

Although many students seek counseling on their own, university faculty and staff members are often the first to recognize that a student may be struggling emotionally. Students may turn to you because they know you and respect you. While your role does not have to include “counseling” the student, you may find it helpful to have some basic information about how to help in these situations. Benton, Benton and Perl (2006) propose that an effective faculty response to students in distress will include “the three R’s”: RECOGNIZE, RESPOND, REFER.

RECOGNIZE

What are some signs of distress in students?

The college years are often referred to as the “best years” of one’s life. However, Kadison and DiGeronimo (2004) suggest that “despite the appearance of comfortable status, secure environment, and a pleasant social world, a multitude of hidden problems have caused a steady and alarming rise in the severity of students’ mental health problems across the nation in colleges and universities.”

The fact is that in an academically competitive university setting and at this developmental stage most students are likely to experience a moderate to high level of stress. As a result, many students develop emotional, interpersonal or spiritual problems that can interfere with their academic performance. Some lack the personal skills to excel academically or socially. Depression, acute anxiety, and alcohol and drug abuse are not uncommon. In your interactions with students, it is important to be able to recognize signs that a student may be struggling.

Some behaviors may seem obvious and serious to you, such as:

- Coming to class or work under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Marked deterioration in personal hygiene
- Angry or threatening outbursts
- Uncontrollable crying
- Talking about hurting themselves or someone else
- Strange or bizarre behavior or ideas
- Incoherence

Other behaviors may be less obvious, such as:

- Anxiety, nervousness, agitation
- Forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating
- Low energy, sad appearance, hopelessness
- Irritability, low frustration tolerance
- Fatigue, reports of sleeplessness
- Extreme weight gain or loss
- Excessive procrastination, dramatic change in class or work performance
- Extreme dependency (e.g., the student who takes much more of your time than most other students)

Students may also present problems that you may not be able to directly help them with, such as:

- Family issues
- Substance abuse
- Health problems
- Financial challenges
- Relationships
- Career and life planning
- Faith and spiritual concerns
- Meaning and identity development

RESPOND

How can I be helpful when I recognize a distressed student?

Worthington (1982) suggests that the most important step in helping another person is giving them the impression that you understand them. This involves ASKING good questions, LISTENING to their concerns, and EVALUATING what the person needs from you.

If you have recognized signs of distress in a student, begin by ASKING a question that communicates your concern – something as simple as “Hey, I’ve noticed that you haven’t been yourself lately...how have things been going?” or “We haven’t touched base in a while, I thought I’d just check in to see if you’re doing ok?” Though some faculty and staff are reluctant to approach a student who they think is struggling, most students are thankful for the concern.

Nouwen states that “LISTENING is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves.” Listening is as much an attitude as a skill; removing distractions, focusing on the individual, and approaching the situation with respect, authenticity and openness are key to helping a student feel cared for and understood.

EVALUATING what a student needs from you will assist in formulating your next steps. Sometimes just allowing students to dump for a few minutes is helpful. Other students may require help brainstorming next steps or making a plan to address their situation. The support and encouragement of a respected faculty or staff member are what often motivate students to seek out further assistance. Finally, following up with a student to see that they have taken those next steps communicates your investment and gives the student a sense of accountability for his or her own well being.

What should I do in a crisis situation?

You may encounter a situation in which your evaluation leads you to believe a student is in crisis. Crisis situations are not uncommon when working with college students, and it is helpful to have a plan for handling them. **If you believe a student is in immediate danger of killing or harming him/herself or another person, CALL 911 immediately!** Once emergency personnel are notified, call Campus Safety (815-3805) as soon as possible so that they can direct emergency personnel to you and provide onsite presence if needed.

If you are concerned about a student but do not believe the danger is immediate, or if you are unsure, UCC counselors are available for consultation by phone (815-2109). You may also call the Department of Campus Safety (815-3805) in this situation if you feel their presence would help to insure the welfare of yourself, the student or any other students present. APU Campus Safety is well trained to handle all types of situations, including psychological ones. If they determine that a mental health professional is needed, they will contact us as well.

There may be a situation in which you have a student with you (e.g., after class or in your office) and are very concerned. If you are able, please walk the student over to the UCC. If you are not available to walk the student over, you might ask another staff member in your department for assistance.

If possible, please call the UCC first, so that we can make arrangements to have someone available to see the student soon after you arrive. You might say to the student: “You seem to be upset about this. I’d like to help you more by connecting you with people on campus who will be able to offer you additional support. Why don’t I call them and set it up for you to be seen right away? Then we can walk over there together.”

Many faculty and staff who have done this have said that, although they didn’t necessarily know how to solve the student’s problem, they felt good about being able to get help for the student.

REFER

How do I make a referral?

If you believe it might be helpful for a student to receive counseling (or at least to be evaluated by a mental health professional), please suggest that they come to the UCC. As stated above, a good way to do this is to listen, to express concern for the student, and then to suggest our services.

As you would imagine, saying “I think you need therapy” may make the student defensive and resistant to the idea of counseling. Since most students see “stress” as a more acceptable problem, using that term in your referral usually works well. For example, you might say, “From what you’ve talked about, it sounds as if you are under a lot of stress. We have people here on campus who are specially trained to help students deal with stress. I’d be willing to help you get an appointment. Would that be OK?”

If the student says “yes,” please call the UCC at 815-2109 and ask to set up an “intake appointment” for the student. If the student says “no” or “I’ll think about it,” you might suggest that they explore our website, write down our UCC telephone number for them or give them a copy of our informational brochure, and say “I hope you’ll give this a try.”

What resources are available?

Crisis management: Any member of the APU community (faculty, staff or student) experiencing a crisis can come to the UCC and meet with a counselor. A “walk-in” counselor is usually available immediately during normal business hours. The counselor will work with the person to form a plan for helping them through this difficult time, and follow up to make sure the plan is working effectively.

Ongoing counseling: Enrolled APU students are eligible for evaluation and ongoing counseling services. All UCC services are confidential. Students are typically seen initially during a scheduled “intake” session. At this time, their problems are explored and the intake counselor helps them decide what services might be most helpful to best meet their needs. If the intake counselor determines that this is a crisis situation, appropriate steps are taken to provide immediate care for the student.

Students may receive up to ten individual sessions through the UCC each academic year with no out-of-pocket fees. In addition, we have many quality low-cost community referrals available for those who want or need long-term counseling.

Consultation: Consultation with UCC staff is available to any APU faculty or staff member by phone or in person. If you are concerned about a student and are uncertain about what to do, please call us (815-2109), identify yourself as a faculty or staff member, and say you are concerned about a student or situation and would like to consult with a counselor. Usually this service is available immediately.

Care Team: The Student Life Care Team meets weekly to identify potential critical students and concerns within the university community that may impact student well-being in order to generate awareness and plan collaborative responses. The Care Team is currently composed of representatives from academic and Student Life departments generally involved with the emotional well being of its student constituents. If you are concerned about a student and would like to consult with a member of the Care Team, please feel free to contact one of the representatives listed below.

- Charlie Moore (chair) - Director, Residence Life..... 815-3825
- Bill Fiala (co-chair) - Director, University Counseling Center..... 815-2109
- Chris Adams - Associate Campus Pastor..... 815-3855
- Chuck Strawn - Director, Communiversity..... 815-3053
- Gidget Wood - Director, Health Center..... 815-2100
- Jeanette Wong - Director, Academic Advising..... 815-3710
- Shino Simons - Associate Dean of Students..... 815-2067
- Stacie Champine - Director, Student Success..... 815-3444
- Terry Meyer - Lieutenant, Campus Safety..... 815-3805
- Victoria Stuard - Associate Director, Learning Enrichment Center.... 815-3321
- Vijay Jacob - International Student Services..... 815-3055
- Willie Hamlett - Associate Vice President for Student Life..... 815-3890

Recommended reading

Benton, S.A. & Benton, S.L. (2006). College student mental health: Effective services and strategies across campus. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Inc.

Kadison, R. & DiGeronimo, T.F. (2004). College of the overwhelmed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Worthington, E.L.. (1982). When someone asks for help: A practical guide for counseling. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The University Counseling Center exists to empower the students of Azusa Pacific University to realize their academic and personal potential by promoting psychological, social, and spiritual wellness through Christian counseling and outreach services. The UCC is fully accredited by the International Association of Counseling Services, Inc.

We are located in Magnolia Court, across from the Health Center, on east campus. Office hours are from 8:30 to 12:00, and 1:00 to 4:30 Monday through Friday. To schedule an initial appointment or to consult with a counselor, please stop by or call us at **(626) 815-2109**.

For more information about the UCC, anonymous online screening tools and other resources, please visit us at <http://www.apu.edu/counselingcenter/>.

