

Supporting a student in distress

Presented at:
October 2015 Coffee Chat
By: Tanya Andrews

How can I help a student who is in distress?

Strategies	Examples
Assess readiness. Stages of change.	Pre-contemplation: "I can't." Contemplation: "I can see reasons for and against change." Determination: "I want to but...." Action: "I am on it." Relapse: "This is hard." Maintenance: "OK, a few small setbacks, but I am getting the hang of this."
Be curious	Student: "I have missed a lot of classes" Advisor: "How many? Which classes?"
Create manageable goals together	Advisor: "Where are you on a scale of 1-10? What is going to get you to a 3.5?"
Avoid working too hard	Advisor: "This is our third meeting, and you still have not implemented the plan we brainstormed together. What is getting in the way?" Doing the task for the student will take away a valuable learning experience.
Build the relationship	Empathize: "I am sorry to hear that was your experience." Create a home base: "Let's book an appointment next week to check in?" "I am here to help." Check understanding: "We talked about a lot today. What are you taking with you?" Show you care: "It was so great to see you today." "Take good care." Follow up: "How did that exam go last week?"
Encourage team building	Advisor: "When we are going through challenging times it is important to have people on your team both permanent members like family and friends and some temporary members, like myself. Who is on your team?" "Who else would be helpful to add to your team?"

What should I say when a student is in distress?

Strategies	Examples
Provide perspective: What is the student missing?	Questions to Ask: What might you think of this situation a year from now? Five years from now? What advice would you give a friend if it was happening to her/him? If you were to take a step back from this situation – what might you notice that may have been originally missed?
Use questions strategically: Motivation interviewing	Advisor: "I really think you should consider dropping stats." Student: "Yeah but...." Instead try.... Advisor: "What mark are you going to need to pass stats and keep a 65% average?" "Is that going to be achievable with your other four classes?" "What are the pros and cons of dropping stats?"
Believe in them: Does everyone have the opportunity to be successful?	Advisor: "I know this seems hard, but you can do this."

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What should I not say when a student is in distress?

Approaches to avoid	Examples
Make judgments	"Why didn't you get a doctor's note if you were sick?"
Give advice	"You know what I would do..."
Use trick questions	"Health Services will not ask about your mental health"
Ask 'why' questions	"Why are you late" vs. "What prevented you from being on time?"

What signs or symptoms can I watch/listen for?

What to watch for	What to listen for
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Social isolation, withdrawal, lethargy » Inability to focus on a specific topic in a conversation » Disorganized thinking and speech » Strong mistrust of others » Violent outbursts » General unhappiness over a period of several weeks » Class absence or "disappearance" over extended periods » Gain or loss of significant amounts of weight » Abrupt change in manner, style, or personal hygiene 	<p>Extreme Thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » "I am a failure." » "I do not belong here." » "I can't do math." <p>Hopelessness or Helplessness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » "I give up." » "There are no options." » "This has to end."

What can I do if I see or hear these signs or symptoms?

Strategies	Examples
Say what you notice	"I noticed you look sad today."
Ask direct questions	"Sometimes when we are going through a hard time...(suicidal thoughts can creep into our minds and/or we may cope by harming ourselves with minimizing food intake, cutting, drugs or excessive alcohol intake)...is this something you can relate to? No judgment, I am just trying to understand what is happening so I can help in the best way I can."
Ask about gaps	"What is getting in the way of you wanting to connect with counselling?"
Refer	"Is there anyone else on campus that knows about what is happening for you right now?" "Who else on campus would you benefit from sharing this information with?" "Have you considered connecting with..."

Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.

~ Richard Light (Harvard University)