

Counseling & Psychological Services

A Faculty/Staff Guide:

Enhancing Communication

Working with the Emotionally Distressed Student



SAN DIEGO STATE
UNIVERSITY

SDSU Student Affairs
Bridges to Success



Faculty and Staff Role: Working With the Emotionally Distressed Student

College years bring fond memories to many, yet we may also remember those days as having been quite stressful. Financial worries, relationships in conflict, peer pressures, loss of support, family problems, waning self-confidence, and struggling to do well academically are common and acutely stressful challenges for many SDSU students. With a little help, most students successfully negotiate these developmental

“traumas.” Unfortunately, some of our students’ personal/family problems may go unresolved until the level of emotional distress becomes overwhelming.

On a campus the size of San Diego State, this can involve a significant percentage of our student population. C&PS projections, based upon a recent National Institute of Mental Health epidemiological study, suggest that during any given one month period, 15.4 percent of the population (which translates to more than 5,000 SDSU students), are likely to experience psychological distress severe enough to be classified by the American Psychiatric Association’s current DSM criteria as a “Major Mental Disorder.” Projections from studies of entering college freshmen are even more troubling. As many as 20 percent or 7,000 SDSU students are struggling with depression or anxiety severe enough to require professional “mental health care.”

Many students seek psychological services on their own. However, faculty, teaching assistants, and staff are often the first to recognize that a student may not be functioning well academically or emotionally. Students may turn to you because of your position and the respect they hold for you. Faculty and staff often handle these difficult situations themselves, and often provide a critical link in helping the student locate the appropriate professional resources.

Contents

- 1 The Faculty & Staff Role
- 2 Consulting with the C&PS Staff
- 4 Cross Cultural Communication
- 5 The Verbally Aggressive Student
- 6 The Violent or Physically Destructive Student
- 6 The Substance Abusing Student
- 7 The Student in Poor Contact with Reality
- 8 The Suspicious Student
- 9 The Depressed Student
- 10 The Suicidal Student
- 11 The Anxious and Stressed Student
- 12 Brief Checklist

CONSULT WITH US

If you are unsure of how to handle a specific student, consult one of the psychologists on staff. Call us at **(619) 594-5220**, and ask to speak with one of our therapists. A brief consultation may help you sort out the relevant issues, explore alternative approaches, and identify other resources.

MAKING A REFERRAL TO C&PS

Counseling & Psychological Services' professional staff of psychologists, social workers, and graduate level interns offer individual treatment and group counseling for SDSU students. Early intervention is preferable to crisis intervention. Encourage students to seek help in confronting, coping with and resolving personal problems before they develop into major obstacles to their success.

If you feel that professional counseling might be beneficial, refer the student to Counseling & Psychological Services. Be direct in letting the student know that you believe a therapist would be of help in this situation. Inform the student that the services are strictly confidential and free of charge. Don't force the issue if the student takes a defensive posture—simply restate your concerns and recommendations. An independent decision by the student to seek help is best.

If you would like one of our therapists to call a student, first let the student know what your specific concerns are and ask the student's permission to have a therapist call him or her. Then call our office at **(619) 594-5220** and ask to speak to one of the therapists. Let them know your concerns and give them the student's name and phone number.

If the student's situation is life threatening (to self or others), it is critical that the student or faculty member inform the receptionist and/or psychologist. Our staff are available on a "same day" basis to see a student if the situation is life threatening. If the situation seems urgent, you might offer to accompany the student to our office.

Counseling & Psychological Services • (619) 594-5220
Calpulli Center, Room 4401 • www.sa.sdsu.edu/cps

YOUR ROLE

As a faculty or staff member, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavioral changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. A student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could well constitute a "cry for help." Your ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress and courage to acknowledge your concerns to the student, are often noted by students as the most significant factor in their successful problem resolution.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTION

You can have a profound effect by openly acknowledging your awareness of their distress, expressing your concern, and willingness to help them explore alternatives. Whenever possible, speak directly and honestly to a student when you sense academic and or personal distress.

- See the student in private. This may help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.
- Acknowledge your observations and perceptions of their situation and express your concerns.
- Listen carefully to the student's issue and try to view his or her perspective without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.
- Attempt to identify the student's concern as well as your own concerns or uneasiness. You can help by exploring alternatives.
- Strange and inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. Comment directly on what you have observed.
- Your flexibility with strict procedures may allow an alienated student to respond more effectively.
- Involve yourself only as far as you want. In an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than time or skill permits.
- Extending oneself to others involves some risk, but it can be gratifying when kept within realistic limits.

Signs Of Distress

- Inability to Concentrate
- Confusion
- Persistent Worrying
- Social Isolation
- Increased Irritability
- Bizarre Behavior
- Missed Class/Assignments
- Procrastination
- Dangerous Behavior
- Restlessness
- Disheveled Appearance
- Mood Swings
- Indecisiveness
- Depression
- Anxiety

Cross Cultural Communication

SDSU is such a richly diverse community that each day most of us work with a student who comes from a background and culture quite different from our own. In this sense many of our interactions and much of our communication is cross-cultural. Communicating across differences can be a key factor in a staff or faculty member's ability to teach, support and guide students.

DO

- Respect cultural differences – whenever possible, ask and listen for the student's cultural framework and perspectives, and take time to learn more about specific cultures.
- Be thoughtful about how your style of communication might be interpreted by a student from another culture.
- Consider how a history of racism, oppression, discrimination and stereotyping could affect how a student perceives SDSU and your attempts to help them.
- validate and acknowledge the student's plight and pain – this need, while important for all students, is often accentuated in students who see themselves as culturally different.
- Offer to help in specific ways – consider a direct and personal intervention in the case of system difficulties. For example, make a phone call to help a student connect with another department or faculty member. Consider Going with a student to introduce them to another department, office or faculty member.
- Explore with a student the wisdom of also seeking help within their more familiar cultural framework. For example, ask them if it might help to talk with elders, family members, and/or religious leaders.
- Familiarize yourself with culturally focused support services:
 - ▶ Educational Opportunity Program – (619) 594-6298
 - ▶ The Cross-Cultural Center – (619) 594-7057
 - ▶ International Student Services – (619) 594-1982
 - ▶ Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Student Union – (619) 594-2737
 - ▶ Office of Diversity & Equity – (619) 594-6464

DON'T

- Automatically judge a student and their problems based on your own cultural norms – for example, a lack of eye contact in some cultures shows respect while in others may communicate avoiding the truth – forceful, loud and expressive language in some cultures is intended to invite a strong and respectful dialogue; in other cultures it can be viewed as hostile or disrespectful.
- Make assumptions based on a student's cultural background.

The Verbally Aggressive Student

Students usually become verbally abusive in frustrating situations that they see as being beyond their control. Anger and frustration become displaced from those situations to you. These students often feel they will be rejected and, therefore, reject you first. They often realize the drama and intimidation behind their anger and are aware of their impact.

DO

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration, e.g., "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion, e.g., "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- Allow them to vent, get the feelings out, and tell you what is upsetting them.
- Reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or other quiet place if this is comfortable.
- Consider keeping your office door open or inviting another faculty or staff member to join you.
- Tell them that you are not willing to accept their verbally abusive behavior, e.g., "When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen."
- Tell them they are violating your personal space and to please move back (if they are getting physically too close), e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close."
- Help the person problem solve and deal with the real issues when they become calmer.

DON'T

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way."
- Press for explanation or reasons for their behavior – "Now I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so obnoxious."
- Look away and not deal with the situation.
- Give away your own rights as a person.
- Hesitate to call the University Police if the situation escalates.

The Violent or Physically Destructive Student

Violence, because of emotional distress, is very rare and typically occurs only when the student is totally frustrated and feels there are no other options.

DO

- 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 serious concerns on your mind.”
- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable, e.g., “You certainly have the right to be angry but screaming, hitting (breaking things) is not O.K.”
- Get necessary help (other staff, University Police, Counseling Services).
- Stay in an open area.
- Divert attention and when all else fails, e.g., “If you hit me, I can’t be of help.”

DON’T

- Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, statements like, “You’re leaving me no choice.”
- Threaten, dare, taunt, or push into a corner.
- Touch.

The Substance Abusing Student

Given the stresses of university life, students are especially susceptible to drug abuse. A variety of substances are available that provide escape from pressing demands. The only problem is that these drugs soon create their own set of problems in the form of addiction, accident proneness and poor health. The most abused substance is alcohol. Alcohol and other drug-related accidents remain the greatest single cause of preventable deaths among college students.

DO

- Be on the alert for signs of drug abuse (preoccupation with drugs, inability to participate in class activities, deteriorating performance in class, periods of memory loss or blackouts).
- Share your honest concern for the person.
- Encourage him/her to seek help
- Get necessary help in instances of intoxication.

DON’T

- Ignore the problem.
- Chastise or lecture.
- Encourage the behavior.

The Student in Poor Contact with Reality

These students have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed; they may coin new words, see or hear things which no one else can, have irrational beliefs, and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior. Generally, these students are not dangerous and are very confused, frightened and overwhelmed.

DO

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.
- Remove extra stimulation of the environment and see them in a quiet atmosphere (if you are comfortable in doing so).
- Acknowledge your 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 the feelings or fears without supporting the misperceptions, e.g., "I understand you think they are trying to hurt you and I know how real it seems to you, but I don't hear the voices (see the devil, etc.)."
- Reveal your difficulty in understanding them (when appropriate), e.g., "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" – switch topics and divert the focus from the irrational to the rational or the real.
- Speak to their healthy side, which they have – it's O.K. to joke, laugh, or smile when appropriate.

DON'T

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking for it makes them defend their positions (false perceptions) more.
- Play along, e.g., "Oh yeah, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."
- Encourage further revelations of craziness.
- Demand, command, or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

The Suspicious Student

Typically, these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are tense, anxious, mistrustful and loners. They tend to interpret minor oversights as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everybody's behavior and everything that happens has special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy underline most of their behavior. They seem capable and bright.

DO

- Express compassion without intimate friendship – suspicious students have trouble with closeness.
- Be firm, steady, punctual, and consistent.
- Be specific and clear regarding standards of behavior you expect.

DON'T

- Assure the student that you are his/her friend; agree you're a stranger, but even strangers can be concerned.
- Be overly warm and nurturing
- Flatter or participate in their games; you don't know the rules.
- Be cute or humorous.
- Challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.
- Be ambiguous.

The Depressed Student

Epidemiological studies show that at any given time, seven percent of the general population is clinically depressed. This suggests that presently, nearly 2,500 SDSU students are struggling with a serious depression. These students show a multitude of symptoms, e.g., guilt, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and inadequacy as well as physical symptoms such as a change in appetite, difficulty staying asleep, early awakening, low interest in daily activities.

DO

- Let the student know you're aware he/she is feeling down and you would like to help.
- Reach out more than halfway and encourage the student to express how she/he is feeling. Depressed students are often initially reluctant to talk, yet others' attention helps the student feel more worthwhile.
- Tell the student of your concern.

DON'T

- Say, "Don't worry," "Crying won't help," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."
- Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think he/she may be.

The Suicidal Student

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among college students. Any one of us can become suicidal if life hits us hard enough! The suicidal person is intensely ambivalent about killing himself/herself and typically responds to help; suicidal states are definitely time limited and most who commit suicide are neither crazy nor psychotic. High risk indicators include feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and futility; a severe loss or threat of loss; a detailed suicidal plan; history of a previous attempt; history of alcohol or drug abuse; and feelings of alienation and isolation. Suicidal students usually want to communicate their feelings and the inability to do so results in a rage or anger directed toward themselves.

DO

- Take it seriously – 75 percent of all people who commit suicide give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member.
- Be willing to listen – even if professional help is needed, a student will be more willing to seek help if you have listened to him or her.
- Voice your concern – take the initiative to ask what is troubling the student and let them know how concerned you are.
- **Get professional help immediately** – call Counseling and Psychological Services to consult with a therapist and/or encourage them to call the 24 hour crisis line at **1-800-479-3339**.

DON'T

- Assume the situation will take care of itself.
- Be sworn to secrecy.
- Act shocked or surprised at what the person says.
- Challenge or dare.
- Argue or debate moral issues.

The Anxious and Stressed Student

Most of us live, work, teach and learn in a complex and stressful world. Epidemiological studies indicate that at any given time 17 percent of the general population is suffering with clinical levels of anxiety. This suggests that at this moment nearly 6,000 SDSU students are experiencing stress at levels high enough to seriously compromise their ability to perform at their full academic potential.

DO

- Listen and let them express their feelings and thoughts – sincere listening alone often relieves a great deal of pressure.
- Be clear and explicit.
- Remain calm.
- Encourage the student to attend a stress management workshop or make an appointment to see a counselor.
- Visit the Center for Well Being at C&PS and view a relaxation video in our “egg chair.”

DON'T

- Minimize the severity of anxiety symptoms.
- Argue about how bad things are.
- Get frustrated when your suggestions are resisted.

Detecting Severely Depressed or Potentially Suicidal Behavior: A Brief Checklist

1 Have you noticed significant changes in the student's overt behavior patterns?

- Sleeping
- Eating
- Studying
- Use of drugs/alcohol
- Time spent with others
- Weight gain or loss
- Other changes _____
- _____

2 Have you noticed significant changes in the student's affect (emotions)?

- Hyperactive, excited
- Withdrawn, depressive
- Mood swings
- Anxious, panicked

3 Is the person abusing drugs or alcohol?

4 What is the quality of social relationships for this student?

- Lack of close, supportive friends
- Rarely participates in group activities
- Spends little time with others
- Non-supportive family ties

5 Have there been any recent traumatic or stressful events in this student's life?

- Death of a loved one
- Changes in close relationships (breaking up of a love affair)
- Changes in family relationships
- Poor academic performance
- Serious illness (AIDS, cancer, diabetes, etc.)
- Other events

6 Has the student hinted at suicide or talked about helplessness?

75 percent of suicide victims communicate their intent to someone else.

7 Has the student attempted suicide before?

8 Has a close friend of this student or family member committed suicide?

9 Does this student engage in physically dangerous activities?

10 Has the student exhibited increasing concern about death or life after death?

For Consultation Call:

**Counseling &
Psychological Services
(619) 594-5220**

**San Diego Access &
Crisis Team (24 hours)
1-800-479-3339**



The contents are the product of the combined efforts of Counseling Centers who comprise the Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education (OCCDHE).