

HOW TO HELP STUDENTS IN DISRESS

Jamie Davidson, PhD

Licensed Psychologist

Associate Vice President for Student Wellness

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Understanding The Behavioral Continuum

Stress exists along a continuum with three major points of interest:

- ▶ Distress
- ▶ Disorder
- ▶ Dysfunction

Understanding The Behavioral Continuum

It is important to understand that:

- ▶ The categories are not discreet
- ▶ Student's levels of stress are fluid
- ▶ Interventions typically produce improvement

Signs Of Distress

- ▶ Changes in academic performance
- ▶ Changes in attendance at class or meetings
- ▶ Changes patterns of interaction (e.g., avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions)
- ▶ Noticeably upset, anxious, angry, withdrawn, or tearful
- ▶ Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness

Signs Of Distress

- ▶ Increased disorganization
- ▶ Repeatedly falling asleep in class
- ▶ Deterioration in physical appearance
- ▶ Bleary-eyed, hung over, or smelling of alcohol
- ▶ Disclose incidents of discrimination, harassment, sexual or physical violence

Signs Of Disorder

- ▶ Marked change in personal dress, hygiene, eating and/or sleeping routines
- ▶ Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts)
- ▶ Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality)
- ▶ Clear signs of substance abuse
- ▶ Depressed or lethargic mood
- ▶ Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions

Signs Of Disorder

- ▶ Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
- ▶ Social withdrawal
- ▶ Unusual or exaggerated emotional response to events
- ▶ Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional while disclosing the circumstances prompting the request
- ▶ Shows signs of memory loss

Signs Of Dysfunction

- ▶ Suicidal statements or suicide attempts
- ▶ Written or verbal threats, or attempted homicide or assault
- ▶ Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- ▶ Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence)
- ▶ Unable to care for self (prolonged starvation, poor self care/protection)
- ▶ Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, e-mail messages, harassment)
- ▶ Stalking behaviors

How You Go About Helping A Student Will Depend On Several Factors

- ▶ Their level of distress
- ▶ The nature of your relationship
- ▶ The type of setting you are in
- ▶ Your comfort level*

*Please remember that comfort is not the same as skill!

Guidelines For Helping Students In Distress - Things To Do

- ▶ Be willing to get involved and to express concern for the student
- ▶ Listen carefully and talk in a non-judgmental way
- ▶ Encourage the student to seek help
- ▶ Offer to walk them to a campus resource or make the phone call together to arrange for an appointment or to get information
- ▶ Listen for subtle indications of suicidal thoughts
- ▶ Follow up with the student to see how they are doing
- ▶ Help to resolve the problem that brought the student to you in the first place

Guidelines For Helping Students In Distress - Things NOT To Do

- ▶ Discount or minimize their distress
- ▶ Don't be cute or humorous
- ▶ Don't offer promises you can't keep such as "Everything will be alright."
- ▶ Don't overstep appropriate boundaries
- ▶ Challenge or agree with mistaken or illogical beliefs
- ▶ Swear secrecy or offer confidentiality to the person
- ▶ Wait until you have become too involved to seek assistance

How To Help A Student In A Crisis

- ▶ Remain calm and know whom to call for help
- ▶ When in doubt, err on the side of caution and let the appropriate officials make the determination on the level and type of intervention
- ▶ Call campus police and/or the counseling center if the student is a threat to self or others
- ▶ Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate resources are made
- ▶ Communicate with your supervisor and develop a follow up plan

Know Your Campus Resources

- ▶ Campus Police
- ▶ Counseling Center
- ▶ Health Center
- ▶ Behavioral Intervention or Student of Concern Team
- ▶ Disability Resource Center
- ▶ Voluntary Health Withdrawal
- ▶ Student Conduct Office
- ▶ Title IX Office

Don't Forget About Taking Care of Yourself!

- ▶ Seek support from supervisors and colleagues
- ▶ Express yourself. Whether through journaling, creating art or talking with family or someone you trust, allow your concerns to come out and be processed
- ▶ Get active through exercise or play. Allow your mind to be distracted by a physical activity for increased mental clarity and presence later on.
- ▶ Engage in breathing exercises. Whether you are deep breathing or meditating on your breath does not matter. Time spent engaging on breath work is one of the most effective ways of calming your mind.
- ▶ It may also be helpful to talk with a counselor