

## Students in Distress: A Helper's Guide

As a faculty, staff or teaching assistant supervising an Oklahoma State University study abroad trip, you will potentially encounter a student in distress. Your role as a potential helper is not only valuable, it could be crucial. In many cases, you will be able to respond effectively to student needs; however, there might be occasions you want to refer a student to someone else for assistance.

This resource is offered to help you recognize signs of student distress and offer a framework for effective interventions; however, each student presents a unique situation, and being away from a familiar setting can change how student distress presents. If you are concerned about a student's behavior and/or health, it is always wise to seek professional consultation.

The Alcohol and Substance Abuse Center, Student Counseling Center and Student Disability Services are examples of services prepared to respond to questions, should you need additional help assisting a student or making a referral.

### Signs and Symptoms of Distress

- Excessive procrastination or very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous work
- Dependency (e.g., student who hangs around your office or makes excessive appointments)
- Listless, low energy or falling asleep in class
- Poor attendance in class or at work
- Marked changes in hygiene, appearance or behavior
- Isolation from others
- Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions or examination deferrals
- Impaired speech or garbled; disjointed thoughts
- Threat of harming self or others
- Behavior that regularly interferes with the decorum or effective management of class
- Overtly suicidal statements (i.e., referring to suicide or self-harm as a current option)
- High levels of irritability
- Inability to make decisions, despite repeated attempts to clarify and encourage
- Apparent alcohol or substance abuse
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain
- Bizarre or strange behavior obviously inappropriate to the situation (e.g., talking to "invisible" people)
- Emotions (e.g., fearful, tearful or nervous) displayed to an extreme degree or for prolonged periods

### Guidelines for Interaction

- Talk with the student privately
- Listen carefully

- Show concern and interest
- Paraphrase or summarize to clarify
- Avoid criticizing or judging
- Consider the Student Counseling Center as a resource and discuss referral with the student
- If the student declines help and you are worried, contact the Student Counseling Center to discuss your concerns with a counselor
- Involve yourself only to the extent you feel comfortable; extending yourself can be a gratifying when within your range of comfort

### Student Counseling Center Referral

- Suggest the student schedule an appointment for counseling. Provide the phone number, website URL and location of the Student Counseling Center to the student (320 Student Union, 405-744-5472, ucs.okstate.edu/counseling).
- While abroad, a Skype call could be arranged.
- In an emergency, tell the receptionist you have a student with you that needs an “emergency appointment.”

### Confidentiality

Sessions with Student Counseling Center staff are confidential. You might be interested in the progress of a student you referred once you return to campus; however, our ability to share information about a student is governed by confidentiality laws and ethics.

We can:

- Answer questions about how to refer students to the Student Counseling Center
- Offer information about psychological issues in general

We can't:

- Discuss content of sessions
- Say whether a student is being seen or kept an appointment
- Discuss treatment plans or progress

In some cases, a student may find it in their best interest for a counselor to share information with a faculty, staff, family member or significant other. Disclosing counseling-related information can occur with a student’s written authorization that includes a clear explanation of the purpose and content of the disclosure. An exceptional circumstance where confidentiality would not be recognized would be a counselor’s determination of imminent danger to the student or others.

### Reasons for Referral Failure

Upon occasion, despite good intentions and accurate knowledge of resources, referral for counseling is not successful. Before you judge yourself, a student or referral source too harshly, consider the following possibilities.

- The student might not have been ready for help.
- There may have been a disparity between the student’s expectations and services provided by the referral source.

- The referral source might not have been appropriate.
- The referral source might not have understood the student's needs.

### Follow up on an unsuccessful referral

- If a referral proves unsuccessful, continue to be receptive to the student, try to determine the reason for the unsuccessful referral and explore other options
- Try to further clarify the student's needs and expectations to assess appropriateness of the initial referral and refer again.
- If it seems the referral source didn't fully understand the student's concerns, you may contact the referral directly, with the student's permission, to offer information.
- If incompatibility seems to be a problem, encourage the student to try another counselor or service. If you feel comfortable, provide the name of a specific individual for referral.
- If lack of readiness seems to be a problem, accept the student's feelings; communicate limitations and encourage consideration of other options (under different circumstances, the student might be more receptive).

### Student Counseling Center

The Student Counseling Center, 320 Student Union (405-744-5472), is open Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. An on-duty counselor is available during these times to meet with students or consult with faculty and staff. A counselor is also on call after hours and can be reached through the OSU Police Department (405-744-6523).