

## Helping Distressed Students

All members of the University of Montevallo community have the potential to interact with distressed students. In fact, many times faculty and staff are on the front lines in helping students in distress. Being able to identify distressed students, knowing methods of helping those students, and if necessary connecting students to on campus resources, a faculty or staff member can assist the student in navigating a difficult time in his or her life.

### Identifying Distressed Students

Becoming aware of how students present themselves when they are distressed can often allow the student to get the help he or she needs early. Below is a list of common distress signals:

- **Change in class attendance or quality of work** - Because the student is distressed, many times the student will not have the energy to do quality work or attend class. Changes in class attendance and the quality of work by students is usually one of the first signs of distress.
- **Changes in appearance** - Note drastic changes in dress and hygiene that are abnormal for that student. Don't ask yourself if this student's appearance is normal for a college student, but ask if this student's appearance is normal for himself or herself.
- **Depression** - While most people experience depressed feelings and thoughts from time to time, it normally only consists of one or two symptoms and usually passes in a short period of time. However, it becomes a problem when students experience multiple symptoms for extended periods of time. Be aware when students tell you they are experiencing sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, or preoccupation with death.
- **Changes in Behaviors** - Has the student begun acting in a way that is different from his or her normal classroom behavior? This could include a calm or reserved student becoming hyperactive or restless, or a peaceful and quiet student becoming disruptive or antagonistic.
- **Disorientation** - Sometimes distressed students seem "out of it." Often times this presents itself as a reduction of what is going on around them, becoming forgetful or losing things, inaccurate perception of reality, speech becomes disconnected or incomplete, or behavior seems to be bizarre or out of context.
- **Drug and Alcohol Abuse** - Identifiable signs of intoxication during class or interactions with University officials are indicators of problems that require attention.
- **Suicidal Thoughts** - Most people who attempt suicide reach out for help before attempting. Those attempts are often varied and can range from "I don't want to be here anymore," to a series of vague "good byes," to "I'm going to kill myself." Many times student use non-verbal communication to communicate suicidal thoughts. Non-verbal messages could include giving away valued items, or putting University, financial, and legal affairs in order. If a student communicates to you suicidal thoughts you should immediately contact the Counseling and Career Center at 665.6262 or Campus Police at 665.6155.
- **Violent or Aggressive Behaviors** - Distressed students will many times make verbal threats, send threatening emails or letters, put violent or threatening material in class assignments or exams, harass or stalk other students or University employees, commit physically violent behavior



## Intervening With Distressed Students

- **Safety first** - Always keep your safety in mind as you interact with distressed students. If you sense danger to you or the student call 911, or Campus Police at 665.6155.
- **Avoid Escalation** - Remember that if a student is distressed they can usually be provoked quickly. Distressed students are in need of to listen and support them. You can always remind them of the rules later.
- **Ask direct questions** - Take a calm, matter of fact approach to asking students questions. You need not be afraid of asking students directly if they are drunk, confused, or if they want to kill themselves.
- **Don't force the student to talk**
- **Communicate concern, not judgment**
- **Don't assume you are being manipulated** - Not every student is trying to manipulate you. Some student stories will be unbelievable, but true.
- **Know your limits** - Although many students will be helped by you listening to them some will require much more than you are able and trained to be provide. When you get the feeling that students require more of you than appropriate, trust those feelings and refer the student. Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself are:
  - You catch yourself feeling "stressed out" by the situation.
  - You notice that you are angry at the student.
  - You feel afraid.
  - You want to adopt the student.
  - You catch yourself comparing his or her situation to similar experiences of your own.
- **Refer, Refer, Refer** - Dealing with students in distress can be difficult. The Counseling and Career Center wants to help. Remember, if you feel like the student is in crisis or in need of immediate help, contact the Counseling and Career Center at 665.6262 during business hours or the Campus Police at 665.6155 after hours. The counselors at the Counseling and Career Center want to help.

## Things to Remember When Dealing With Distressed Students

- You are not responsible for the student's well-being, nor are you responsible for whether the student seeks help.
- Your expression of concern may provide motivation for the student to seek help.
- Do not get trapped into giving advice. Let the student make his or her own decisions
- Do not say "Don't worry," "Crying won't help," "I know exactly how you are feeling," "Everything will be okay." These types of statements make students feel like their situation is really not important or not a big deal.
- The Counseling and Career Center is here to help. You can contact us at 665.6262. Or you can call the Campus Police at 665.6155 or 911 if the there is an emergency.

