

Helping a Distressed Student: A Faculty and Staff Guide

Every year one out of ten Stanford students gets help from Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Many students approach CAPS directly. However, some may turn to you first for help because they respect and trust you as a mentor, advisor, staff or faculty member.

Recognizing a Student in Need

You may also be the first one to recognize when a student needs help and can guide him or her to professional resources. Please note that the following examples of student appearance, behavior and expressions of distress are cause for concern.

Unusual Appearance:

- Swollen or red eyes
- A change in personal hygiene or dress
- Dramatic weight loss or gain

Marked Behavior Changes:

- Poor performance and preparation
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration, especially when accompanied by a change in attitude
- Unusual or changed pattern of interaction
- Avoids participation
- Dominates discussions
- Excessive anxiety when called upon
- Disruptive behavior
- Problems with roommates or family
- Exaggerated emotional responses that are inappropriate to the situation
- Depressed, lethargic mood
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Strange or bizarre behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality

Expressions of Distress:

- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Isolation from friends or family
- Verbal or written threats of violence
- Overt references to suicide

Urgent Concerns

Urgent concerns involve disturbed thoughts, feelings or actions so severe that an immediate response is needed. These can include the following:

- Suicidal intentions
- A threat of violence or imminent harm to others, either by intention, error in judgment or passive neglect
- Confusion, disorientation, hallucinations or delusions
- Extreme anxiety or obsessive thinking

Severe distress may be precipitated by a traumatic event, such as a sexual assault, loss of a relationship, or death of a friend or family member.

What To Do

If you believe that imminent danger or harm to a student or someone else exists, immediately call the police for assistance. To help assess the situation, call CAPS at (650) 723-3785.

A CAPS on-call clinician is available 24 hours a day for these urgent situations. Identify yourself as a Stanford faculty or staff member and indicate the urgency of your request (say whether you need a response immediately, within the hour or the same day). Leave a phone number where you can be reached. After weekday hours, our answering service operator will take your phone number and page the CAPS on-call clinician who will return your call within 20 minutes.

Preventing Violence

Be concerned if you observe any of the following:

1. Alcohol or drug intoxication
2. Paranoia or agitation
3. Impulsive behavior

4. Recent acts of violence, including damage to property
5. Verbal or physical threats
6. Threatening actions or objects that may be used as weapons

What To Do

Protect yourself. Be alert to the potential for violence. Know as much about the situation as possible before meeting the student. Survey the scene for immediate hazards. Resist dealing with the situation alone; enlist the help of others.

Abstain from provoking violence. Approach the individual in a non-threatening way. Speak in a calm, reassuring manner. Never confront or threaten students who seem paranoid or aggressive. Refrain from touching the person if you can and avoid physically restraining anyone who is agitated. If you are attacked, use only enough force to contain the person.

Be firm, but gentle. Let the student know that violence is not acceptable. It is often helpful to change the environment. Get the student to a calm, quiet place (away from environmental stimuli, such as noise, lights and people). Also try to avoid crowds or sources of anger.

Less Urgent Concerns

In a non-urgent situation, talk with the student about your observations and concerns. Such acknowledgment often encourages them to get help. Try the following approaches:

1. Be direct, specific and nonjudgmental
2. Spell out your specific concerns and ask how you can help
3. Express concern (rather than shock, dismay, fear or anger, which may further upset the student)
4. Listen carefully to understand his or her point of view

Additional Support & Referrals

If you have questions about how to best handle a situation, the counseling staff at CAPS are ready to help. A consultant who supports faculty and staff in dealing with student concerns is assigned to each academic department. CAPS counselors assist

in the following ways:

- Help assess the situation and its seriousness
- Propose possible interventions
- Explore resources, both on and off campus
- Find the best way to make a referral, when appropriate
- Help you clarify your own feelings about the student, so you can be more effective
- Discuss follow-up concerns after your initial action

Making a Referral

Point out that help is available and encourage the student to go to CAPS. If the student agrees, you can facilitate this by arranging the appointment while the student is still with you. Emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage (not weakness or failure). In a similar vein, seeking professional help when you have problems with your car, health or the law is a smart thing to do.

Confidentiality

When you refer students to CAPS, ask them to let you know about their experience with us. This is important because we cannot divulge any confidential information (including whether or not counseling was given) without written consent.

Follow Up

Arrange to meet with the student again. Your follow-up can solidify the student's resolve to get appropriate help. It also demonstrates your commitment to assist with the process. Later, ask the student if he or she kept the appointment with the CAPS clinician and how it went.