

THE STUDENT IN POOR CONTACT WITH REALITY

Some students may have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, have false ideas about what is taking place or who one is, and may see or hear things which aren't there. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, and disturbed. While they may exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior, they usually are not dangerous but may be very scared, frightened and overwhelmed. In relatively rare instances they may become violent when they feel threatened (see violent and physically destructive students).

Helpful:

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.
- Remove the person from any extra stimulation in the environment and meet in a quiet, private atmosphere (if you are comfortable in doing so).
- Acknowledge your concerns and state that you can see they need help, e.g., "It seems very hard for you to integrate all these things that are happening, and I am concerned about you; I'd like to help."
- Acknowledge the feelings or fears without supporting the misperceptions, e.g., "I understand you think they are trying to hurt you, and I know how real it seems to you, but I don't hear the voices (see the devil, etc.)."
- Reveal your difficulty in understanding them (when appropriate), e.g., "I'm sorry but I don't understand. Could you repeat that or say it in a different way?"
- Focus on the "here and now." Switch topics and divert the focus from the irrational to the rational or the real.
- Speak to their healthy side (which they have). It's okay to joke, laugh, or smile when appropriate.
- Refer to the Counseling Center. When making an emergency referral, it is helpful to escort the student to the Counseling Center to ensure that they receive appropriate assessment and treatment.

Not Helpful:

- Don't argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking; it makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.
- Don't play along, e.g., "Oh yeah, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."
- Don't encourage further revelations or craziness.
- Don't demand, command, or order.
- Don't expect customary emotional responses.

* Adapted from: Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student. Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education; 1999