

# HELPING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

As a higher education professional, you know that some stress is inevitable. In addition to academic stressors, many students experience financial insecurity, family distress, relationship issues, social biases, and physical and mental health conditions, among others. It is important to remember that while some stress is to be expected, stress that builds up over time can lead to more serious mental health concerns. The good news is that you can help students in your role.

## RECOGNIZE

### Physical:

Swollen or red eyes (crying)  
 Increased fatigue  
 Change in personal hygiene  
 Significant changes in weight

### Cognitive:

Forgetfulness  
 Poor concentration  
 Confusion

### Emotional:

Depressed or lethargic mood  
 Hyperactive mood  
 Exaggerated emotional response, inappropriate for the situation

### Spiritual:

Loss of meaning/direction  
 Loss of purpose

### Behavioral:

More absences/tardiness  
 Change in performance  
 Increase in alcohol/drug use  
 Strange or bizarre behavior

### Relational:

Social withdrawal  
 Defensiveness  
 Distrust

\*note that lists are not exhaustive, consider what is baseline for each student

## RESPOND

1. Find a private place and give your undivided attention
2. Thank them for sharing
  - *I appreciate you sharing this with me*
3. Validate their concern
  - *It sounds like things are pretty tough right now*
4. Let them know you are concerned about their welfare and want to help them
5. If references are made to suicide or dying, ask the student about it (See Responding in a Crisis below)
  - *With all that you mentioned about \_\_\_\_\_, I'm wondering: have you had thoughts about hurting or killing yourself?*
  - *Do you intend on killing yourself?*
  - *Do you have a plan to kill yourself?*

\* Asking will not increase risk, it actually decreases risk
6. If necessary, refer to counseling
  - *Do you think this is something you might like to talk about with someone?*

### Do NOT:

- Ignore them
- Minimize the student's distress
  - *Try not to worry about it*
  - *It doesn't sound so bad*
  - *Others have it much worse*
  - *God wouldn't give you more than you can handle*
  - *I know how you feel*
- Ask leading questions
  - *You don't want to kill yourself, do you?*
- Panic
  - *The UCC is here to support you through consultation*

## RESPONDING IN A CRISIS

A student with risk to harm self or others

- *If you are unsure, feel free to call the UCC to consult*
- During business hours
  - *Bring the student to the UCC for a crisis appointment*
  - *If there is safety risk, call 911 or GVPD*
- After business hours
  - *Call GVPD to initiate a wellness check or call 911*
- Follow-up with a Student of Concern CARE Report

## REFER

- Normalize help seeking
  - *Lots of students find counseling helpful. I wonder if you might find it helpful too*
- *Have you checked out the UCC website? They have a lot of great resources available, and I wonder if you might find those helpful*
- “Check” the referral for student’s reaction
- Assess barriers to seeking help, if necessary
  - *Is there anything that would stop you from going to the counseling center?*
    - Offer to assist the student with the referral (e.g., accompany them to the UCC or sit with them while they make the call)
    - Provide information about the process of counseling
    - Let them know that services are free and confidential
    - Consider referring them to Let’s Talk for a brief consultation with a UCC provider

## RESOURCES

### University Counseling Center

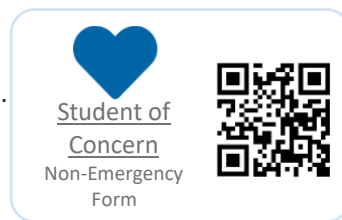
(616) 331-3266  
[www.gvsu.edu/counsel](http://www.gvsu.edu/counsel)

Allendale Campus  
206 Student Services Bldg.

Pew Campus  
DeVos 101B

### Grand Valley Police Department

(616) 331-3255  
[www.gvsu.edu/dps](http://www.gvsu.edu/dps)



## APPRECIATE YOUR LIMITS

Realize the limits of your responsibility when assisting distressed students

- Getting involved does not mean you must (or can) resolve the student’s difficulties
- You are NOT responsible for the student’s emotional well-being
- Obtain support for yourself from staff, peers, partners, friends, or therapist, as appropriate

### Your Role

- Your role is not to fix the situation
- Your role is not to provide treatment
- Your role is not to handle the situation alone