

### III. A GUIDE TO HELPING NINE TYPES OF DISTRESSED STUDENTS

#### A. THE VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE STUDENT

Students usually become verbally abusive when in frustrating situations which they see as being beyond their control; anger and frustration become displaced from those situations to you. Typically, the anger is not directed at you personally.

##### DO:

- acknowledge their anger and frustration, e.g., "I hear how angry you are."
- rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion, e.g., "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- allow them to ventilate, get the feelings out, and tell you what is upsetting them.
- reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or other quiet place if this is comfortable.
- tell them that you are not willing to accept their verbally abusive behavior, e.g., "When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen."
- tell them they are violating your personal space and to please move back (if they are getting physically too close), e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close."
- help the person problem-solve and deal with the real issues when that she becomes calmer.

##### DON'T:

- get into an argument or shouting match.
- become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way!"
- press for explanation or reasons for their behavior, "Now I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so obnoxious."
- look away and not deal with the situation.
- give away your own rights as a person.

#### B. THE VIOLENT OR PHYSICALLY DESTRUCTIVE STUDENT

Violence, because of emotional distress, is very rare and typically occurs only when the student is completely frustrated and feels unable to do anything about it. The adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," best applies here.

**DO:**

- prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation, e.g., "I can see you're really upset and really mean business and have some critical concerns on your mind."

- explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable, e.g., "You certainly have the right to be angry but hitting (breaking things) is not O.K."

- stay in open area.

- divert attention when all else fails, e.g., "If you hit me, I can't be of help."

- get necessary help (other staff, University Police, Health Center, University Counseling Services).

- remember that student discipline is implemented by the Dean of Students Office.

**DON'T:**

- ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, statements like, "You're leaving me no choice."

- threaten, dare, taunt, or push into a corner.

- touch.

**C. THE STUDENT IN POOR CONTACT WITH REALITY**

These students have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, the dream from the waking state. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed; they may coin new words, see or hear things which no one else can, have irrational beliefs, and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior. Generally, these students are not dangerous and are very scared, frightened and overwhelmed.

**DO:**

- respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.

- remove extra stimulation of the environment and see them in a quiet 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 misconceptions, 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 O.K. to joke, laugh, or smile when appropriate.

**DON'T:**

- argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking, for it makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.

- play along, e.g., "Oh yeah, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."

- encourage further revelations of craziness.

- demand, command or order.

- expect customary emotional responses.

**D. THE SUSPICIOUS STUDENT**

Typically, these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are tense, anxious, mistrustful, loners, and have few friends. They tend to interpret minor oversights as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everybody's behavior and everything that happens has special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy underline most of their behavior.

**DO:**

- express compassion without intimate friendship. Remember, suspicious students have trouble with closeness and warmth.

- be firm, steady, punctual and consistent.

- be specific and clear regarding the standards of behavior you expect.

**DON'T:**

- assure the student that you are his/her friend; agree you're a stranger, but even strangers can be concerned.

- be overly warm and nurturing.

- flatter or participate in their games; you don't know the rules.

- be cute or humorous.

- challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.

- be ambiguous.

## E. THE ANXIOUS STUDENT

Danger is everywhere even though what makes students anxious is often unknown; not knowing what is expected and conflict are primary causes of anxiety. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise their anxiety; high and unreasonable self-expectations increase anxiety also. These students often have trouble making decisions.

### DO:

- let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.
- reassure when appropriate.
- remain calm.
- be clear and explicit.

### DON'T:

- make things more complicated.
- take responsibility for their emotional state.
- overwhelm with information or ideas.

## F. THE DEMANDING STUDENT

Typically, the utmost time and energy given to these students is not enough; they often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe the amount of time received is a reflection of their worth.

### DO:

- let them, as much as possible, make their own decisions.
- ignore them if possible, e.g., "Excuse me, I need to attend to other things."

### DON'T:

- let them use you as their only source of support.
- get tripped into giving advice, "Why don't you, etc.?"

## G. THE SUBSTANCE ABUSING STUDENT

Given the stresses of university life, students are especially susceptible to drug abuse. A variety of substances are available that provide escape from pressing demands. The only problem is that these drugs soon create their own set of problems in the form of addiction, accident proneness and poor health. The most abused substance—so commonplace we often forget that it is a drug—is alcohol. Alcohol and other drug-related accidents remain the greatest single cause of preventive death among college students.

### DO:

- be on the alert for signs of drug abuse:
  - preoccupation with drugs
  - inability to participate in class activities
  - deteriorating performance in class
  - periods of memory loss (blackouts)
- share your honest concern for the person
- encourage to seek help
- get necessary help in instances of intoxication

### DON'T:

- ignore the problem
- chastise/lecture
- encourage the behavior

## H. THE DEPRESSED STUDENT

Typically, these students get the most sympathy. They show a multitude of symptoms, e.g., guilt, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and inadequacy as well as physical symptoms such as decreased or increased appetite, difficulty staying asleep, early awakening and low interest in daily activities. They show low activity levels because everything is an effort and they have little energy.

### DO:

- let student know you're aware he/she is feeling down and you would like to help.
- reach out more than halfway and encourage the student to express how she/he is feeling, for he/she is often initially reluctant to talk, yet others' attention helps the student feel more worthwhile.
- tell student of your concern.

**DON'T:**

- say, "Don't worry," "Crying won't help," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."
- be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think he/she may be.

**1. THE SUICIDAL STUDENT**

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. The suicidal person is intensely ambivalent about killing himself/herself and typically responds to help; suicidal states are definitely time limited and most who commit suicide are neither crazy nor psychotic. High risk indicators include: feelings of hopelessness and futility; a severe loss or threat of loss; a detailed suicidal plan; history of a previous attempt; history of alcohol or drug abuse; and feelings of alienation and isolation. Suicidal students usually want to communicate their feelings; any opportunity to do so should be encouraged.

**DO:**

- take the student seriously—80 percent of suicides give warning of their intent.
- acknowledge that a threat of or attempt at suicide is a plea for help.
- be available to listen, to talk, to be concerned, but refer the student to University Counseling Services, Student Health Center, or other appropriate agency when you yourself are getting overwhelmed.
- administer to yourself. Helping someone who is suicidal is hard, demanding and draining work.

**DON'T:**

- minimize the situation or depth of feeling, e.g., "Oh it will be much better tomorrow."
- be afraid to ask the person if they are so depressed or sad that they want to hurt themselves (e.g., "You seem so upset and discouraged that I'm wondering if you are considering suicide.")
- overcommit yourself and, therefore, not be able to deliver on what you promise.
- ignore your limitations