
Assisting Distressed or Troubled Students

A Guide for Faculty and Staff



AUGUSTA UNIVERSITY

Division of Enrollment
and Student Affairs

As faculty and staff, you come into contact with many students on a daily basis. You are on the “front lines” of the university and are in an excellent position to observe students, identify those who may be in emotional distress and offer assistance to students.

You may be the first (or only) person who recognizes that a student is not functioning well, either academically or personally. What can you do when you suspect a student may need help? How involved should you be? What is your appropriate role? Where do you draw the boundaries? When do you need to consult with someone else?

While you are not expected to assess and treat mental health problems, you are in a position to recognize distress or troubling behavior, and may be the best person to direct the student to the most appropriate resource. Reaching out to students is a powerful gesture which not only helps students personally, but enhances their academic success.

This booklet is designed to acquaint you with the resources on campus that can assist you in helping students in distress and to guide you in making a referral to helping professionals. In addition, there is a section outlining suggestions for dealing with specific types of emotional problems.

Resources

CARE Team

The Campus Assessment, Response, and Evaluation Team is a group of staff members from various departments who meet regularly to assist students experiencing difficulty and to help ensure the safety of our campus.

What Does the CARE Team Do?

- Review critical campus incidents.
- Develop intervention strategies to assist students in crisis.
- Develop protocols and proactive ways to address recurring student issues.
- Discuss campus trends that may impact student safety, services, programs and general campus life.
- Make recommendations to campus staff or faculty as appropriate.

The group places a high priority on balancing a person's rights to privacy with the university's duty to respond to people experiencing difficulty or expressing at-risk behavior. The CARE Team's primary objective is to connect students with the support and resources they need to be healthy, productive members of our campus community. Though the team's primary focus is assisting students, assistance is provided for faculty and staff members when needed.

The CARE Team Consists of:

- Assistant Dean of Student Life (Chair)
- Dean of Student Life
- Director of Student Health Services
- Director, Student Counseling and Psychological Services
- University Police Captain
- Director, Testing and Disability Services
- Director, Housing and Residence Life
- Representative from Legal Affairs
- Representative from Human Resources
- Assistant Deans for Student Affairs from each of the academic colleges

Dean of Students Office - (706) 737-1411

The Dean of Students Office serves as the campus “problem solving” resource. Common student concerns include harassment complaints, medical and hardship withdrawals, questions and other attendance issues. Assistance is also provided to faculty and staff members related to general misconduct issues, dealing with disruptive behavior and general concerns about student behavior or health.

Student Counseling and Psychological Services (SCAPS) (706) 737-1471

The Counseling Center provides free comprehensive mental health services for currently enrolled students. The center offers personal, academic and career counseling. The center is open Monday – Friday from 8:00 AM until 5:00 PM. The main office is located on the Summerville Campus in the Facilities Building. The satellite location on the Health Sciences Campus is located on the second floor of the Student Center. Walk-in emergency appointments are available daily. Please contact the office to schedule an appointment after hours.

Testing and Disability Services – (706) 737-1469

Testing and Disability Services helps ensure an accessible and positive college experience for students with disabilities. The office provides a variety of services and accommodations to meet the needs of students with disability related concerns. Accommodations for students with disabilities are made on an individual basis.

Office of Housing Residence Life - (706) 721-3471

The Office of Residence Life has staff members who can assist in resolving issues related to campus housing. Additionally, each residence hall has live-in staff members (Residence Assistants) who are available to discuss the living environment, conflict with roommates, ways to get involved on campus and a variety of other personal issues.

Student Health Services – (706) 721-3448

Student Health Services offers many comprehensive outpatient services and programs including a primary care clinic that also provides women’s health, psychiatry, sports medicine, physical therapy and travel consultation. Minor surgical procedures,

laboratory services, other diagnostic testing and immunization services are also available.

Public Safety – (706) 721-2914

Public Safety provides law enforcement and educational services on campus. Officers are available 24-hours a day to respond to a crime or emergency. Dial 2911 on campus, or 911 if safety is threatened or to report an emergency that needs immediate assistance.

Local Community Resources

AU Health Behavioral Health & Psychiatry (706) 721-6597

A part of AU Health, the staff and physicians offer services within a patient family centered care philosophy.

Georgia Crisis & Access Line – (800) 715-4225 www.mygcal.com

This is a free service sponsored by the Georgia Department of Human Resources. They are available 24/7 to provide access to mental health, addictive diseases and crisis services.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – (800) 273-8255

This 24-hour crisis line is free and available to anyone who is in emotional distress or experiencing a suicidal crisis. Your call will be routed to the nearest mental health crisis center to your location. You may contact this number for individual assistance or for a loved one.

How and When to Make a Referral and/or Consultation to Student Counseling and Psychological Services (SCAPS)

NON EMERGENCY CONSULTATION: If you are unsure of how to handle a situation, call SCAPS at 706-737-1471, inform the receptionist who you are (faculty, staff or administrator) and ask to speak with a counselor. If all counselors are engaged, your call will be returned as soon as possible. A brief consultation with a counselor

may help you sort out the relevant issues and explore alternative approaches to use with the student. Conveying your concern and willingness to help in any way you can (including referral) is probably the most important thing you can do to assist a student in distress. Your support, encouragement and reassurance are very valuable. Disruptive classroom behavior is prohibited by the AU Student Code of Conduct. The SCAPS will be happy to consult with you about these cases. However, behavioral problems need to be referred to the Dean of Students Office.

NON EMERGENCY REFERRALS: When you discuss a referral to the SCAPS, it would be helpful for the student to hear in a clear and concise manner your concerns and why you think counseling would be helpful. Having the student call for an appointment tends to increase her/his responsibility and commitment to follow up by keeping the appointment. HOWEVER, there may be some situations when it is more advantageous for you to call and make an appointment for her/him or even to accompany the student to our office.

CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY: All client discussions are held strictly confidential except when the client is under 18 years of age, presents a danger to him/herself or others (including situations where abuse must be reported) or if information must be released due to a court order. Counseling referrals may only be acknowledged if the client gives the counselor permission to reveal to the referring person that they have attended counseling. All other release of information occurs only if the client signs a release form.

SERVICES PROVIDED: The SCAPS provides FREE personal, academic and career counseling to currently enrolled AU students. Our individual counseling services are designed for clients who can benefit from time-limited counseling (up to 12 sessions/12-month period). If long-term therapy or other specialized services, such as hospitalization or medication are indicated, the client will be referred to an appropriate off-campus resource.

POSSIBLE EMERGENCY SITUATIONS: Urgent concerns that require immediate intervention might include: suicide, fear of losing control and possibly hurting someone else, sexual or physical assault,

abuse, a recent death of a loved one or students making threats or exhibiting violent behavior.

Helping Student in Distress: General Guidelines

In today's society we have seen that there can be tragic results when a person, often due to underlying psychological problems, feels pushed beyond his or her ability to tolerate the stresses of life. Students dealing with personal issues or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. Taking the step to assist a student can save a life...perhaps many lives. An individual who is distressed often wants help but doesn't know how to ask.

Signs of a Student in Distress

- The student seems excessively sad, anxious or irritable.
- There is a marked change from the student's normal baseline of behavior. A typically strong and engaged student might start procrastinating, turning in poorly prepared work, missing class or meetings or avoiding class or group participation.
- There are marked changes in a student's appearance, such as deterioration in grooming, hygiene, or avoiding class or group participation.
- It seems likely that the use of alcohol or other substances may be interfering with a student's performance or relationships.
- There is a marked and persistent change in energy level. The student might seem listless, fall asleep frequently in class or meetings or show acceleration in speech and activity.
- The student's behavior regularly interferes with the decorum or effective management of your class, program or office.
- The student seems unusually dependent, helpless or hopeless.
- The student's thoughts, speech or actions seem bizarre or

unusual.

What you can do for a student in Distress

- Talk to the student in private. Find a comfortable, private place to talk.
- Listen carefully. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel comfortable about what to do next.
- Inform the student of your concern in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner. Give specific examples of the behavior patterns you've observed that lead you to feel concerned. Ask open ended questions. The student may choose not to answer, but may feel relieved to know you are trying to understand.
- Avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental.
- Ask if the student has ever talked about his or her problem with anyone else, including a counselor.
- Don't feel compelled to find a solution. It is not your job to find a solution or to engage in personal counseling. Often, listening is enough.
- Suggest that the student can get more help, if needed.
- Don't hesitate to ask for support from the Dean of Students Office, SCAPS or Student Health.

Listening Skills

If a student approaches you to discuss a problem or concern, you obviously have already set the stage for good communication (otherwise, the student would not have approached you). Below are some general tips regarding effective listening. Depending on the situation, one should make certain that the physical environment or location is conducive to effective communication (e.g., in most cases, it would not be appropriate to engage in an emotional discussion within a classroom with several other students present).

Physical Attending Behaviors:

- Facing each other squarely
- Good eye contact
- 'Open' posture. Crossing your arms in front of you is an example of a 'closed' posture
- Your posture reflects and communicates your willingness to respond to the student

Psychological Attending Behaviors:

- Attend to nonverbal behaviors and cues (i.e., what is the student's behavior and appearance telling you about his or her health, energy level, feeling state...).
- Listen to verbal behavior (both what is said, and the tone in which it is stated; are these congruent?).
- *Listening and Responding:*
 - o Provide an open invitation to talk; show concern and interest.
 - o Listen carefully.
 - o Use open ended questions and minimal encouragers.
 - o Avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental.
 - o Summarize or repeat back the essence of what the student has told you.
 - o Connect to resources available on campus

Know Your Boundaries

- Know your limitations. If you feel "in over your head," you probably are.
- Your responsibility to the student includes the responsibility to refer when appropriate.
- Assist students in identifying and utilizing available resources. When individuals 'own' their decisions, they are much more likely to follow through.
- Regarding confidentiality: Do not agree to secrets you cannot keep. If students ask for your confidence, state you will treat what they say in a professional manner.

The Depressed Student

Because we all experience some of the symptoms of depression at one time or another, we all have some personal knowledge of what the depressed student is going through. A depressed student is likely to be experiencing some of the following symptoms:

- Sadness, tearfulness
- Guilt or anger at him/herself
- Trouble concentrating or remembering
- Loss of interest in schoolwork or usual activities
- Feelings of worthlessness or inadequacy
- Physical Symptoms (Changes in appetite, difficulty sleeping and/or low energy levels)
- Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness
- Suicidal thoughts

Facts about Suicide

It is important to take all suicidal comments serious and to make appropriate referrals.

- College student have higher suicide rates than non-college people of the same age.
- There are more attempts at the beginning and end of the semesters.
- Talking about suicide will not plant the idea in a person's mind, but will probably relieve some of the tension she/he is experiencing.
- Feeling isolated increases the likelihood of suicide.
- The more developed the suicide plan, the greater likelihood for suicide.

Helpful Responses:

- Reach out and encourage the student to talk about his/her feelings
- Tell the student about your concern for his/her well-being
- Acknowledge that a threat of suicide (or an attempt) is a plea for help
- Be available to listen, to talk, to be concerned; but refer to the SCAPS
- Refer to the SCAPS (SCAPS – 706-737-1471, Student Health Services – 706-721-3448, Public Safety – 706-721-2914 or 706-721-2911, or 911)
- Frequent contact, even for a few minutes, begins to relieve feelings of isolation (encourage the student to be in contact with family, friends, counselor).
- Administer to yourself. Helping someone who is feeling suicidal is hard, demanding and draining work.

Less Helpful Responses:

- Saying “don’t worry,” or “everything will be better tomorrow.” This may only make the student feel worse.
- Becoming overwhelmed by the student’s problems. This may only provide evidence that she/he should feel helpless.
- Assuming too much responsibility for the student and his/her problems.
- Trying to ignore or minimize his/her feelings.

The Student in Poor Contact with Reality

In some cases, a student may appear confused or illogical. This student may have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality. You may notice that the student’s speech jumps from one topic to another with little or no logical connection between topics. The student may pay a great deal of attention to some unimportant

detail that is being discussed or may be generally scattered and incoherent. The student may coin new words and expect others to understand their meaning or may put words together because they rhyme, not because they make grammatical sense.

The student may make inappropriate emotional responses. For example, she/he may overact to his/her feelings, or be very "flat" emotionally. Many times the person knows that his/her emotions are inappropriate, but just feels overwhelmed and cannot control them.

Someone in poor contact with reality may experience themselves as especially powerful or important, or may believe that people are attempting to harm or control them in some way. She/he may also feel that certain actions have special meaning for them (e.g., when people in a small group begin to laugh, then they are laughing at him/her.)

This student may experience hallucinations, usually auditory (i.e., hearing voices) although the hallucination could be experienced through any sense.

Helpful Responses:

- Respond to them with warmth and kindness, but with firmness.
- If you are comfortable in doing so, reduce extra stimulation from the environment and see them in a quiet atmosphere.
- Acknowledge their concerns and state that you can see they need help (e.g., "It seems very hard for you to integrate all these things that are happening and I am concerned about you; I'd like to help").
- Acknowledge their feelings or fears without supporting the misperceptions (e.g.- "I understand how you think they are trying to hurt you and I know how real it seems
- Reveal your difficulty in understanding them ("I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Could you repeat that or say it in a different way?")

- Focus on the 'here and now.'
- Speak to their healthy side.
- It is okay to joke, laugh or smile when appropriate.

Less Helpful Responses:

- Arguing, disputing their illusions or trying to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking. It just makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.
- Playing along (e.g.- "Oh yeah, I hear voices...see the devil!")
- Encouraging further revelations of delusional thinking. It would be more helpful to switch topics and divert focus from delusions to reality.
- Demanding, commanding or ordering them to do something to change themselves.

The Aggressive Student

Aggression can take many forms, from very subtle, passive acts to violent outbursts. It often results when a student perceives a threat, feels frustrated and/or out of control. Some aggressive people express hostility immediately without regard for the circumstances or the people around them. Others deny their anger and frustration until their hostility builds to the point of an explosive outburst. Many times, persons who are verbally or physically aggressive feel inadequate and use hostile behavior make them feel more powerful. Often these individuals believe you will reject them so they become hostile and reject your first to protect themselves from being hurt. They may see you as attempting to control them and lash out to try to gain some sense of control.

It is important to remember that the student is generally not angry at you personally, but is angry at his/her world and you are the handy target of pent-up frustrations.

Overall, dealing with an aggressive student will be best handled by maintaining a firm, consistent and calm control in the situation (i.e. know what you are doing and what your goals are).

Helpful responses:

- Allow the individual to express his/her anger in a calm manner, and tell you what is upsetting.
- Tell the student that you are not willing to accept abusive behavior (e.g. "When you yell at me I cannot listen.") If you need to, explicitly state what behaviors are acceptable.
- Stick to the limits you set.
- If the person begins to get too close to you, tell them to please move back.
- Reduce stimulation. If you are comfortable doing so, invite them to your office or another quiet place. If you sense a threat, arrange for a colleague to be nearby.
- Rephrase what the individual is saying and identify his/her emotions.
- Get help if necessary (supervisor, colleague, police).

Less Helpful Responses:

- Arguing
- Pressing for explanations about his/her behavior
- Looking away and not dealing with the situation
- Physically restraining or grabbing the student
- Making threats, dares or taunts

The Anxious Student

We have all experienced anxiety to a perceived stressful situation. Anxiety becomes heightened as the situation becomes more vague and less familiar.

A panic attack is an overwhelming sense of dread and fear, and is the extreme result of feeling anxious. Some of the physiological components of general anxiety and panic attacks are rapid heart palpitations, chest pain or discomfort, choking, dizziness, sweating, trembling or shaking or cold, clammy hands. The student may experience feelings of worry or fear and may anticipate some

misfortune. She/he may complain of poor concentration, being on edge, being easily distracted, memory problems and/or fitful sleep. The student may also state unreasonably high self-expectations and be very critical of his/her present performance. This student may constantly think about and discuss his/her problems and possible solutions, but be too fearful to take action.

Helpful Responses:

- Let them discuss their feelings and their thoughts. Often, this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.
- Encourage them to break down tasks into workable steps so they feel less overwhelmed.
- Relaxation techniques, deep breathing, meditation and enjoyable exercise (e.g. walking) can all be helpful in reducing anxiety. Encourage them to engage in these behaviors or to seek professional help to learn these and other coping strategies.
- Be clear and explicit about what you are expecting from them and what you are willing to do. It may be helpful to have them repeat what you have said to ensure that they understand.
- Be calm and reassure him/her as appropriate.

Less Helpful Responses:

- Trying to solve his/her problems as if they were your own.
- Becoming anxious or overwhelmed along with them.
- Overwhelming the student with more information or ideas (instead, keep things 'bite size').

The Demanding Student

Any amount of time and energy may simply not be enough for some students. Such students often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe that the amount of time received is a reflection of personal worth. In many instances, these people feel incompetent to handle their own lives.

Helpful Responses:

- Set clear and precise limits with the student.
- Stick to limits no matter how much she/he protests.
- Let the individual make his/her own choices, clarifying the logical consequences of such choices.
- Refer the student to other students in class, their friends, or campus/community resources.

Less Helpful Responses:

- Letting the student “trap” you into solving more and more of his/her life problems
- Allowing him/her to use you as a sole source of support

The Suspicious Student

Usually these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are tense, cautious, mistrustful and have few friends. These students tend to interpret a minor oversight as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of others’ behavior and everything that happens may seem to be interpreted in a suspicious light. Usually they are over-concerned with fairness and being treated equally. They project blame onto others and will express anger in indirect ways. Many times they will feel worthless and inadequate.

Helpful Responses:

- It is important to send clear, consistent messages regarding what you are willing to do and what you expect.
- Express “reserved compassion,” mindful that a suspicious student may have trouble with closeness and warmth
- Be firm, steady, punctual and consistent.
- Be aware that humor may be interpreted as rejection

Less Helpful Responses:

- Being overly warm, nurturing or assuring the person that you are his/her friend. Let the student know that you can still be concerned without being intimate.
- Trying to flatter him/her, or to be cute or humorous, to try to relieve your own anxiety. This will probably distance the student from you.
- Challenging or agreeing with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.

The Violent or Physically Destructive Student

Violence related to emotional distress is very rare and typically occurs only when the student is completely frustrated, feels powerless and is unable to exert sufficient self-control.

Helpful Responses:

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation (e.g., "I can see you're really upset and really mean business, and have some critical concerns on your mind").
- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable (e.g., "You certainly have the right to be angry, but hitting (breaking things) is not okay").
- Stay in an open area.
- Divert attention when all else fails (e.g., "if you hit me, I can't be of help").
- Get necessary help (other staff, Public Safety, SCAPS).

Less Helpful Responses:

- Ignoring warning signs that the person is about to explode (e.g., raised voice, quickened speech, clenched fists, statements like "You are leaving me no choice").

- Threatening or taunting behaviors.
- Physically cornering the person.
- Touching the student.

General Tips for Dealing with Troubled Students

- Request to see the student outside of class.
- Briefly describe your observations and perceptions of their situation and express your concerns directly and honestly.
- Listen carefully to what the student is troubled about and try to see the issue from their point of view without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.
- Strange and inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. The student can be informed that such behavior is distracting and inappropriate.
- Your receptivity to an alienated student will allow them to respond more effectively to your concerns.
- Involve yourself only as far as you are willing to go.
- At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than your time or training permits. Extending oneself to others always involves some risk, but it can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.
- If you have concerns about a student's emotional state, call the SCAPS at 706-737-1471 or Student Health Services at 706-721-3448 for consultation.

Helpful Contacts:

- On-Campus Emergency Assistance
 - Health Sciences Campus 706-721-2911
 - Summerville Campus2911
- Any Emergency.....911
- CARE Team 706-737-1411
(VP for Student Affairs Office)
- Student Counseling & Psychological Services 706-737-1471
- Student Health Services 706-721-3448
- Residence Life..... 706-721-3471
- Public Safety (non-emergency)..... 706-721-2914
- Testing and Disability Services 706-737-1469
- Augusta-Richmond County Sheriff..... 706-821-1000
(Non-emergency)
- AU Health Medical Center Emergency Dept.. 706-721-4951

Most importantly, if you are concerned about a student, tell someone. The university is full of resources to assist both you and the student in need of help. Contact the CARE Team through the Vice President for Student Affairs Office at 706-737-1411.