



DISTRESSED AND DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

This guide outlines behavior indicators of distressed and disruptive students, and response strategies for faculty and staff.

IDENTIFYING A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

As a faculty or staff member at Westmont, you may be the first to notice a student who is experiencing difficulty. In these situations, your relationship and experience with the student can bridge the individual to available resources and care. Our environment facilitates relationships where care and concern can be communicated; however, faculty and staff are not to provide mental health counseling or attempt to diagnose students in distress. Most frequently, the best care for struggling students is to notice signs of distress, communicate care, and connect students to the appropriate resources.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Distress:

- Stated need for help (directly or indirectly). Listen for both the content of what a student is saying as well as the underlying feelings and intentions of his or her message. Notice tone of voice and gestures. Students may also communicate problems via e-mail or through written class assignments.

Academic Indicators:

- Infrequent class attendance with minimal or no work completed.
- Excessive procrastination and/or very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous coursework.
- Repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., deadline extensions).
- Behavior which regularly interferes with effective class management. (See Disruptive Students section in this guide.)
- Essays or creative works that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair.

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators:

- Dependency (e.g., the student who hangs around or makes excessive unproductive appointments during office hours).
- Tearfulness – unexplained and frequent.
- Frequent or high levels of irritable, unruly, abrasive, or aggressive behavior.
- Unable to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.
- Overly anxious, nervous or tense.
- Recent traumatic changes in personal relationships (e.g., death of a family member or close friend, divorce and other changes in significant relationships).

Physical Indicators:

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class.
- Marked changes in personal hygiene.
- Impaired speech and/or disjointed thoughts.
- Excessive weight gain or loss.
- Coming to class bleary-eyed, hung over, or smelling of alcohol or other substances.

QUICK REFERENCE: RESPONSE PROTOCOL

<p style="text-align: center;">Situation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Student's conduct is clearly and imminently reckless, disorderly, dangerous, or threatening (including suicidal self-harm behavior).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Contact</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Call 911 Then Public Safety (805.565.6222)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Situation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Student shows signs of distress but I am unsure how serious it is. I'm feeling uneasy and/or really concerned about the student's safety.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Contact</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Counseling Center between 9-5, M-F (805.565.6003), or On-Call Resident Director (805.565.6273) if no response or if calling after hours.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Situation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">I'm not concerned for the student's immediate safety, but he or she is having significant academic and/or personal issues. Student needs support.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Contact</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Complete Online Care Report http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/care/ReportForm.html</p>

Safety/Risk Indicators:

NOTE: Any indicators from this section should be acted on immediately.

- Current expressed suicidal thinking or planning
- Any written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality or a suicidal tone to it.
- Statements to the effect that the student is "going away for a long time".
- Severe depression, or mood swings.
- History of suicidal thoughts or attempts, coupled with ongoing depressed mood.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors.
- Essays or papers that focus on despair, suicide or death.

Students in a Serious Mental Health Crisis

If a student is in a serious mental health crisis, you may hear or see the following:

- Suicidal statements or suicidal behaviors/attempts.
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions.
- Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts).
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there); bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate for the situation (e.g., talking to someone that is not present).
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostile, suspicious, and/or agitated behavior).

WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT IS IN DISTRESS

When you believe that a student, or anyone else in the college community, is talking about harming themselves or others, **you have a responsibility to act:**

- Regardless of who the person is, if you perceive an imminent danger to self or to others, call 911 immediately.
- In cases where imminent danger is not clearly present but the need seems urgent (e.g., suicidal thinking but no present danger), you may call the Counseling Center (805.565.6003) during business hours. For afterhours concerns or if there is no answer at the Counseling Center, contact the On-Call Resident Director (805.565.6273). Leaving a simple voice mail or e-mail message is insufficient. It is important to have a consult with another professional immediately.
- For situations where a mental health emergency is not present and the student is not in danger, complete a Care Report. <http://www.westmont.edu/offices/care/ReportForm.html>. A Student Life staff member will review these reports within one business day.

IDENTIFYING DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR

On occasion, you may find a student whose behavior is causing distress to you or others. These concerns vary greatly, but can be broadly categorized as excessively demanding or aggressive/potentially violent. These situations or behaviors may include:

- Becoming confrontational or argumentative.
- Inability to accept limits.
- Verbally threatening faculty, staff, or other students.
- Sending alarming notes, e-mails, or messages to faculty, staff, or other students.
- Becoming verbally abusive.
- Overt physical disruptions (throwing papers or books; turning over chairs, etc.).
- Overt acts of violence directed at faculty, staff or student (hitting, pushing, etc.).
- Delusions/hallucinations and general suspiciousness

WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT IS DISRUPTIVE IN CLASS

The severity and frequency of a student's misconduct influence the action that might be appropriate to a specific instance of disruptive behavior. Below are suggestions, **listed in the order of increasing severity.**

- Provide clear expectations for standards for classroom behavior in the syllabus.
- At the onset of inappropriate behavior, consider a general statement to the entire class.
- If behavior continues, speak directly with the student but do not meet alone with a student you believe to be a threat to your personal safety. (You can notify Public Safety to be on alert or nearby.)
- Complete a Care Report. <http://www.westmont.edu/offices/care/ReportForm.html>. Make a written record of any meeting to discuss disruptive behavior. If the meeting concerned a serious incident, send a letter or email to the student summarizing the conversation.

- Involve others as appropriate: Talk to your department chair, or contact the Counseling Center for consultation.
- If necessary, remove the student from the class session. If a student refuses to leave a class when directed, call Public Safety for assistance. Report any removal from class to your department chair and notify the Student Life Office as quickly as possible. The Dean of Students will review the student's behavior and follow-up with the student as appropriate.

Responding to a Threatening or Potentially Violent Student

In the unlikely event that you encounter a threatening or potentially violent student, keep in mind the following principles. It is important to report threatening or violent behaviors with your department chair, supervisor, Public Safety, and the Student Life Office immediately.

- **Be aware.** Look for changes in behavior before physical aggression occurs. You may observe the student increasing the volume of his/her voice, pointing fingers, or leaning forward in a potential attacking position.
- **How to respond verbally**
 - Remain calm and in control — do not mirror the student's behavior or tone of voice. Take slow deep breaths to maintain your composure.
 - Use the student's name.
 - Listen and respond empathically — do not interrupt or deny the student's feelings. Remain nonjudgmental, build trust and communicate understanding to de-escalate the situation.
 - Convey a willingness to assist. Offer acceptance, respect, and understanding of the student's concern.
 - Set limits. Offer options, but also outline limits and discuss potential consequences to irresponsibility.
- **How to respond non-verbally**
 - Keep at least one leg length away (about 36 inches) to avoid the person's personal space, to prevent escalation, and to increase your own personal safety.
 - Maintain an open stance — keep your hands open in plain view. Do not cross arms or point fingers.
 - Maintain appropriate eye contact and facial expressions.
- **Meeting with a threatening or potentially threatening student**
 - Do not meet alone.
 - Alert a colleague of the meeting and have that colleague ready to assist. Have a Public Safety Officer on "standby."
 - Keep door of your meeting place open.
 - Keep yourself between the student and the door for a quick exit, if needed.
 - Terminate meeting immediately if your intuition senses something is wrong.
 - Follow the verbal and nonverbal guidelines above.
- **If attacked**
 - Immediately increase personal space.
 - Call 911 or yell for help.
 - Use the least force necessary to protect yourself and keep the student from harm.