

Counseling Services
University of Houston-Clear Lake

**Responding to
Distressed
&
Distressing
Students**



**University
of Houston
Clear Lake**

Counseling Services
<http://www.uhcl.edu/counselingservices>
(281) 283-2580
Student Services Building Suite 3103
University of Houston-Clear Lake
2700 Bay Area Blvd.
Houston, TX 77058-1098

RESPONDING TO DISTRESSED AND DISTRESSING STUDENTS

Students encounter stress for a variety of reasons. Academics, family problems, social situations, work, loss, and financial problems are just some of the sources of stress. While most students cope successfully with these stressors, for some the pressures become overwhelming and unmanageable. The inability to cope effectively with emotional stress poses a serious threat to a student's overall functioning. The expression of concern by a faculty or staff member may be a critical factor in helping a struggling student re-establish the emotional equilibrium necessary for success at UHCL. We hope that this information will not only assist you in assessing the severity of a student's personal problems, but will also give you some specific ideas about what to do when dealing with a distressed student and how and when to refer them to UHCL Counseling Services.

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 that interferes with the educational environment
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
- Marked change in personal habits
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class

Signs of Serious 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

Faculty and Staff Consultation with a Therapist

This brochure is designed to help guide you in your response to a distressed student. But 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 staff to make this information known to the C.A.R.E. team. If you have questions about the need for a confidential consultation, please talk to the Counseling Services Director or Associate Director.

Tips for Responding to Distressed Students

If you notice signs of distress, it can be very useful for you check in with the student and see if you can get some more information about what they are experiencing in order to help you decide if you need a consultation or if and who you should refer them to. 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 and take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask 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 positive attitudes 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 students’ own concern or behaviors. Let the student know that you believe a consultation with a therapist could be helpful. Offer to allow them to use your phone to call for an appointment or walk them to the counseling center.

Tips for Responding to Distressed Students

- Don't hesitate to **follow-up** privately with the student to ask if he/she made a successful contact with the Counseling Services. Due to 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 Campus Police 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 at a later time.
- **Do not promise confidentiality** to the student. There will be times when you need to consult with others, and you don't want to feel that you're 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 either a referral to Counseling Services or to the C.A.R.E. team, depending on the nature of the student's distress.

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 where you and the student are to meet with you and the student to provide a consultation.

If the student demonstrates behavior that is cause for immediate concern outside of normal business hours, contact Campus Police at 281-283-2222.

In the case of urgent concern for a student, you should also consider making a report to the Dean of Students office, either for the Early Warning Program for students in academic jeopardy or the Crisis Awareness Response Emergency (C.A.R.E.) Team for students with behavioral issues or other problems interfering with student success. In that case, the Dean can make contact with the student and make sure they follow up with counseling or other needed referrals.

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.

OUR MISSION

The mission of University of Houston – Clear Lake Counseling Services is to help students fulfill their goals by fostering connections with and among members of the university community, facilitating the discovery and realization of power in their strengths and developing the ability to address emotional and psychological challenges. Our efforts and services are also aligned with the academic, retention, and student development missions of UHCL, so students can have a successful university experience and take full advantage of the various opportunities at the university.

**COUNSELING SERVICES
PROFESSIONAL STAFF**

Cynthia A. Cook, Ph.D.
Executive Director for Counseling, Health, and Career Services

Kimberly A. James Ph.D.
Associate Director

Jonathan Schmalz-Benson, Ph.D.
Training Director

Christine Henry, Ph.D.
Psychologist

Carolina Jimenez, Ph.D.
Psychologist

Christina Tjok, M.D.

Regular Office Hours

Monday through Thursday
8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
Friday
8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Summer Office Hours

Monday through Thursday
8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Friday
8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Counseling Services

SSCB 3103

281-283-2580

www.uhcl.edu/counselingservices

Dean of Students Office

281.283.2567

www.uhcl.edu/deanofstudents

**Early Warning Academic Support Program
Crisis Awareness Response Emergency Team
To Make a C.A.R.E. Team Report: 281-283-2273**