

TWU Counseling Center

How to Deal With Distressed Students

A Guide for Texas Woman's University Faculty Staff, and Students

Prepared by the Counseling Center
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DEALING WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS

Any member of the TWU community may come into contact with a distressed student. Being aware of distress signals, methods of intervention, and sources of help for the student can help you feel more in control of situations that may arise. The mental health professionals at the Counseling Center are available to faculty and staff for consultation regarding these issues. Feel free to call us at 940-898-3801 if you would like to discuss these matters further.

DISTRESS SIGNALS

Listed below are some of the more prevalent signs of someone in distress. This list is intended to provide basic information only.

- 1. Depression.** While we all may feel depressed from time to time, "normal" depressions may consist of only one or two symptoms and usually pass within days. Clinically depressed students will exhibit multiple symptoms for a longer period of time. Some of these symptoms are sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, and preoccupation with death.
- 2. Agitation or Acting Out.** This would represent a departure from normal or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, restlessness or hyperactivity, being antagonistic, and increased alcohol and/or drug abuse. It is possible that the person may be extremely upset but not suicidal. However, if a person has been depressed and then becomes agitated and moves about restlessly, there is more cause for concern.
- 3. Disorientation.** Some distressed students may seem "out of it." You may witness a diminishment in awareness of what is going on around them, forgetting or losing things, misperception of facts or reality, rambling or disconnected speech, and behavior that seems out of context or bizarre.
- 4. Drug and Alcohol Abuse.** Signs of intoxication during class or interaction with University officials are indicative of a problem that requires attention.
- 5. Suicidal Thoughts.** Most people who attempt suicide communicate early messages about their distress. These messages can range from "I don't want to be here", to a series of vague "good-byes", to "I'm going to kill myself." Non-verbal messages could include giving away valued items, and putting legal, financial, and University affairs in order. If the person has made clear self-destructive plans, the problem is apt to be more acute than when the plan is less definite. All of the above messages should be taken seriously.
- 6. Violence and Aggression.** You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. This may be manifested by physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material. While consulting with others about the seriousness of the threat may be appropriate, contacting the Department of Public Safety may also be necessary.

INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

While it is not expected that you be a "watchdog" or that you provide a thorough assessment, you may be the first contact for a student in distress and in a position to ask a few questions. Following these guidelines can lead to a positive outcome for all parties.

- 1. Safety First!** Always keep safety in mind as you interact with a distressed student. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call the Department of Public Safety at 898-2911.
- 2. Avoid Escalation.** Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. It is usually not a good idea to "pull rank" and assert authority unless you are certain of the student's mental health status. Distressed students are in need of listening and support. One can always remind them of rules at a later time.
- 3. Ask Direct Questions.** Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask students directly if they are drunk, confused or if they have thoughts of harming themselves. You need not be afraid to ask these questions. You will not be "putting ideas in their heads" by doing so. Most distressed students are relieved to know that someone has noticed and is paying attention.
- 4. Do Not Assume You Are Being Manipulated.** While it is true that some students appear distressed in order to get attention or relief from responsibility, only a thorough assessment can determine this. Attention-seekers can have serious problems and be in danger, too.
- 5. Know Your Limits.** You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can provide. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting them the assistance they require. You can do this by reinforcing them for confiding in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, trying to identify the problem area, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do.

Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself include:

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by the situation
- Feeling angry at the student
- Feeling afraid
- Having thoughts of "adopting" or otherwise rescuing the student
- "Reliving" similar experiences of your own

Resource	Denton	Dallas Parkland	Dallas Presbyterian	Houston
Counseling Center	940-898-3801	214-689-6655	214-706-2416	713-794-2059
Student Life	940-898-3615	214-689-6697	214-689-6697	713-794-2157
TWU DPS	940-898-2911	214-689-6666	214-706-2333	713-794-2222
County Mental Health Center	940-381-5000	214-330-7722	214-330-7722	713-970-7070