

## **Recognizing the Emotionally Distressed Student/Faculty/Staff Member**

If you are concerned about a student, faculty, or staff member, but are not sure how to proceed, call the Wellness Center. A professional counselor will return your call and help you determine an appropriate course of action. Your call will remain confidential. Consultations of this sort are a regular part of our services, and are frequently used by faculty to learn how best to deal with students who are in need of assistance.

Due to the opportunities for faculty and staff to observe and interact with students and other employees, they often are the first to recognize that someone is in distress. Look for a pattern of behaviors, but understand that not everyone who is in distress experiences the same symptoms. Additionally, distress may be situational (i.e., short-term), or chronic (i.e., ongoing) and the severity of symptoms varies with individuals.

- Awareness and Identification: What to Look For (Signs/Symptoms)
  - Speech: incoherent, loud, pressured, rapid, disjointed, or slurred
  - Thought content: poor reality contact, irrational, paranoid, suspicious, grandiose, confused, disoriented, poor planning and decision-making
  - Dependency (hangs around, makes excessive appointments, excessive telephone contacts)
  - Stalking, obsessive pre-occupation, obsessive fantasizing
  - Intoxication (substance use and abuse); abuse of prescriptions medications or "over the counter" products
  - Anxiety (trembling, sweating, irritability, restlessness, reports worry, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, feeling overwhelmed, fearful)
  - Depression (reports or reveals persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, loss of interest or pleasure, insomnia, weight gain or loss, decreased energy, fatigue, difficulty concentrating)
  - Other behaviors: inconsistent class participation, frequent illnesses/absences, poorly prepared or inconsistent work (especially if changed from a prior level of functioning), irritability, mood swings
  - Suicidal: makes threats or references to not wanting to live any longer, reports an overwhelming loss (perceived), has available means and a viable plan, reports lack of emotional support system (withdrawal), reveals poor coping strategies, reports or reveals substance use and abuse
  
- What to Do: Proactive Preparedness
  - Be familiar with signs and symptoms of ongoing distress
  - Seek consultation with the Wellness Center or other knowledgeable professionals

- Speak early with the Vice President for Student Affairs or a lead professor, who might meet with the student and establish a "contract" regarding their behavior
  - Direct the person to helpful resources at Wilson University or in the community (WU Wellness Center, nearest emergency room)
- Effective Listening/Helping Skills
 

*Remember: Everyone wants to be heard, to feel "listened to" and understood.*

    - Express concern and desire to help
    - Ask about feelings and thoughts
    - Suspend judgment
    - Try to develop trust (provide environment of warmth and acceptance)
    - Use person's name
    - Let the person know you are listening (attending behaviors)
    - Communicate undivided attention; resist distractions
    - Nod
    - Paraphrase or repeat essence of person's messages
    - Agree when genuine
    - Repeat or summarize main ideas ("facilitative listening")
    - Listen "between the lines for the underlying "feeling" message
    - Empathize with and "reflect" their feelings ("I can understand that you're feeling angry. It must be very frustrating.")
    - Acknowledge concerns and fears, without supporting misperceptions
    - Discourage discussion of any delusion and focus on "here and now"
    - Problem-solve (only when the person is ready)
    - Explore ways (options) for person to have their needs met
    - Break down concerns into manageable problem-solving steps (non-judgmental, solution-oriented approach)
    - "Brainstorm" together
    - Try to provide a face-saving solution; explore acceptable compromises
    - Do not:
      - Argue
      - Interrupt
      - Scold or lecture
      - Offer false reassurances
      - Be overly logical and rational, or try to "fix" the problem before thoroughly understanding
      - Trivialize the circumstances or feelings
      - Try to convince them of their irrationality
      - Overly challenge or confront
      - Invade physical space
    - Body language (non-verbal behavior) communicates important messages. Although WU is an online university, there are many

opportunities for you to be “in-person” with students, faculty, and staff. Should you have an “in person” situation arise, the following may be helpful in reducing others' anger and assisting an individual in calming themselves:

- Eye contact (not too intense)
- Interpersonal distance (not too close); Respect personal space; Do not move toward an agitated person
- Restrict body movement to a minimum; Minimize sudden behaviors
- Maintain an "open" position (do not cross arms or legs; hands unclenched)
- Maintain same eye level (sit or stand depending on student's position)
- Speak softly and reassuringly

*Adapted from Simpson University Wellness Center*