

University of Houston-Clear Lake Counseling Services

RESPONDING TO DISTRESSED AND DISTRESSING STUDENTS

Faculty and Staff Consultation with a Therapist

This document is designed to help guide you in your response to a distressed student. If you are uncertain about when or how to approach a student, about the appropriateness of a referral, or if the student resists a referral and you remain concerned, you can call Counseling Services for a consultation with a therapist. We will gladly consult with you and provide guidance about what you might want to do next.

Consultations about a student cannot be guaranteed to remain confidential, as it will be part of the student's counseling file if they do seek services and at times, it may be necessary for Counseling Services staff to make this information known to the CARE team. If you have questions about the need for a confidential consultation, please talk to the Counseling Services Executive Director or Associate Director.

When and How to Refer

Many faculty and staff members have contact with students on a frequent basis and have the opportunity to observe some of the changes that may be signs or symptoms of distress. These can be indicative of the need to refer them for professional assistance. Seeking counseling is voluntary for a student. **We cannot initiate contact with a student; they must seek help on their own.** In addition, without a release of information by the student we cannot provide any feedback about whether the student made contact with our office.

Levels of Referral

It may be useful to think about two different levels of referral for distressed students.

Regular Referral: In the case of mild or moderately distressed students, it is probably appropriate to tell them about Counseling Services and encourage them to seek services on their own. In this case, when they contact the Counseling Services they can expect to set up an initial visit within a few days, a 30-minute initial consultation appointment, where they will meet with a therapist to determine a course of action, which mostly likely will include continuing therapy on campus or receiving a referral for other appropriate resources.

Crisis Referral: In the case of urgent concern for a student or if a student is experiencing a high degree of distress, a crisis referral may be warranted. If you determine that the student needs to be seen immediately, you can call and let the Counseling Services front desk staff know of the urgency of the situation and walk the student to our office and we will attempt to see them right away. In some situations, it may be more desirable to ask the therapist to come to your location on campus to meet with you and the student to provide a consultation. **If the student demonstrates behavior that is cause for immediate concern contact: UHCL Police Department at 281-283-2222.**

C.A.R.E. Team

If you are concerned about a student, you should also make a report to the Crisis Awareness Response Emergency (CARE) Team. The university has established the Crisis Awareness and Response Emergency (CARE) Team through the Dean of Students Office in order to provide a proactive multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to assessing and responding to students who exhibit threatening, concerning, and/or disruptive behaviors. The purpose of the CARE Team is to provide a vehicle for communication across and among divisions and departments of the university regarding student conduct and to serve as the institutional gathering point for information related to students of concern. CARE TEAM: <https://www.uhcl.edu/dean-of-students/>

Tips about Referrals

When referring students to Counseling Services it is useful to:

- Reassure students that it is an act of strength to ask for help
- Explain that there are therapists committed to helping them be successful
- Dispute the myth that only "weak" or "crazy" people go for counseling
- Remind them that counseling services are free and confidential
- Offer to help them make the initial contact with Counseling Services

Services Offered

Individual Therapy	Couples Therapy	Group Therapy
Psychiatry	Support Groups	The Mind Spa
Biofeedback		WellTrack App

Counseling Services Office Hours

Monday-Friday 8am-5pm
After hours crisis line 281-283-2580, press 2

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Signs of Distress

The following signs may indicate that a student is distressed:

Problems in Academic Performance in conjunction with other signs of distress

- Changes in grades or academic performance
- Changes in class attendance or turning in assignments
- Unusual or disturbing content in writing

Social Indicators

- Marked change in patterns of interaction (e.g. avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called on, domination of discussions)
- Social withdrawal

Emotional Indicators

- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Increased anxiety
- Extreme mood swings
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses to events

Unusual Behavior

- Agitation or Acting-out behavior that pushes the limits of decorum and interferes with the educational environment
- Drug or alcohol abuse; visibly intoxicated or high
- Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
- Marked change in personal habits
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class

Additional Signs of Crisis

The following may also be present which might signal a more serious mental health crisis:

- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Inability to communicate clearly orally or in writing (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts)
- Suicidal comments (orally or in writing)
- Loss of contact with reality
- Highly disruptive behavior
- Threats to harm others
- Stalking behavior

Tips for Responding to Distressed Students

If you notice signs of distress, check in with the student and see if you can gather more information about what they are experiencing in order to help you decide if you need a consultation or need to refer them to Counseling Services. If you decide to approach a student or if a student reaches out to you for help, here are some suggestions:

- **Talk** to the student in private and be straightforward about your concerns for his/her welfare
- **Ask** direct questions, take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask the students directly what is going on and if you are worried about suicide, directly ask them if they have thoughts of harming themselves. There is no need to be afraid of these questions – you will not be “putting ideas into their heads” by asking. Most distressed students are relieved to know what someone has noticed and is paying attention.
- **Listen** to their thoughts and feelings in a respectful, caring, and nonjudgmental way.
- **Instill hopefulness** and a positive attitude in resolving the problem. Assure the student of the availability of resources and of people who want to help.
- Maintain clear and **consistent boundaries** and expectations.
- **Share your concern** with the student. Cite your observations about the student’s own concerns or behaviors. Let the student know that you believe a consultation with a therapist could be helpful. Offer the student your phone to call for an appointment or walk them to the counseling center.
- Don’t hesitate to **follow-up** privately with the student to ask if he/she made a successful contact with the counseling center. Because of confidentiality, Counseling Services will not be able to confirm or deny that the student made contact with us, so it is important that you follow up with them directly.
- Always keep **safety** in mind as you interact with a distressed student. **If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call UHCL Police Department at 281-283-2222.**
- Avoid **escalation**. Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, or intimidating responses. Distressed students are in need of listening and support. You can remind them of rules later.
- **Do not promise confidentiality** to the student. There will be times when you need to consult with others, and you do not want to feel that you are breaking a promise.
- **Know your limits**. You will be able to assist many distressed students by simply listening and referring them to Counseling Services. Some students, however, will need much more than you can provide. If you notice that you have overextended yourself, provide a referral either to Counseling Services or to the C.A.R.E. team, depending on the nature of the student’s distress.