



Center for Counseling & Consultation

A Guide for Faculty & Staff

College students typically encounter a great deal of stress during their undergraduate years (i.e., academic, social, family, work, financial). While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students may feel alone, isolated, helpless and even hopeless. These feelings can easily disrupt academic performance and may result in harmful behaviors such as substance abuse and attempts at suicide.

Faculty and staff members are in a unique position to identify and help students who are struggling with various issues or are in crisis. This may be particularly true for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends, or for students who are unaware of resources available to them. Anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in a time of trouble. Your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in saving students' academic careers or even their lives.

The purpose of this guide is to help you recognize some of the symptoms of student distress and to provide some specific options for intervention, referral to campus resources, and/or consultation with the Center for Counseling & Consultation (CCC).

Tips for Recognizing Distressed Students

At one time or another, everyone feels low or upset. The following may help to identify some symptoms which, when present over a period of time, suggest that the problems with which the person is dealing are more than the "normal" ones.

Marked Changes in Academic Performance or Behavior	Unusual Behavior or Appearance	References to Suicide, Homicide or Death
Poor performance and preparation	Depressed or lethargic mood	Expressing helplessness or hopelessness
Excessive absences or tardiness	Hyperactivity or very rapid speech	Overt references to suicide
Repeated requests for special consideration	Swollen or red eyes	Isolation from friends or family
Unusual or changed pattern of interaction	Change in personal hygiene or dress	Homicidal or suicidal threats (Verbal or Written)

Avoiding participation	Dramatic weight loss or gain	
Dominating discussions	Strange or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality	
Excessively anxious when called upon	Exaggerated or inappropriate emotional response	
Disruptive behavior		
Problems with roommate(s) or family		

What Can You Do?

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student reaches out to you for help with personal problems, here are some suggestions that might make the opportunity more comfortable for you and more helpful for the student:

- **TALK** to the student in private when both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied. 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 cared about as an individual and more confident about what to do.

If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? You should be more concerned about your grades."

- **LISTEN** to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, nonthreatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both content and feelings. Let the student talk.
- **GIVE** hope. Assure the student that things can get better. It is important to help them realize there are options, and that things will not always seem hopeless. Suggest resources: friends, family, clergy or other professionals on campus. Recognize, however, that your purpose should be to provide enough hope to enable the student to consult a professional or other appropriate person and not to solve the student's problems.
- **AVOID** judging, evaluating, and criticizing even if the student asks your opinion. Such behavior is apt to push the student away from you and from the help they need. It is important to respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.
- **MAINTAIN** clear and consistent boundaries and expectations. It is important to maintain the professional nature of the faculty/student or staff/student relationship and the consistency of academic expectations, exam schedules, etc. Also, it is important that you not be 'sworn to secrecy', in the event you need to consult with someone else about an

urgent situation.

- **REFER:** In making a referral it is important to point out that: 1) help is available and 2) seeking such help is a sign of strength and courage rather than a sign of weakness or failure. It may be helpful to point out that seeking professional help for other problems (medical, legal, car problems, etc.) is considered good judgment and an appropriate use of resources. For example, "If you had a broken arm you would go to a doctor rather than try to set it yourself." If you can, prepare the student for what they might expect if they follow your suggestion. Tell them what you know about the referral person or service.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** Arrange a time to meet with the student again to solidify their resolve to obtain appropriate help and to demonstrate your commitment to assist them in this process. Check later with the student to see that the referral appointment was kept and to hear how it went. Provide support while the student takes further appropriate action or pursues another referral if needed. Remember that, except in emergencies (i.e., a student presents an imminent danger to self or others), students are adults who may refuse a referral. Give such a student an opportunity to reconsider by attempting to address any concerns they may have about the referral. You may also offer other alternatives (e.g., off campus counseling).
- **CONSULT:** When in doubt about the appropriateness of an intervention, call the CCC (718-990-6384) for consultation. If an urgent concern about a student arises after office hours, call the After-Hours Helpline (718-990-6352) to speak with a counselor. **In case of emergency, contact Public Safety (Q-718-990-5252; SI-718-390-4487) for assistance.** A student whose behavior has become threatening, violent, or significantly disruptive may need a different kind of approach.

What Happens to a Student at the Counseling Center?

During the pandemic, services at the CCC have been centralized for all campuses. Services are delivered virtually through secure video conferencing or phone. Students may call or visit our website (www.stjohns.edu/counseling) to make an appointment. Students should make their own appointments. You can assist this process by offering the student the Center's phone number (718-990-6384) and office hours (Monday - Thursday 8am - 4:30pm & Friday 8:30am-3pm). **In an emergency situation, the student will be seen as soon as possible.** All on-campus counseling services are free. Students need to know that services at the Counseling Center are confidential by law and ethical guidelines. You should note that this means Center staff are not able to verify a student's attendance or any other mental health information without the student's written permission.

For the first virtual visit, the student completes information forms before meeting with a counselor. During the initial interview, the counselor begins an assessment of the student's needs and the ways in which the Counseling Center might be able to help.

If the student and the counselor agree that further services are appropriate, the student may be offered short-term individual telemental health counseling. Some students are referred to other

campus service departments or to community resources for specialized services or continued counseling. Others may leave the initial interview feeling able to handle their problems on their own. Students can contact the Center again if additional services would be useful.

Consultation is Available

If you have decided to help a student at risk, you may still have questions about how best to handle the situation. Staff members at the Counseling Center would be happy to help you:

- Assess the situation, its seriousness, and the potential for referral.
- Learn about resources, both on and off campus, so you can suggest the most appropriate help available when talking to the student.
- Find the best way to make the referral, if appropriate.
- Clarify your own feelings about the student and consider ways you can be most effective.
- Discuss follow-up concerns after the initial action or referral.

Points to Remember:

- Counseling is free and confidential for all registered and matriculated students.
- Consultation is available for faculty & staff.
- Office Hours are **Monday-Thursday 8:30am-4:30pm & Friday 8:30am-3pm.**
- All services are currently offered virtually.
- At this time, there is **one contact number for all campuses – 718-990-6384.**
- All members of the University community may speak with a counselor **after hours** by calling the **helpline** at **718-990-6384.**
- **In case of emergency, contact Public Safety (Q-718-990-5252; SI-718-390-4487).**
- For more information or to schedule an appointment, visit us at www.stjohns.edu/counseling.