

WHAT CAN I DO? Faculty & Staff Helping Students In Distress

The college years can be very stressful for students as they face the challenges of the demanding academic Rensselaer environment and the roles and responsibilities of becoming an adult. Additionally, many students arrive at Rensselaer with struggles that will challenge their ability to succeed in this new and demanding environment such as family difficulties or financial problems.

Faculty and staff are in the unique position of identifying distressed students and helping them to access the resources needed to cope with the demands of college life. You are on the front lines, witnessing the early signs of distress as they are played out on campus and in the classrooms. Students are also likely to initially seek assistance from faculty and staff members, particularly when they see you as available and willing to listen. Beyond the support you can provide, there are also professional support services available to students through the Counseling Center. The Counseling Center staff are available to meet with students and to consult with you about providing the help that he or she may need.

Identifying a Student in Distress

Many students have difficulty *asking* for help. Instead, they will indicate or show signs that they are struggling. The intensity of these signs of distress is one factor in determining the best response to take with each student.

At one time or another, everyone feels upset, depressed, and/or unhappy. Cause for concern should arise when the symptoms of distress occur for extended periods of time or begin to interfere with a student's academic responsibilities or social/personal relationships.

Following is a list of signs that might indicate that a student is in distress. (NOTE: This list is not meant to serve as a comprehensive list as students may exhibit other behaviors that are just as serious but are not listed).

Academic Signs

- Significant decline in quality of work
- Repeated absence(s) from class, lab, or recitation
- Not handing in homework or assignments
- Coursework that is handed in expresses signs of anger, hopelessness, isolation, depression, or despair
- Inappropriate disruptions or verbalizations in class
- Lack of participation during in-class group activities

Psychological or Physical Signs

- Deterioration in physical presence or hygiene
- Exaggerated behaviors or personality traits (e.g., agitation, withdrawal, blunted affect)
- Constant irritability, anxiety, or tearful behavior
- Overt suicidal thoughts or behavior, such as referring to suicide as an option or manner of coping
- Unwarranted anger, hostility, or outbursts
- Significant changes in concentration or motivation
- Evidence of alcohol or other drug dependence or abuse
- Visible increases or decreases in weight
- Extreme fatigue or sleepiness in class
- Evidence of cutting behavior (e.g., knife-like cuts on arms)

Additional Factors to Consider

- Candid statements indicating family problems, personal losses such as the death of a family member or the break up of a significant relationship
- Expressions of concern about a student by peers, lab partner(s), or classmates
- Written or verbal statements that have a sense of finality or hopelessness
- Your sense that something is seriously amiss (no matter how vague this might be)

Helping a Distressed Student

The following recommendations can be used if a student approaches you with a problem and/or if you decide to approach a student about some of the signs listed above. Performing these steps in an understanding and respectful manner will make the process of providing assistance or making a referral more likely to succeed.

- **Privately talk to the student about your concerns.** Provide the student with your undivided attention. A few minutes of your listening may be enough to assist the student in solving their own problem. Ask the student, if necessary, if they have ever discussed their concerns with a counselor. Encourage the student to talk with a professional at the Counseling Center.

- **Express your concerns in nonjudgmental terms.** Be direct and specific. For example, say something like "I have noticed that you have not been handing in your work lately and I am concerned," rather than "Why have you not handed in your work?"
- **Listen to their thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening manner.** By repeating or paraphrasing the essence of what the student has conveyed to you, you communicate empathy and understanding. Do your best to include both the *feeling* and *content* of what was told to you. For example, "It sounds like you are having difficulty transitioning to your senior year and you feel anxious about the future." But remember, it is important to let the student do most of the talking.

Making A Referral

If you believe the student is not a harm to themselves or others, suggest to them in a caring manner that they may benefit from a meeting at the Counseling Center.

It is best, however, not to make the referral when the student is extremely upset or confused. Wait for the student to calm down before offering this suggestion. Below is some additional information to offer when making the referral:

- Sessions are confidential. This means that information about the student cannot be released to family, friends, faculty, or other offices without the student's written permission. (There are limitations to this confidentiality which will be explained to the student in their first session).
- Counseling records are kept separately from academic records and are protected by law.
- Counseling services are free to students who have paid the Health Center Fee.
- The Center is staffed by four licensed Ph.D. psychologists with specialized training in college health.

Provide the Counseling Center phone number (276-6479) when making the referral. You can also call with the student present or walk the student over to Academy Hall if you prefer. In a crisis, the student can be seen that day for a crisis appointment. Please contact us as soon as possible so proper arrangements can be made.

Remember, being supportive is the best thing you can do for this student. Point out that seeking help is a sign of strength and that you understand that asking for help may be the hardest part. Let the student know that there are many places on campus where they may seek assistance. If the student would be better served by an office other than the Counseling Center, please refer them accordingly. See the Resources Section for additional referral sources.

Students in Crisis

When a student is dealing with an emotionally stressful event or change in their life, their methods of coping may become less effective or ineffective altogether. A student in a serious mental health crisis may exhibit the following:

- Suicidal statements, gestures, or attempts
- Acts or threats of harm to other individuals
- Property destruction or other criminal acts
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Extremely disruptive behavior (e.g., outbursts, aggression, hostility)
- Inability to communicate effectively (e.g., disoriented thought, babbling)
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., hallucinating, hearing/seeing things that are not present)
- Homicidal threats (written or verbal) or attempted homicide or assault

What To Do in a Serious Crisis

If you believe a student to be of imminent harm to him/herself or another person (as evidenced by any of the symptoms above) immediately contact Public Safety at 276-6611. If you would like to consult with a Counseling Center staff member, you may do so by calling 276-6479 during regular office hours (8:30a.m. – 5p.m.) or by contacting Public Safety (276-6611) after hours. Please let whomever you call know the situation is a crisis so that we can react accordingly. If you feel uneasy leaving the student, please walk them to Academy Hall during regular hours or Public Safety after hours. Besides assuring the student's safety, this is an excellent way to show your support.

Campus Resources

Counseling Center
3200 Academy Hall
276-6479

After Hours Emergency Number
276-6611
Ask for the On-Call Psychologist

Advising and Learning Assistance Center
Sage 2106
276-6269

Career Development Center
Darrin Communications Center
Suite 209
276-6234

Chaplain's Office
Rensselaer Union
Suite 217
276-6518

Disabled Student Services
4629 Academy Hall
276-4839

Student Health Center
3200 Academy Hall
276-6287

Health Education
3200 Academy Hall
276-2305

Public Safety
Visitors Information Center
276-6656 (non emergency 24 hour)
276-6611 (emergency 24 hour)

Residence Life
West Commons
276-6284

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute COUNSELING CENTER



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Rensselaer