

Dealing with Students in Distress

A Guide for Faculty and Staff



Any member of the Caldwell College community may come into contact with a student who is emotionally distressed. Faculty and staff are often the first to notice a change in student behavior and personality. Such changes may, or may not, have a significant impact on the student's academic work, appearance, social activities, attendance and attention in class and expressed attitudes. Being aware of distress signals, methods of intervention and resources available for students can help you and the students feel more in control of situations that may arise. Counseling Office personnel are available to faculty and staff for consultation regarding these issues. Feel free to call the Office at extension 3307. Be assured that all calls will be considered private and confidential.

DISTRESS SIGNALS

The information listed below contains some of the more common warning signs and symptoms of distress witnessed on campus.

1. Depressive Disorders

- depressed mood
- teariness/crying
- increased absences
- decrease in class participation
- changes in level of academic work
- preoccupation with depression/death in oral and/or written work
- poor concentration in class
- sleep disturbances
- changes in appetite and sudden weight gain or loss

2. Anxiety Disorders

- difficulty in controlling anxiety and worry which impacts social and academic functioning
- restlessness or feeling on edge
- appears easily fatigued
- difficulty in concentrating
- dizziness
- irritability
- sleep disturbances
- muscular tension/headaches
- panic attacks
- fear and avoidance of social situations such as class presentations or office visits
- perfectionism
- persistent intrusive thoughts and repetitive behaviors

3. Substance Abuse

- signs of intoxication in class or social situations
- decreased attention span and follow-through
- disorientation
- irresponsible or unpredictable behavior
- misperception of facts or reality
- rambling or disconnected speech
- increased tardiness/absences
- social isolation
- exhibits anger/defensiveness

4. Acting Out Behaviors (associated with various mood and personality disorders)

- is disruptive, restless, or hyperactive
- behaves antagonistically
- is sexually provocative
- is verbally inappropriate
- exhibits clinging or needy behavior
- says that you are the only one who has ever understood him/her
- seeks your time and attention inappropriately
- makes you feel intensely involved or uncomfortable

5. Suicidality

- articulates feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and futility
- verbal messages such as: “I don’t want to be here,” “I could kill myself,” or a series of vague “Goodbyes”
- talking and/or writing about suicide thoughts and plans
- preoccupation with death
- experienced significant loss or threat of loss
- gives away valued items
- social isolation
- abuses alcohol or drugs

Suicidal behaviors should be taken seriously. In the case of an imminent threat (i.e. student tells you he or she has taken pills) contact Campus Security at x3289 or 911, and don’t leave the student alone.

6. Bizarre, Disturbing or Threatening Behaviors

- alarming change in appearance or behaviors

INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

When students are in distress, they often turn to those close to them, including faculty and staff, for advice and support. The following are some guidelines you might consider when intervening for a student.

1. **Ask Direct Questions.** Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask students directly if they have a problem, stating what you have noticed. It is best to ask direct questions, including whether a student is having suicidal thoughts. You will not be putting ideas in a student’s head by doing so. Even though they may deny

having any significant problems at the moment, most distressed students are relieved to know that someone has noticed their pain, is paying attention, and cares enough to offer help.

2. **Avoid Escalation.** Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid remarks that might be perceived by them as threatening or intimidating. It is usually not a good idea to assert authority unless you are certain of the student's mental health status. Distressed students are in need of a listener and support. One can always remind them of rules at a later time.
3. **Seek Help.** You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by listening and using your own skills in communication. However, some students will need more than you can provide. Your personal discomfort is a good cue that a referral might be needed. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting students the assistance they require. You can do this by supporting their decision to confide in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, trying to identify the problem area if appropriate, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do.
4. **Do Not Assume You Are Being Manipulated.** While it is true that some students appear distressed in order to get attention or relief from responsibility, only a thorough assessment can determine this. Attention-seekers can have serious problems and be in danger too.
5. **Safety.** Always keep safety in mind as you interact with a distressed student. On this campus we have had few instances of students who pose a physical danger to others. However, it is important to remember that distressed students can easily misinterpret our words, actions, a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and even our best intentions. Practice good safety measures by keeping your office door open while with such students, having another person present or nearby, and documenting the encounter. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. **If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call Campus Security at extension 3289 or 911.**

CONSULTATIONS

Counseling Office personnel are available to provide consultation to faculty, staff, and students regarding student mental health concerns and referral information.

Consultation might include the following:

- a telephone discussion regarding your concerns about a student
- a sharing of possible alternatives on dealing with the student
- a referral for counseling or scheduling an appointment (for further information regarding how to make a referral to the Counseling Office, see the *Counseling Office's Referral Guide for Faculty and Staff* at www.caldwell.edu/counseling)
- coordinating arrangements to have student seen by a counselor for an emergency assessment

A consultation might also be warranted when a student's distressing situation causes you to feel overextended. Examples include:

- feeling "stressed out" or overwhelmed by the situation
- feeling angry with the student or afraid
- considering "adopting" or otherwise rescuing the student
- feeling you are the only one who can help
- finding yourself reliving similar experiences of your own

The Counseling Office is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, extension 3307. The Office is located in the Student Development Center, 2nd floor, Newman Center. The website address is www.caldwell.edu/counseling.