

**UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN**

**COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES**

**HELPING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS:**

**TIPS FOR FACULTY AND STAFF**

By  
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- COMMON SIGNS THAT A STUDENT MAY BE DEALING WITH A SERIOUS PROBLEM OR CONCERN
- TIPS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO

College students often encounter stressful situations during their time at college. Typical causes include academic, social, relationship, family, and financial problems. The college years, when young adults are first exploring their own identity apart from their family, are often a time of great change. Discovery of new beliefs and values through exposure to people from other backgrounds and intensive self-discovery are common, and can lead to stressful or overwhelming circumstances. Young adults frequently have fewer resources than older adults to draw on in resolving problems, such as prior experiences, mature friends, or hope based on successfully navigating life's troubles in the past. They may readily become seriously depressed, or feel alone and isolated with what they believe to be a unique problem. Often, for a variety of reasons, students cannot turn to family members for help or guidance. They may turn to you, either directly by coming to speak with you, or indirectly, by such means as their choice of topics in writing assignments, what they say in an essay, crying in class or in your office, or otherwise demonstrating problems through their behavior. **WHAT YOU DO CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

**Common Signs that a Student May Be Dealing With a Serious Personal Problem or Concern:**

- **Talking or writing about suicide.** It is a myth that people who talk about suicide never commit suicide and that such talk is merely an attempt to gain attention. It is also a myth that asking someone directly about suicidal feelings will more likely lead to a suicide attempt. If you become aware of a student who is thinking about suicide, please make an immediate referral to UTM Counseling and Career Services (Extension 7720). Please call Counseling and Career Services for a consultation if you are unsure of the appropriate intervention or if the student is reluctant to take

your referral. If the student states a clear plan to commit suicide, or if you have reason to believe the student has such a plan, call Public Safety (Extension 7777).

- **Direct statement of a problem or need for assistance**
- **Lowering of academic performance, changes in attendance or class participation**
- **Social withdrawal, depressed or lethargic mood, crying, anxiety, hyperactivity, very rapid speech, change in personal hygiene, impaired speech or thought processes**
- **Outbursts of anger, disruptive classroom behavior, violence or threats of violence, strange or inappropriate behavior.** Contact Public Safety immediately if you believe the student poses an imminent risk to anyone else.
- **Physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbances, eating problems, shaking**
- **Alcohol and drug abuse**

### **Tips on What You Can Do:**

Talk to the student promptly and in private when neither of you is rushed. Attempt to eliminate the possibility of interruptions.

State the reasons for your concern gently and honestly while avoiding assumptions. Listen very carefully and be nonjudgmental. Remember: If you were in the student's shoes, you might be doing the same things or feeling the same way. Do not expect that the student will immediately reveal issues of concern or will necessarily reveal them at all. However, your concern will let the student know that others are noticing there is a problem and that you are a person who is willing to help.

Instill hopefulness and positive attitudes in resolving the problem. Assure the student of the availability of resources and of people who want to help, and the fact that there are various options. Refrain from offering solutions or being critical of the student's past actions. Remember that in a crisis, caring listening and just "being there" can go a long way; sometimes it can even be all that is needed or possible.

Maintain clear interpersonal boundaries as appropriate to your professional relationship with the student. Once you know details of the student's personal life, realize that it may be more difficult but still necessary to maintain academic requirements and institutional policies. Of course, any appropriate flexibility that can be brought to bear in the circumstances may be very much appreciated by the student. As a general rule, if you feel that more than one discussion with you will be necessary, you should consider making a referral to other resources.

Make a referral to the appropriate resource. If in doubt about the appropriate referral, call Counseling and Career Services (Extension 7720), Public Safety (Extension 7777), or the Office of Student Affairs (Extension 7700). Counseling and Career Services has a staff of qualified psychologists who offer free counseling services to students. All counseling services are completely confidential with exceptions only as mandated by law (danger to self, danger to others, child abuse, elder abuse, and response to subpoena). Information about the student, including the fact of attendance at counseling sessions, cannot be released to other UTM offices, faculty, staff, parents, or any other person or agency, without the student's written consent. In Tennessee, minors age 16 and over may request and receive counseling without parental knowledge or consent; however, parents of minors (students and others under age 18) have a legal right to obtain treatment records. We cannot confirm or deny that a student has been in contact with our office or

received counseling without a written release from the student. If a student should prefer a referral to an off-campus counseling resource, call Counseling and Career Services for referral suggestions. Point out to the student that Counseling and Career Services works with students on issues ranging from roommate problems and career questions to depression and family problems. Be sensitive to the fact that our society still stigmatizes the receiving of psychological counseling. Students frequently like the suggestion of making a one-time “consultation” appointment about the problem.

Students may make appointments at Counseling and Career Services either by phone or in person. You may offer the use of your office telephone to the student to make an appointment or offer to accompany the student to the referral location. Or you may offer to place the call and put the student on the line to make the appointment. Appointments may be made with the secretary; students in crisis will be seen the same day.

Except in emergencies, counseling is always a personal choice. If the student refuses a referral, try to be friendly and recognize that the student may request your help or follow up on your referral suggestion at a later time. Suggest that seeking and needing assistance from others is a part of everyone’s life. Make the point that problems taken care of as soon as possible after they arise are more easily dealt with than if they are neglected, just as a weed is more easily pulled when it is small than after its roots have spread throughout the garden. If a student is not interested in a referral and you feel uncomfortable about the situation, contact Counseling and Career Services for a consultation to discuss your concern. Counseling and Career Services staff is always available to discuss options for approaching a student or concerns regarding a student’s behavior. If an emergency exists outside of normal office hours (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.), contact Public Safety (Extension 7777). If an emergency exists, remain calm and, if possible and safe, have someone stay with the student until help arrives.

You will not be able to identify every student who is in distress, nor will every student you approach appear receptive to your expression of concern or willingness to help. However, taking the time to acknowledge your concerns directly to a student may eventually turn out to be a most significant factor in successful problem resolution and may even be a turning point in a student’s life.

This brochure was written by:  
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