Texas State University

A Guide for Faculty Supporting Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

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The purpose of this guide is to assist faculty with identifying their roles, responsibilities, and appropriate responses to support and assist students facing mental health challenges.

Please Note: When supporting students facing mental health challenges, it is expected that faculty develop and maintain an instructor/student, academic relationship with students that is based on appropriate and healthy boundaries. To maintain appropriate boundaries, faculty should remain cognizant that their role does not include development of a therapeutic relationship with students. Therapeutic intervention and services should be provided by the Counseling Center or another therapeutic provider available to the student.

Signs of Distress

1. Consistent disruptive behavior: interrupting or disrupting class and not being responsive to redirection, destroying property, displaying volatile emotional reactions.
2. Precipitous decline in class functioning: not coming to class, turning in assignments that represent less quality than previous work, sleeping in class, neglecting personal hygiene.
3. Reported decline in usual functioning: increase or decrease in sleep and/or appetite, inability to concentrate, increase in substance use.
4. Suicidal thoughts and/or expressed intent.
5. Threats to hurt others.
6. Difficulty with communication: incoherent speech, rambling, ideas or thoughts that go off on tangents or seem out of touch with reality.
7. Auditory or visual hallucinations.

Best-Practice Recommendations for Supporting Students Facing Mental Health Challenges

When faced with a student experiencing mental health challenges, it is recommended that faculty follow these **best practices** to proactively prepare to offer assistance, assess a student's situation, determine their mental health status, and provide the best resource options available:

- **Commit to developing appropriate, academic relationships with students in their classes.**
  All faculty can have a vital role in the academic lives of their students. Taking the time to know a little about each student via in-class interactions, small group discussions, and office hours, can help build a relationship with students that may be helpful if a student begins to struggle. The knowledge inherent in this type of relationship can also provide a useful baseline of a student's behavior for the faculty to use if problems begin to surface.

- **Think of and use the course syllabus as a healthy boundary.**
  Focus on what the student needs to be successful in meeting the expectations of the

class. Although you always can be flexible, modifying your syllabus is not always necessary or advisable for students who are not experiencing the distress signs mentioned above.

Listen!
Listening is the most effective tool faculty can use to connect with a student and assess the severity of the situation. Listening helps build rapport and provides an avenue to gather information. Reflecting feeling and content conveys empathy, which is essential in these circumstances. Reflecting feeling conveys an understanding of the emotional state of the student. A simple, "You feel <insert feeling>" or "You seem to be feeling <insert feeling>" is all that is required to help a student feel heard and understood. Reflecting content demonstrates an understanding of the themes or general message the student is trying to communicate. Think of this as a summary of what the student is telling you. Using these listening skills will be effective in helping a student feel understood and will give you the information you need to decide what next steps may be necessary.

- **Explore the student's perception of the issue and their current level of support.**
  How the student views the issue will provide a wealth of information about the nature of the problem and their level of distress. Learning about the student's level of support can also be helpful in assessing the severity of the situation. For example, someone who is struggling with class work and has anxiety about failing may be less of a concern if they identify a group of friends or classmates they study with or feel comfortable seeking out for tutoring. Whereas a student with the same issue may be at greater risk if they mention feeling isolated and do not feel confident in reaching out for support services.

- **Avoid rushing to "solve" the problem.**
  Most students need to feel heard and understood by their instructor. Moving quickly to solutions can frustrate the student and lead to responses of "I've already tried that" or "That won't work because…". Instead, help empower students to find a solution through the other techniques mentioned.

- **Focus on the class or program experience**.
  When talking with a student about their struggles, consider the following:
  - "How does your anxiety (or other concern) impact your class work?"
  - "How do you think your feelings of depression (or other concern) impact your ability to focus in class?"
  - "If you experienced these feelings before, were you able to manage them and successfully complete assignments? If so, how?"

  At the end of the conversation, you can always ask:
  - "What do you think you need to assist you with this issue or concern?"

  Asking this question keeps you out of a problem-solving mode and encourages student responsibility and empowerment in generating alternatives, solutions, and

resources that best fit their situation.

- **Collaborate on possible resources.**
Based on the information gathered, collaborating with the student on possible resources that meet their needs is a good way to end the meeting. If the identified concern is academic, the best recommendations may be SLAC, the Writing Lab, tutoring, or further mentoring by the faculty. If the concern is medical, perhaps the Student Health Center is a good resource, while social concerns may be best handled via Student Affairs. Mental health concerns may lead to recommending the University Counseling Center. The faculty role is focused on helping the student identify potential resources and assisting them with connecting with those resources. However, it is the student's responsibility to follow through and make use of the resources provided.

  For those concerns where collaboration with the student is not appropriate or possible, that are beyond the faculty's capacity to address, or are beyond the capacity of other resources; faculty response alone may not be sufficient or appropriate. In these situations, contacting the Student Behavior Assessment Team (SBAT), University Police Department, or the city police department may be the most viable option.

Resources

University Counseling Center: 512-245-2208 (Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm)
https://www.counseling.txstate.edu/

Student Health Center: 512-245-2161 by Appointment Only
https://www.healthcenter.txstate.edu/

University Police Department: 512-245-8336
https://www.police.txstate.edu/

 CLAS Counseling Clinic: Dr. Tracy Chiles, 512-716-4250

> **San Marcos https://www.txstate.edu/clas/Professional-Counseling/counseling-services/Assessment-and-Counseling-Clinic-SM.html**

> **Round Rock Campus:https://www.txstate.edu/clas/Professional-Counseling/counseling-services/RRC-Counseling-Practicum-Clinic.html**

Behavior Assessment Team (BAT): 512-245-2124
https://sbat.dos.txstate.edu/

MINDS MATTER:

https://mindsmatter.vpsa.txstate.edu/students.html
Mental health problems are common in a college student population. Getting help early can reduce distress and prevent a problem from becoming a crisis. If you, or someone you know, may be experiencing overwhelming distress or other symptoms of a possible mental health problem. Below are resources available for students on campus or in the community.

https://mindsmatter.vpsa.txstate.edu/friends-family.html
Mental health problems are common in a college student population. Students struggling with a mental health concern often will seek help from friends and family before seeking help from a mental health professional.

https://www.healthcenter.txstate.edu/HPS/request-presentation.html
Presentations by the Student Health Center (for students, primarily, but some to help faculty/departments better understand student issues

School Violence and Behavioral Threat Assessment Model
https://txssc.txstate.edu/topics/school-violence/articles/behavioral-threat-assess-model