

Helping Students in Distress

Faculty and Staff Resource

August 2011

Counselling & Career Centre
Room 1402, Main Campus
Phone: 403-343-4064

counselling@rdc.ab.ca

[Counselling & Career Centre](#)

What to Look For:

Academic Indicators:

- Deterioration in quality of work
- Missed assignments
- A drop in grades
- Repeated absences from class
- A negative change in classroom performance
- Disorganized or erratic performance
- Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed exams)

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators:

- Tearfulness
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Excessive dependency
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Expressions of concerns about the student by his/her peers
- A gut feeling that *something* is wrong with the student
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems or other difficulties
- Exaggerated personality traits (more/less animated than usual)
- Inappropriate emotional display
- Unusual or bizarre ideas or behaviors

Physical Indicators:

- Deterioration in physical appearance
- Visible changes in weight
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Excessive fatigue
- Coming to class, hung over or smelling of alcohol
- Appearing sick or ill

Safety/ Risk Indicators

- Any written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality or a suicidal tone to it
- Statements of *losing control*
- Statements to the effect that the student is *going away for a long time*
- Severe depression
- History of suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Self-Injurious or self-destructive behaviors
- Essays or papers that excessively focus on despair, suicide, or death

What You As The Instructor Can Do:

1. Talk to the student promptly and in private, when neither of you is rushed.

Attempt to eliminate the possibility of interruptions.

2. State the reasons for your concern gently, and honestly while avoiding assumptions.

Listen very carefully and be nonjudgmental. Perhaps if you were in the student's shoes, you might be doing the same things or feeling the same way. The student may not immediately reveal issues of concern or reveal them at all. However, your concern will let the student know that others are noticing there is a problem and that you are a person who is willing to help.

3. Instill hopefulness and positive attitudes in resolving the problem.

Assure the student of the availability of resources and of people who want to help, and the fact that there are various options. Remember in a crisis, caring listening and just *being there* can go along way; sometimes it may be all that is needed.

4. Maintain clear interpersonal boundaries as appropriate to your professional relationship with the student.

Once you know details of the student's personal life, it may be more difficult but still necessary to maintain academic requirements and institutional policies. Sometimes providing academic flexibility can be very helpful for a student in crisis. As a general rule, if you feel that more than one discussion with you will be necessary, you should make a referral to other resources.

5. Make a referral to the appropriate resource.

If in doubt about the appropriate referral, call the Counselling & Career Centre (403-343-4064) and ask to speak to one of the Counsellors. The Counselling & Career Centre is staffed with qualified Psychologists and a Clinical Social Worker who offer free counselling services to students. The Counsellors can also help you find appropriate referral information for off-campus supports. The Counsellors at RDC work with students on a wide variety of issues including relationship concerns, exam anxiety, career exploration, and other mental health concerns such as public speaking anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

6. Issues of Confidentiality

All counselling services are completely confidential with the exceptions as mandated by law (danger to self, danger to others, child abuse, or court subpoena). Information about the student, including confirmation of attendance of counselling sessions, cannot be released to other RDC offices, faculty, staff, parents, or any other person or agency, without the student's consent. We cannot confirm or deny a student has been in contact with our office or received counselling without a written release from the student.

7. Students are seen on a first come- first served basis by an Intake Counsellor in the Counselling & Career Centre (Room 1402, Main Campus).

If you are comfortable, and on Main Campus, you may offer to accompany the student to Room 1402, Main Campus to speak to a counsellor. Students in crisis will be seen as soon as possible.

Please note that security may be available to transport a student in emotional crisis from the Donald School of Business to Main Campus/Counselling and Career Centre. For more information, please call (ph: 403.356.4866) or visit the DSB security desk located in the main reception area, adjacent to the elevators on the 3rd floor.

8. NOTE: Except in emergencies, counselling is always a personal choice

If the student refuses a referral, try to recognize that the student may request your help or follow up on your referral suggestions at a later time. It may help to suggest that seeking assistance from others is a part of everyone's life. If a student refuses the referral and you are uncomfortable about the situation, contact a Counsellor at the Counselling & Career Centre for a consultation to discuss your concerns. It also may be helpful to consult with your fellow colleagues and/or your department chair.

You will not be able to identify every student who is in distress, nor will every student you approach appear receptive to your expression of concern or willingness to help. However, taking the time to acknowledge your concerns directly to a student may eventually turn out to be a significant factor in successful problem resolution and may even be a turning point in a student's life.

Dealing with Crisis Situations:

Most of the time, students have the choice as to whether they will seek help. However, there are a few situations where the student is not capable of making the right choice for themselves, and others must step in. Such situations may be as follows: when a student is openly suicidal; when a student threatens harm to others; when abuse of a child is suspected. Do not promise confidentiality in any of these situations.

If a student expresses an intent to physically harm themselves and/or speaks of ending their lives, or threatens to harm others, security must be contacted immediately (ph: 403 343-4000 Main Campus, 403.356.4866 Downtown Campus). Depending on the situation and your relationship with the student, you may chose to either escort them directly to the security desk (located at the front entrance, Main Campus or the 3rd floor, Downtown Campus) or have security come to your location. Security will follow protocol to inform the Counselling staff or arrange after-hours services. If a student is unwilling or unable to accompany you to either of these places, and has stated intent to commit suicide, calling 911 is appropriate.

Examples of How to Approach Student Concerns:

Example 1: Here is a sample conversation which could occur with a student in crisis:

Dr. S has noticed that one of her students, Joseph, appears to be having difficulty. At the beginning of the semester he attended class regularly and came prepared for lectures and exams. About halfway through the semester, she noticed he missed several classes, and appeared distracted and exhausted when he did attend. Dr. S made the decision to approach Joseph as he was leaving class, and asked him to stay behind.

Dr. S: Joseph, I have noticed that you haven't been attending class as often as you used to.

Joseph: Yeah... Sorry, I've had a lot going on.

Dr. S: I'm not trying to put you on the spot here, but I just wanted to let you know that I had noticed, and I was wondering if everything is okay?

Joseph: Oh, yeah, I'm okay.

Dr. S: Well, it seems like something has changed for you since September, and you look quite tired in class. You also haven't been as well-prepared for class as you were previously. I wanted to let you know that if you have something going on in your life right now which is difficult, it may help to get some support.

Joseph: (says nothing)

Dr. S: Is there anything I could do which would be helpful for you?

Joseph: No, that's fine, thanks.

Dr. S: Would you be willing to meet with one of the Counsellors on campus?

Joseph: I don't think so

Dr. S: Alright, I can respect that. If anything changes and you would like to do so in the future, do you know where they're located?

Joseph: Yeah.

Dr. S: You're also welcome to talk to me if there is anything I could do to help. Well, thanks for hearing me out. Take care, I'll see you next class.

Summary:

The student in this example was not particularly open to support. However, the instructor did several supportive things. She first described behaviors that she observed without judgment. She let the student know that she has concerns about him, she respected his wish for privacy, and she informed him about where he could get support if he chooses to access it. The instructor has now made the student aware that help is available, and he may choose to access it at some point in the future. Alternatively, if the

issue is something that the student can resolve on his own, the instructor's comments may serve as the motivation he needed to take whatever action is necessary.

Example 2:

Halfway through the semester, Dr. G. notices that one of his students is struggling. Jenn attends every lecture and takes copious notes. She also puts in long hours studying between classes, and completes extra homework exercises. However, she has failed all of her exams so far. Dr. G has provided traditional supports to Jenn (helping her review exams/assignments, giving her direction in areas of focus, etc.) but she continues to do poorly in tests. Dr. G decides to talk to Jenn when she attends his office hours.

Jenn: Dr. G can you explain how I could have done better on the midterm?

Dr.G: Well, Jenn, I am concerned about you, because I can tell you're putting a lot of time and effort into this class, but your grades are below what we would expect.

Jenn: (Cries) I have to work hard in this subject and so I do everything I can to prepare. I feel like I know the material and understand it but when I get into an exam I just lose it. I forget what I know; I go blank or else, I doubt my answers and change them. I always have the worst marks in the class. I spent three weeks studying for the midterm and I still didn't even pass it. I just don't know what more I can do.

Dr.G: I can tell you're really frustrated and upset about this. Jenn, I think you would benefit from speaking to one of the Counsellors in the Counselling & Career Centre. They can determine whether the college may be able to put some supports in place to help you have a better chance at succeeding.

Jenn: I think I need to study harder, and I know I can do better on the final.

Dr. G: This may be difficult to hear, but right now I'm not sure that lack of effort is the issue. Based on what I have seen of your work, I am strongly recommending that you visit Counselling & Career Centre to see a counsellor.

Jenn: What will they do?

Dr. G: They'll assess whether you need more support than you're getting right now. I think it would be helpful for you to go. It will be up to you whether you follow any recommendations they give you.

Jenn: Can't you just help me with this? You can explain to me how to do better on the exams if we look over my old ones. Maybe you could extend your office hours and see me a few times per week?

Dr. G: I know you would prefer to deal with me, but to be honest; I am not the best person to be helping you with this. You need different support than what I can offer you.

Jenn: I'm going to talk to my parents about it.

Dr. G: Sure, you can talk it over with them. Here is a brochure on the relevant services offered at the college and how to access them.

Summary:

Students who are putting in extensive effort and not succeeding on test and exams may be dealing with test anxiety or some other personal or situational issue which is limiting their ability to be successful. Test anxiety is not unusual and there is effective help available. At the Counselling, Career and Learning Centre (Room 1402, Main Campus, Main Campus), a counsellor can assess for this issue and help the student look at various ways to manage it. If personal issues or situations are playing a role in the student's academic performance, Counsellors can assist the student to see this and to develop strategies to deal with it.

This instructor in this example was direct and honest with the student about his concerns. He empathized with the student's distress. He also set an appropriate boundary with the student, by declining her request for additional tutoring. In this case, the instructor sensed that spending time tutoring the student would have been a "band-aid" solution, whereas an appropriate referral may be more likely to get to the root of the difficulty.

Thank You for your Commitment to the Students at RDC

Sincerely,

The Counselling Staff in the

Counselling & Career Centre

Room 1402, Main Campus, Main Campus

