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# Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student

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A Guide for Faculty and Staff

*Presented by*

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## HELPING THE EMOTIONALLY DISTRESSED STUDENT

As a result of the combined efforts of the Counseling Centers in the Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education (OCCDHE), the following materials have been developed. They are designed to assist faculty and staff in identifying and intervening with students who are in distress.

Parts of The Substance Abusing Student were revised from Harris, S. (1989), A Faculty/Staff Guide: Toward Enhancing Communication with Students and Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student. Northridge, CA: University Counseling Services, California State University, Northridge, and from Assisting the Emotionally Troubled Student: A Resource Book, (1989). Arcata, CA: Humboldt State University, Counseling and Psychological Services.

Part of Sexual Harassment was revised from Assisting the Emotionally Troubled Student: A Resource Book, (1989). Arcata, CA: Humboldt State University, Counseling and Psychological Services.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a member of the faculty/staff here at Cal Poly Pomona, you are constantly interacting with students. At times, you may encounter a student undergoing an overwhelming amount of stress. Numerous students are experiencing serious and painful crises in their lives that can interfere with their education and negatively influence their abilities to function.

The most recent information that we have gathered on the Cal Poly Pomona campus indicates that around midterms and finals there is increased likelihood that you will encounter emotionally troubled students in the classroom or across from your desk.

It is important to remember that most of these students are not really different from other students and staff. Most are experiencing situational frustrations, pressures, conflicts and, in their own way, are asking for help.

This booklet is designed to give you some useful techniques in dealing with distressed or difficult students. Typical distressed or difficult students are described as aggressive, depressed, suicidal, anxious, suspicious, or in poor contact with reality. Included in this guide are brief descriptions and comments on possible interventions with these types of students.

## GENERAL CRISIS INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

A crisis situation occurs when the student feels unable to cope with what is occurring in his/her life. The more helpless the individual feels, the greater the crisis. As a result of the crisis situation, the student may feel depression, anxiety, hostility, or shame.

If you encounter a student experiencing a crisis, there are a number of helpful actions that you can take. First, it is important to help the student discuss the situation and his/her feelings. Let the student know that you hear his/her concern and try not to shut the student out, for you have probably been approached because you are trusted. Second, it is important to know how far you are willing to work with the student and convey when that limit has been reached. Third, know appropriate referral sources. These are discussed in the last section of this booklet.

Overall, when dealing with most students in crisis situations, conveying your concern and willingness to help in any way you can (including referral) is probably the most important thing you can do. Your support, encouragement and reassurance will be particularly valuable to a student in crisis. The student in crisis is reactive and limited in awareness; you offer the student responsiveness and broadened awareness-**the basic guideline is to maintain your own full responsibility and sensitivity.**

## MAKING A REFERRAL TO COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Referring a student may be a difficult process if the person has fears about getting help for emotional problems. It would be helpful to remember that you are doing what you think best for the student and that knowing your limits of competency is important and commendable rather than something negative. Don't allow yourself to be coerced into the role of therapist because the student is reluctant to seek professional help.

When you do discuss a referral, it would be helpful for the student to hear in a clear, concise manner your concerns and why you think counseling would be of benefit. You might also tell them a few facts about Counseling and Psychological Services. For instance, all services are free to enrolled students, and there is a counselor available to see students **Monday through Friday from 8:00am to 5:00pm daily**. All discussions are confidential, except where disclosure is required by law (i.e., where there is reasonable suspicion of abuse of children, disabled or elderly persons; where the client presents a serious danger of violence to another person, or where the client is likely to harm himself or herself unless protective measures are taken.)

When referring a student to the Center, it is important to inform him/her that there are two standard ways to be seen by a counselor.

- 1) The student can call the Center at **(909) 869-3220** and schedule an initial intake appointment. Having the student call for an appointment increases his/her responsibility and commitment to come in for counseling.
- 2) A student can be seen on a "walk-in" basis if they are experiencing an emergency and/or crisis. Crisis counselors are available during all hours of operations (Monday – Friday, 8:00am to 5:00pm). Under certain circumstances it may be helpful if someone can escort the student to the Center.

Part of the referral process may include a consultative call to the Center. The student or the referring party may want to speak to the counselor on intake or crisis duty. The intake or crisis counselor, because of his/her availability, is usually the most appropriate person to contact. In addition, the intake counselor will be able to answer most of your referral questions and assist in the referral process. Nonetheless, it is also possible to consult with a particular counselor if you choose to do so. Keep in mind, however, that the counselor may either personally see the referred student or for various reasons (e.g., schedule conflict, workload) refer him/her to the most appropriate counselor on staff.

In order for a counselor to talk to the referring party, the student/client will need to sign an "Authorization to Exchange Confidential Information" form (see [Attachment "A"](#)). If you have any questions regarding referrals or the Center's services, please call us and we will be happy to talk to you.

## THE ANXIOUS STUDENT

Danger seems to be everywhere for the anxious students but some students will have difficulty identifying the exact sources of their fears. According to national epidemiological statistics, anxiety, phobia, and panic conditions are the most prevalent form of mental disorder. Not knowing what is expected and conflict are primary causes of anxiety. Unknown and unfamiliar situations and high and unreasonable self-expectations also increase anxiety. 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.
- Recommend that the student consult with a trained professional at CAPS about their anxiety.

### **DON'T:**

- Make things more complicated.
- Take responsibility for their emotional state.
- Overwhelm with information or ideas.

## THE SUSPICIOUS STUDENT

Typically, these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are tense, anxious, and mistrustful loners. 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. They may nonetheless seem capable and bright.

### **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.
- Refer to Counseling and Psychological Services to assist with anxiety, frustration, and/or anger.

### **DON'T:**

- Assure the student that you are his/her friend; agree that you're a stranger, but say that 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

## THE DEMANDING, PASSIVE STUDENT

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

### **DO:**

- Let them, as much as possible, make their own decisions.
- Set limits with them, e.g., “Excuse me, I need to attend to other things”.

### **DON'T:**

- Let them use you as their only source of support.
- Get trapped into giving advice, “Why don't you, etc.?” This behavior often triggers our “parental” responses.

## 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, low interest in daily activities). These students typically demonstrate 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.
- Refer to Counseling and Psychological Services

### **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.

## THE STUDENT VICTIMIZED BY DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination occurs when an individual or group is treated differently based upon perceived characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, race, national origin, and sexual orientation. Unlawful discrimination occurs when the individual or group is denied the social and/or economic opportunities afforded the majority solely on the basis of unrelated characteristics such as age, race, sex, etc.

The following anti-discrimination statutes apply to students. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the regulations adopted thereunder, prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, as amended, and the administrative regulations adopted thereunder prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and the regulations adopted there under prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. Additional anti-discrimination statutes, which apply to employees, are also enforced by this institution.

### **DO:**

- Listen and show concern.
- Recognize that discrimination seriously affects the student's ability to learn, to development, and to interact with others.
- Direct complaints of discrimination to the Office of Diversity and Compliance, Building 1 , Room 202, (909) 869-4646.
- Refer the student to Counseling and Psychological Services when appropriate.
- Disabled students can be referred to Disabled Student Services, University Library, Room 126, (909) 869-3333.
- Understand that the reported incident may be one of many.

### **DON'T:**

- Invalidate or ignore the problem.
- Deny the student's perception of the incident(s).
- Take a defensive posture.
- Rationalize or excuse the behavior of others.

## THE STUDENT WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY HARASSED

Sexual harassment can be defined as unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Often, sexual harassment is not an isolated one-time-only occurrence but a repeated pattern of inappropriate behavior.

Sexual harassment of students, employees and those who apply for student or employee status is covered by Executive Order 345, Prohibition of Sexual Harassment, May 29, 1981.

### **DO:**

- Listen and help clarify what happened concerning the sexual harassment. Validate student's perceptions and encourage the student not to engage in self-blame.
- Make the student aware of the complaint procedures contained in the Cal Poly Pomona "Sexual/Gender Harassment Statement of Policy and Procedures", June 1993.
- Direct complaints of sexual harassment Campus Complaint Coordinators listed in the "Sexual/Gender Harassment Statement of Policy and Procedures"
- Refer the student to Counseling and Psychological services when appropriate.

### **DON'T**

- Take an inactive stance. No action can have negative consequences for the student.
- Invalidate the student's report of incident.

## THE STUDENT WHO HAS SURVIVED SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault occurs far more frequently than was believed in the past. Recent studies have found that many college students had experienced some form of sexual assault in dating situations. For purposes of this manual, we define sexual assault as any sexual activity that is not agreed upon by adults who are capable of consent.

Sexual assault is often experienced as a wrenching loss of control over one's life. For a survivor\* of sexual assault, restoring that loss requires the ongoing support of others to let survivors make their own decisions. Whom to tell about the sexual assault must be their decision, including whether or not to report it to the police. It is especially important to respect the privacy and the rights of the survivor.

The first reaction to an assault may be shock, in which state the survivor appears to be functioning fairly normally, but is in fact in need of extra support and recovery time.

Survivors often react to an assault by feeling guilt or shame (e.g., "It wouldn't have happened if only I wasn't walking there," or "What did I do to provoke him?"). It is very important that faculty and staff do their best to reassure a survivor that the responsibility for the assault rests only with the perpetrator.

It is very normal for people to forget an experience of being sexually assaulted or abused, only to have it re-surface in their awareness many months or years later. When such a memory surfaces, the survivor may need as much support as someone who has survived a recent trauma.

*\*The term "survivor" is used in acknowledgement of the victim's strength for having survived a sexual assault.*

### DO:

- Listen to the student and help the student find a time/place/person with whom to talk comfortably.
- Allow the student to make her/his own choices about what to do next (even if you disagree). Give the student credit for having lived through a terrible situation.
- Assess the student's need for immediate safety. Police assistance is available by calling 911.
- Believe the student's experiences without question. Listen without making judgements or giving advice.
- Let the student know that there are supportive services available. These include: Counseling and Psychological Services (x3220), Project S.I.S.T.E.R. (24 hours: 909-626-4357), The Center (x3206), the Santa Monica Rape Treatment Center (310-319-4000), and the Valley Trauma Center 24-Hour Hotline (818-886-0453).

*The Student Who Has Survived Sexual Assault (continued)*

**DON'T:**

- Assume that the incident is not traumatic, even if the student does not seem too distressed.
- Make comments or questions that imply the student could have been responsible, could have done something different, etc.



## THE SUBSTANCE ABUSING STUDENT

The high level of stress of university life, often makes students especially vulnerable to substance abuse. A variety of substances can provide an escape from pressing demands. However, these drugs soon create several problems in the form of addiction, proneness to accidents and poor health. The most commonly abused drug is alcohol. Unfortunately, alcohol and other drug related accidents remain the single cause of preventative death among the college population.

Students abusing alcohol are usually identified by faculty when impairments associated with alcohol abuse undermines the student's performance or when irresponsible, unpredictable behavior influences the learning environment (e.g., intoxicated and disorderly in class).

### DO:

- Be aware of common signs of drug abuse:
  - ✓ Inability to engage in class activities
  - ✓ Deteriorating class performance
  - ✓ Irregular class attendance
  - ✓ Periods of memory loss (blackouts)
  - ✓ Preoccupation with drugs
- Demonstrate your genuine concern for the student.
- Communicate with student only when he/she is sober.
- Communicate your concern about the student with respect to alcohol and other drugs in terms of specific performance or behavioral changes.
- Confront unsatisfactory performance or behavioral changes by pointing out deteriorating class performance or irregular class attendance.
- Communicate support and concern when related to the student's willingness to address the problem.
- Suggest and encourage him/her to seek assistance.
- Refer the student to Counseling and Psychological Services.
- Refer the student to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). A.A. meets on campus in The Center (x3206).
- Contact the necessary resources in cases of intoxication (e.g., Public Safety).
- Maintain contact with the student after the referral.

*The Substance Abusing Student (continued)*

**DON'T:**

- Negate or ignore the problem.
- Criticize or denigrate
- Communicate your concern in judgmental or suspicious terms.
- Encourage the inappropriate behavior.
- Accept or tolerate the student's irresponsible behavior in the classroom.
- Deny the existence of the problem.
- Argue or try to convince them of their substance abuse; they will deny this until they're ready to work on problem.



## THE VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE STUDENT

Students usually become verbally abusive when in frustrating situations that 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. These students often feel they will be rejected and, therefore, reject you before you reject them. They often realize the drama and intimidation behind their anger and are aware of their impact.

### 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...”
- Allow them to ventilate, 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 they become calmer.
- Refer to Counseling and Psychological Services.
- Call Public Safety (x3070) if you feel you are in immediate danger.

### 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 explanations 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.

## THE STUDENT IN POOR CONTACT WITH REALITY

These students have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, their imaginings from their perceptions. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, and 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. They are much more frightened of you than you are of them.

### DO:

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.
- Remove the person from the extra stimulation of the environment and meet in a quieter 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 misperceptions, 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 health side, which they have. It’s okay to joke, laugh, or smile when appropriate.

### DON’T:

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking; 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 or craziness.
- Demand, command, or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

## THE VIOLENT OR PHYSICALLY DESTRUCTIVE STUDENT

Violence, because of emotional distress, is very rare and typically occurs only when the student is totally 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:**

- Call Public Safety (campus police) at 911 if you or others are in imminent danger.
- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation, e.g., "I can see you 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 rights to be angry, but hitting (breaking things) is not O.K."
- Get necessary help (other staff, University Police, Health Center Personnel, Counseling Services).
- Stay in an open area.
- Divert attention when all else fails, e.g., "If you hit me, I can't be of help."
- Refer to Counseling and Psychological Services.

### **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.

## THE SUICIDAL STUDENT

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. Any one of us can become suicidal if life hits us hard enough. The suicidal person is intensely ambivalent about killing himself/herself and typically responds to help; suicidal states are definitely time limited; most people who commit suicide are not psychotic. High risk indicators include: feeling of hopelessness, helplessness, 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 and the inability to do so results in a rage or anger directed toward themselves.

### DO:

- Call Public Safety (campus police) at **911**, if immediate emergency intervention is needed.
- Take the student seriously - 80% 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 Counseling and Psychological Services or other appropriate agency if you get overwhelmed or if you need a professional consultation or assistance.
- Minister 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.")
- Over commit yourself and, therefore, not be able to deliver on what you promise.
- Ignore your limitations.

## REFERRAL RESOURCES

There may come a time when you wish to refer a student to one of the services on campus. The following are guidelines that may facilitate the referral process.

Refer a student when:

- A) The problem or request for information is beyond your knowledge.
- B) You feel that for some reason, no matter what it is, you cannot work with the student or feel like you are being used.

In emergencies, if a student appears dangerous to others or to self, call the Campus Police emergency dispatcher at **911** immediately. All pay phones on campus will direct 911 calls to Campus Police. Give your name, location, and department. Advise them of the situation and remain where you are until contacted by an officer. The officers of the Cal Poly Pomona Department of Public Safety receive special training in dealing with violent and/or emotionally disturbed students; they will respond promptly and effectively.

### **COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES**

**Building 66, Room 116**

**(909) 869-3220**

Hours: 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.  
Monday-Friday by appointment

Immediate crisis counseling is available during all hours of operation for urgent crisis situations (e.g., suicidal student, homicidal student, the survivor of sexual assault, and the student who has poor contact with reality).

**Emergency Dial 911**

## IMPORTANT CAMPUS NUMBERS

Police and Parking Services	Emergency Calls	<b>911</b>
	Routine Calls	869-3070
Counseling and Psychological Services		869-3220
Disabled Students Services		869-3333
Student Health Center		869-4000
The Pride Center		869-3064
The Center		869-3206
The Cesar Chavez for Higher Education Student Center		869-5035
The African American Student Center		869-5006
The Native American Student Center		869-2132
The Asian/Pacific Islander Student Center		869-5023
Project Sister (Sexual Assault)	24hrs.	(909)626-HELP
House of Ruth (domestic violence)		(909)988-5559
LA Suicidal Prevention		(310)391-1253
Suicide Crisis Intervention Service		(909)886-4889 or (800)832-9119
Aurora Behavioral Health/Charter Oak		1-800-654-2673