

Responding To Students In Distress

Eric Nelson, Ph.D.
Director of Counseling Services
805.565-6003
ernelson@westmont.edu

Reports of anxiety, depression, and other distress among college students continue to rise. From a socio-cultural standpoint, students today have likely faced higher levels of academic pressure from an earlier age, and many seem to lack effective coping mechanisms. College can represent the end-all-be-all, the culmination of everything, where fears about the future can seem to hinge upon a single letter grade, relationship, situation, internship, etc. Fortunately, students on this campus are embedded within

the Westmont community, with administrators, faculty, staff, and peers who care considerably for their welfare. Most often, the concern and engagement of one individual is enough to assist and soothe a student in distress. At other times, faculty or staff can be the critical point of contact connecting the student to appropriate care and motivating him/her to reach out. To facilitate your approach with students, below are some guidelines to consider:

Observe. Be familiar with the symptoms of distress and attend to their occurrence. Pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings. Be particularly aware of:

- Changes in performance, mood, or personality
- Excessive absences or frequent late assignments
- Heightened dependence on peers or staff/faculty
- Impaired speech / confused thoughts
- Threatening behaviors / suicidal references

Initiate Contact. Talk to the student privately, in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern. Early feedback, intervention, and referral (if indicated) can prevent more serious problems from developing. If unsure, simply check in with

the student (e.g., “How are you, really?”).

Offer Support: Interest, concern, and attentive listening are critical in responding to students. Avoid criticism or sounding judgmental. Summarize the essence of what the student has told you as a way to clarify the situation; provide hope that things can get better. Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem and generate coping strategies. Suggest other resources that the student can take advantage of: friends, family, clergy, or professionals on campus.

Discuss Options to Assist Student. First clarify: What does the student want to accomplish? What has the student done to try to resolve the problem? What solutions can you and the student

brainstorm? What other resources might be helpful, including a referral for counseling?

Reach Out: It may be beneficial to seek input from a licensed medical health provider. The counseling staff can suggest possible approaches to take, provide you with support, or intervene directly with students. Call us for assistance at 805-565-6003. For emergencies, dial 911. For urgent concerns, contact the RD On Call if the counseling staff are unavailable at 805-565-6273.

Portions adapted from “Helping Distressed or Distressing Students” – University of Rochester Counseling Center

Consider using these sentence stems to frame your approach:

- I care ... about you as an individual / student / friend / colleague.
- I see ... that you have missed multiple classes, and seem more distant.
- I feel ... concerned about you.
- I want ... to be a support for you, and hear how you are.
- I will ... check back in with you next week, get coffee with you, create a Student Care Report, walk you to the Counseling Center, help you reach out to the Disability Office.