

Distressed Students 101

How to Identify, Communicate, and Help
Students in Distress

Objectives

You will learn...

- o To identify and tell the difference between distressed, disturbed, disruptive, and dangerous students.
- o Understand the resources to help these students and when to refer student.
- o How to communicate with students to help them see their problem more rationally.
- o How to help students by offering support and helping them brainstorm solutions.

The 4 Ds: Continuum of Behavior

Distressed → Disturbed → Disruptive → Dangerous

- **Distressed:** upset but more like everyday reaction to everyday stress
- **Disturbed:** highly distraught, behaving in unusual ways, possible difficulty functioning
- **Disruptive:** interfering with others, with the residential environment, and/or with staff
- **Dangerous:** implicit or explicit threats to self or others.
- What are some examples of these behaviors?

When to Refer

- Some situations you cannot handle on your own...
 - Refer when the behavior has become dangerous (i.e. suicidal, homicidal, physically violent).
 - If the behavior has escalated or worsened despite using strategies that should have helped.
 - The situation may require expertise (sexual assault, hate crimes, i.e.)
- Use the chart for resources to know where to refer what behavior.
- Consult with the departments when you are unsure.

Resources for Each Type of Behavior

- o **Distressed** – You may be able to offer support, brainstorm solutions, and help the student manage their stress. Consultation with the Counseling Center or Office of the Dean of Students may be helpful
- o **Disturbed** – Office of the Dean of Students, Counseling Center
- o **Disruptive** – Office of the Dean of Students, University Police Department, Student of Concern, Student Conduct
- o **Dangerous** – University Police Department, consult with Dean of Students may

How Can You Tell If A Student Is Distressed?

- o In your groups, discuss symptoms of distress that you've noticed in your students. Write them down on the large pieces of paper.
- o Where and when are you most likely to encounter students with these symptoms? Brainstorm how you might respond in these different areas.

Symptoms of Students Experiencing Distress

- o Social isolation (reports from student)
- o Change in behavior over several visits
- o Extreme hostility or anger
- o Inability to focus on the conversation or subject
- o Disorganized speech or patterns of thoughts
- o Forms are filled out strangely (aggressively, passively, includes inappropriate information)
- o Abrupt change in manner, style, or personal hygiene.
- o May exhibit restlessness or fidgeting during the conversation
- o Excessive crying

Where and When Might You Become Aware of Distressed Students?

- o E-mails
- o Phone calls
- o At initial contact
- o By another concerned student
- o From paperwork (filled out oddly)

Situations You May Encounter at Initial Contact

- o What specific situations have you encountered (or worry about encountering) with distressed students at initial contact (phone call, front desk, etc.)?
- o What questions do you have about handling these situations? What would be helpful to know?

Tips For Handling Distressed Students at Initial Contact

- Address behaviors while maintaining relationships.
- Know yourself and your emotions – so you can manage your triggers.
- Respond in a calm and collected way.
- Diffuse escalating or dangerous situations.
 - Use emergency procedure in place by your department.
 - Avoid lecturing on rules or procedures, focus on diffusing the situation.
 - Get the appropriate staff to help with the situation.

What Would You Do in the Following Situation?

- o A student cannot get enough aid to attend. They say they'd rather die than tell their family they cannot attend. The staff member asks for clarification and the student's response makes the counselor question if they are serious enough to do something.

Communicating with Students

How to Help Students Alleviate Some of the Stress and Come Up
With Good Solutions

Situations You May Encounter at Secondary Contact

- o What specific situations have you encountered (or worry about encountering) with distressed students in our offices/at your desks?
- o What questions do you have about handling these situations? What would be helpful to know?

Responding to the Student: The Response Skills

- o The skills aim to help “calm” the student down and allow them to tell their story.
- o They allow the student to feel heard and not judged.
- o They give you a chance to understand the background of the situation and to understand what the student wants.
- o They’re helpful when you’re not sure how to help.

The Response Skills

- o Remain Calm.
- o Listen.
- o Validate
- o Offer support and solutions.

Play Dumb: Allow the Student To Tell Their Story

- o Ask the student what happened or what is going on.
- o Don't interrupt or try to interject with advice.
- o Even if you're 99% sure you know what is going on, allow the student to tell you their side of the story.
- o Do clarify details of the story by asking...
 - o What do you mean by "x?" Can you tell me more about "y," I'm not quite understanding.
- o Ask open ended questions to encourage the student to talk about the issue.
- o Ask the student what he or she wants as the outcome.

Validate

- Let them know that you understand their story and their experience is real.
- Avoid saying things that minimize their feelings, deny their perception of the event, or isolates them.
- Avoid invalidating behavioral cues (rolling eyes, sighs, facial expressions).
- Validation builds trust between you and the student, which is essential to you being able to help them!

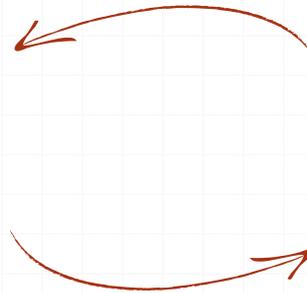
Validating versus Invalidating

Validating Responses

- I can understand why you feel that way.
- That is a tough situation.
- You're choosing to be upset over "x," I can understand that.
- You are really frustrated about this.
- It's normal to feel overwhelmed.

Invalidating Responses

- That isn't the way it happened.
- You shouldn't feel that way.
- You should just move on.
- You're the only one in the class who feels that way.
- Using clichés.



Offering Support and Brainstorming Solutions

- o After you've helped clarify the problem and calm the student, you can focus on offering support to the student.
- o Support can be many things. Ideas?
- o You have a toolbox to help you with the student. In your toolbox is a mini toolkit you can offer students.

The Skills to Offer Support

- o Evaluate:
 - o Think about what caused the student to be in this situation – was it underlying anger or frustration? Poor study skills? Poor social skills? Time management issues? You can invite the student to evaluate the distress as well.
- o Teach new skills.
 - o Once you've determined the situation, offer a new skill. You can go review skills, give them a handout, and/or offer them a referral to the appropriate resource.

The Skills to Offer Support

o Reestablishment

- o This could include helping the student strategize ways to calm him or herself down before he or she reached high levels of distress, a long term plan for students to be successful in the academic environment and to solve the underlying problem.
- o This phase may be done in conjunction with your supervisor or in consultation with other departments.
- o What about if there are no solutions available to help the student? What can we do then?

PRACTICE

- On the next screen you will be given a situation to practice in pairs.
- One person will be the student, and the other will be the staff member assisting the student.
- You will then switch when the facilitator instructs you to do so.
- Keep in mind the needs of the student, referral sources, and things you can offer the student to help them problem solve.

PRACTICE: The Situation

- o Student is dependent according to FAFSA rules/guidelines and needs parental income information to complete the FAFSA before we can offer a financial aid package. But the parents will not help complete the FAFSA or provide funding. Student is upset because now “we” are preventing him/her from getting the aid they need to attend Binghamton. We ask for additional documentation to see if we can make the student independent but he/she doesn't think they should have to do this. He/she leaves the office quickly yelling obscenities, runs into another student so hard they knock them over and doesn't stop to assist them in getting up.

Review of the Session

- o Remember to check to see where they fall on the spectrum of the 4 Ds. Refer to appropriate resources when necessary.
- o Know the limits of your role.
- o Practice the communication skills to calm the student and hear their story.
- o Offer support and problem solving when appropriate.