

Helping a Distressed Student: Brief Symptom List and Referral Guide

You may be the first to recognize that a student needs help, and are often the one who can guide the student to professional resources. Following are examples of causes for concern about a student.

Marked Behavior Changes

- Poor performance and preparation
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration, especially when this represents a change in attitude
- Unusual or changed pattern of interaction
- Avoiding participation
- Dominating discussions
- Excessive anxiety when called upon
- Disruptive behavior
- Problems with roommates or family
- Exaggerated emotional responses that are inappropriate to the situation
- Depressed, lethargic mood
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Strange or bizarre behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality

Unusual Appearance

- Swollen or red eyes
- A change in personal hygiene or dress
- Dramatic weight loss or gain

Expressions of Distress

- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Isolation from friends or family
- Verbal or written threats of violence
- Overt references to suicide

Urgent Concerns

Urgent concerns involve disturbances in thoughts, feelings, or actions so severe that an immediate response is needed. They include:

- Suicidal intentions
- A threat of violence or imminent harm to others, whether by intention, error in judgment, or passive neglect
- Confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, or delusions
- Extreme anxiety or obsessive thinking

Severe distress may be precipitated by a traumatic event, such as a sexual assault, the loss of a relationship, or the death of friend or family member.

What to Do

If you believe that there is imminent danger of harm to a student or someone else, immediately call the police for assistance. To help assess the situation, call the Counseling Center at (870) 972-2318. A Counseling Center on-call counselor is available for urgent situations 24 hours a day. Identify yourself as an ASU faculty or staff member, and indicate the urgency of your request (say whether it's immediate, within the hour, same day). Leave a phone number where you can be reached. **After weekday hours and on weekends, call the UPD dispatcher (870) 972-2093 who will notify the on-call counselor, who will return your call as soon as possible.**

Non-Urgent Concerns

In a non-urgent situation, talk with the student about your observations and concerns. Such acknowledgment often encourages them to get help. Try to:

- Be direct, specific, and non-judgmental
- Spell out your specific concerns, and say how you can help
- Express concern rather than shock, dismay, fear, or anger (which may further upset the student)
- Listen carefully to understand his or her point of view

Follow-Up

Arrange to meet with the student again. This follow-up can solidify the student's resolve to get appropriate help, and it demonstrates your commitment to assist in this process. Later, ask the student if he or she kept the appointment, and how it went. Once the student is receiving help, provide additional support.

Help for You

If you have questions about how best to handle a situation, the counselors at the Counseling Center are ready to help. A counselor can:

- Help assess the situation and its seriousness
- Propose possible interventions
- Explore resources, both on and off campus
- Find the best way to make a referral, if appropriate
- Help you clarify your own feelings about the student, so you can be more effective
- Discuss follow-up concerns after your initial action

Making a Referral

Encourage the student to go to The Counseling Center. If the student agrees, you can facilitate this by arranging the appointment while the student is with you. When referring a student, point out that help is available. Also point out that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage, not a sign of weakness or failure. Seeking professional help is the smart thing to do, just as it would be for problems with your car, the law, or your health.

Preventing Violence

You should be concerned if you observe any of the following:

- Alcohol or drug intoxication
- Paranoia or agitation
- Impulsive behavior
- Recent acts of violence, including damage to property
- Verbal or physical threats or menacing, or objects that may be used as weapons

What to Do

Protect yourself. Be alert to the potential for violence. Know as much about the situation as possible before meeting the student. Survey the scene for immediate hazards. Do not deal with the situation alone; enlist the help of others. Don't provoke violence. Approach the individual in a non-threatening way. Try to speak in a calm and reassuring manner. Never confront or threaten students who are aggressive or seem paranoid. Don't touch the person if you can avoid it. Don't physically restrain someone who is agitated. If you are attacked, use only enough force to restrain the person. Be firm but gentle, and let the student know that violence is not acceptable. Change the environment. Try to get the student to a calm, quiet place, away from environmental stimuli such as noise, lights, and people. Also try to avoid crowds, or sources of anger.

Confidentiality

When you refer students, ask them to let you know about their experience with us. This is important because we cannot divulge any confidential information (including whether or not counseling was given) without written consent. Please encourage the student to sign the Referral And Authorization To Exchange Confidential Information form giving such permission. (The referral form may be downloaded from this site).