



SUPPORTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

IS THIS GUIDE FOR ME?

If you in any way teach, train, advise, supervise or mentor students at Berea College, you have a role to play in student's emotional health. We believe that you are in a unique position to identify and respond to the early stages of emotional distress of the students you have contact with. Knowing the warning signs of trouble, the early indicators of distress, how to respond in these situations and how to contribute to a healthy learning environment will greatly increase your ability to act appropriately in such situations, help improve another's quality of life, and may even help save a life.

Colleges and universities across the country are facing a rise in student mental health concerns which appear to be increasing in both frequency and severity. Increasingly high numbers of students are arriving on campuses with a history of anxiety, depression, and poor mental health treatment; conditions that are shown to be negatively impacted by the presence of poverty (Annual Report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2017; Lipson et al., 2015; Simon, Beder, & Manseau, 2018; WHO 2014). Berea College has not been immune to this trend:

- In 2018, 24% of incoming Berea College students indicated that they frequently felt depressed during the past year (Up from 12% in 2014).
- Only 33% of incoming students in 2018 rated their emotional health as 'above average' or better (Down from 44% in 2014).

Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2018

Faculty and staff are not asked to take on the role of trained counselors, but the ability to identify and respond to students experiencing emotional distress is an important part of our role.

Knowing When and How to Take Action

In emergency situations where immediate action is clearly needed, you will call Public Safety (x.3333), or 911, and/or Counseling Services for immediate consultation. And if you believe the student is suicidal or experiencing suicidal ideation, refer to the 4R's of Responding to a Crisis Situation on the back page of this document.

However, there will be times when it is not an emergency situation but you simply have a 'feeling' that something is wrong or recognize small indicators of concern, and it can be challenging to know exactly when and how to respond. It's important for faculty and staff who work closely with students to be able to **recognize the many signs of distress** (page 2) that students may present. It's possible that any one indicator alone may mean the student is simply having an 'off' day, but any one serious sign or a cluster or small signs may indicate a need to take action on behalf of the student. In these situations you may choose to **speak directly with the student** (page 3) to better understand the situation, or **refer/report the situation or student to another campus official** (page 4) for support or anytime you feel the situation is beyond your capabilities. Which direction you choose may be influenced by your experience, comfort, time, severity of the issue, or other personal factors. Either option is an acceptable approach, and if unsure you should consult with someone – Supervisor, Department Chair, Campus Christian Center, Counseling Services, Office of Student Success & Transition, Student Life Team – about how to best proceed.

The Many Signs of Distress

As a professor in the classroom or supervisor of a student in the Labor Program, you are in the unique position of being able to observe behavior in your students on a regular basis. And at times, their behavior could indicate they are experiencing some kind of emotional distress. While we do not ask our faculty or staff to take on the role of professionally trained counselors, the ability to identify and appropriately respond to students in your classroom or work environment who are experiencing emotional distress is an important part of our role and critical to our students.

The presence of one of the following indicators alone does not necessarily mean that the student is experiencing severe distress. However, the more indicators you notice, the more likely it is that the student needs help.

ACADEMIC INDICATORS

- Repeated absences from class, section, lab or employment
- Missed assignments, exams or appointments
- Deterioration in quality or quantity of work
- Extreme disorganization or erratic performance
- Written artistic expression of unusual violence, morbidity, social isolation, despair or confusion; essays or papers that focus on suicide or death
- Continual seeking of special provisions (extensions on papers or deadlines, make-up exams)
- Patterns of perfectionism: e.g., can't accept themselves if they don't get an A+
- Overblown or disproportionate response to grades or other evaluations.

SAFETY RISK INDICATORS

- Written or verbal statements that mention despair, suicide or death
- Severe hopelessness, depression, or withdrawal
- Statements to the effect that the student is "going away for a long time"
- Physical or verbal aggression that is directed at self, others, animals or property
- The student is unresponsive to the external environment; he or she is incoherent or passed out
- The student is disconnected from reality/exhibiting psychosis
- The student is displaying unmitigated disruptive behavior
- The situation feels threatening or dangerous to you

PHYSICAL INDICATORS

- Deterioration in physical appearance or personal hygiene
- Excessive fatigue, exhaustion; falling asleep in class repeatedly
- Visible changes in weight; statements about change in appetite or sleep
- Noticeable cuts, bruises or burns
- Frequent or chronic illness
- Disorganized speech, rapid or slurred speech, confusion
- Unusual inability to make eye contact
- Coming to class bleary-eyed or smelling of alcohol or other substances

BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL INDICATORS

- Direct statements indicating general distress, family conflict, grief and loss, economic hardships
- Angry or hostile outbursts, yelling, or aggressive comments
- Unusual withdrawal or animated behavior
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness; crying or tearfulness
- Expressions of severe anxiety or irritability
- Excessively demanding or dependent behavior
- Lack of response to outreach from course staff
- Shakiness, tremors, fidgeting or pacing

The more indicators you notice, the more likely it is that the student needs help.



If you choose to **SPEAK DIRECTLY** to the student

If you have a relationship or rapport with the student, speaking directly to them could be the best option. When you are speaking directly to a student, remember that you are NOT taking on the role of a counselor. Your primary role is to listen, care, provide your informed perspectives, and offer resource referral information as needed. Here are some recommendations:

- **Meet privately** with the student, preferably choosing a time and place where you will not be interrupted.
- Set a **positive** tone. Express your concern and care.
- Point out **specific signs** that you have observed. *"I've noticed lately that you..."*
- Ask **open-ended questions** that deal directly with the issues without judging. *"How are things going for you lately?"* or *"What problems has that situation caused you?"*
- **Listen attentively** to the student's responses and encourage them to talk. *"Tell me more about that."*
- Allow the student time to tell the story. **Allow silences in the conversation.** Don't give up if the student is slow to talk.
- If there are signs of safety risk, **ask if the student is considering hurting themselves or suicide.** A student who is considering suicide will likely be relieved that you asked. If the student is not contemplating suicide, asking the question will not put that idea in their head or cause them to now consider it.
- **Restate** what you have heard as well as your concern and care. Ask the student what they think would help. *"What do you need to do to get back on a healthy or successful path?"*
- **Suggest resources and referrals.** Share any information you have about the particular resource you are suggesting and the potential benefit to the student. *"I know the folks in that office and they are really good at helping students work through these kind of situations."* Provide name, number and office location of the referral resource or, if comfortable, offer to walk with the student to the location.
- **Avoid making sweeping promises** of confidentiality, particularly if the student presents a safety risk. Students who are considering suicide need swift professional intervention. Assurances of absolute confidentiality may get in the way.
- Unless the student is suicidal or may be dangerous to others, **the ultimate decision to access resources is the student's.** If they say *"I'll think about it,"* when you offer referral information, it is okay. People in varying levels of distress sometimes deny their problems because it is difficult to admit they need help or they think things will get better on their own.
- Let the student know that you are interested in hearing how they are doing in a day or two. End the conversation in a way that will allow you, or the student, to come back to the subject at another time. **Keep the lines of communication open.**

Your primary role is to listen, care, provide your informed perspective, and offer resource referral information as needed.

Depending on the nature of the problem, it may be advisable to follow-up with someone on campus such as a supervisor, Office of Academic Affairs, Office of Student Success & Transition, Counseling Services, Campus Christian Center, Student Life Team, etc. to make them aware of your conversation.

If you choose to REFER/REPORT the situation to another campus resource or official

If you are not familiar with the student, feel uncomfortable approaching the situation, or are unsure of what to say, you may prefer to report the concern. For general student concerns you should create an Alert in the Navigate Berea system which can be accessed through the Teaching & Advising tab of your myBerea account (for more information on creating Alerts, contact the Office of Student Success & Transition). If you have more serious concerns about a student's wellbeing, health, or safety and would like to make a referral, or if you would like consultation about next steps, contact a representative from the **Students of Concern Team**. This team is in place to facilitate early identification of students who exhibit evidence of concerning behaviors, and to intervene with support and resources before problems escalate into a crisis that jeopardizes the student's chance of success or safety, or interferes with the safety of other students. Contact any of the offices below to place a name on the Students of Concern agenda:

<input type="checkbox"/> Counseling Services	counselingservices@bera.edu	859-985-3212
<input type="checkbox"/> Campus Christian Center	campuschristiancenter@bera.edu	859-985-3134
<input type="checkbox"/> Public Safety	publicsafety@bera.edu	859-985-3333
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Life	lsl@bera.edu	859-985-3150
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Success & Transition	sst@bera.edu	859-985-3376
<input type="checkbox"/> Labor Program	labor_program@bera.edu	859-985-3611

When referring a student or contacting the Students of Concern Team yourself, please be aware of the following:

- Members of the Student of Concern Team take a collaborative approach to student situations, and information may be shared among team members. However, this group will exercise discretion and maintain privacy as much as possible to protect the individuals involved.
- Counseling Services and College Chaplain staff members who are bound by confidentiality will accept all information you provide but may not be able to share the results of a follow-up. While this can be concerning at times, it is necessary to protect the student's privacy.
- Often, the best approach is not for a counselor or chaplain to reach out directly to a student. You may be asked to take further action such as speaking to the student directly, giving the student a referral to a campus resource, or involving another department. Be willing to follow through with the recommendations of the counseling or chaplain staff.
- If it is determined that a mental health professional will make a cold contact with the student, consider giving permission to use your name as the referral source. It is challenging for a counselor to cold call a student and explain the reason for the call without providing context.

THE 4R'S OF RESPONDING TO A CRISIS SITUATION

In an emergency situation where you feel like the student is going to hurt themselves or someone else it is important to contact Public Safety (x3333) and Counseling Services (x3212), and follow these important reminders:

REACT

Breathe! If there is evidence of a medical emergency (pills consumed or other physical harm), call 911. Otherwise, stay calm and take your time. Provide a safe and private space for the student. Then help the student determine their immediate needs (medical attention, counseling, staying with a friend).

REPORT

Explain your obligation to report to ensure the student and community remain safe.

REFER

Assist with connecting the student to the resources that can best address their needs. Whatever option they choose, remain with the student until arrangements have been made.

RELEASE

Know you have done your part. Allow the student to proceed with their choice of action. Offer support but trust that there are medical, administrative and counseling resources in place to assist them from this point forward.