

## **Identifying, Responding to, and Referring Students in Distress**

### **Faculty, staff, parents, and friends**

of students are often among the first to notice students who are encountering overwhelming amounts of stress in their lives. Students often seek help from faculty, staff, relatives, or friends they trust and know well. Those closest to students are the first to notice signs and symptoms of distress, which can seriously disrupt academic progress, personal relationships, and daily behavior.

Below are some guidelines to follow if you are concerned about a student. While they were written specifically for College faculty and staff, they can be applied to a variety of situations. There are also a number of excellent on-line resources available for persons who are concerned about the well-being of another. An excellent starting place is the "Self-Help" section of this website.

### **Signs and symptoms of stress in students**

- Erratic or infrequent class attendance.
- Excessive procrastination, poorly prepared work, frequent missed assignments.
- Increasing dependence on a faculty or staff member (by making excessive appointments, hanging around your office or after class) or others.
- Social isolation, withdrawal, lethargy.
- Inability to focus on a specific topic in a conversation or activity.
- Disorganized thinking and speech, feelings that are inappropriate to the situation, lack of affect, or other evidence that a student is "out of touch with reality."
- Expression of feelings of persecution, strong mistrust of others.
- Behavior that disrupts the classroom or other environments.
- Signs of excessive alcohol or drug use.
- Gain or loss of significant amounts of weight.
- Abrupt change in manner, style, or personal hygiene.

**Most, but not all, suicide attempts are preceded by a message that the person is considering suicide. This message could be direct ("I'm going to kill myself") or subtle (giving away possessions or making reference to "not being around any more.") Any message about suicide must be taken seriously.**

### **Guidelines for Responding**

- Share your interest and concern openly and directly.
- Set clear limits about your role with the student.

- Maintain a student's privacy.
- Do not promise confidentiality. Rather inform a student that you will use discretion if seeking outside assistance. You may want to look at our [confidentiality statement](#), which all students read when they come in for their first meeting with a counselor.
- Help a student tell his or her story. Offer the opportunity to listen to whatever is on the student's mind.
- Demonstrate an understanding of what the student discloses.
- Inquire how the student is attempting to respond to the problem. Develop response options together.
- Consider with the student the consequences of "doing more of the same."
- Consult with colleagues, supervisors, deans, Counseling Center staff, or others if you feel you need additional perspectives, before or after approaching the student.
- Suggest a referral to the Counseling Center, the Student Health Center, the Office of the Dean of Students, or other community resource.
- Follow-up. Offer and be open to further contact.

### Consultation

- Consult with colleagues, supervisors, deans or associate deans, counselors, or others who might be able to give you suggestions for working with a problem student.
- Consult with Counseling Center staff by phone or in person.
- Recognize that a referral to another resource is sometimes necessary, even if approaching the student with your concerns has an immediate impact on his or her behavior or performance in your class.

**Over 96% of students who reported they were having difficulties at Tougaloo College before they started counseling said counseling was helpful in resolving their concerns.**

**Over 97% of students who reported using the counseling said they would return for counseling and would recommend counseling to their friend.**

### Consider a referral when

- The problems or requests made are beyond your level of competence.
- The boundaries of your role make it unwise to work with students on personal issues.

- A student expresses a preference (directly or indirectly) to speak with someone else about their concerns.
- After some time and effort, you feel like you are not making progress in helping this student.

## Referral Guidelines

- It is generally more helpful to refer to a particular office or agency than to a specific person. You might recommend a person about whom you feel comfortable, but that person may not be the most available at the time he or she is needed.
- Consider helping the student make an appointment, perhaps by walking with the student to the office where the referral is being made or letting the student call from your office.
- After a referral, let the student volunteer information they want to share. It may not be necessary for you to have details of a student's interaction with another agency. In fact, at times the student may wish to stop talking to you about the problem altogether. Communicate continued concern and openness to help.
- Once a referral is made, communication between the student and the referral agency is often confidential. You may be curious and feel unfinished in your work with the student, but you may have to let it be that way as the student begins to work with someone else.
- There are few "quick fixes." Behaviors, attitudes, and feelings take time to change, and a student may show slow progress or, for a while, none at all. Trust the process and, again, communicate your continued concern and availability.

**Nearly one-third of students seeking help at the Counseling Center say they were referred by Tougaloo College faculty or staff.**

## Counseling Center services

- The Counseling Center generally sees students by appointment. Students wanting an initial meeting with a counselor should call the Center (601-977-7818) or stop by (Jamerson Hall- 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.) to make an appointment.
- The Counselor is available throughout the day to handle crises. Students who are in crisis are always accommodated as soon as possible.
- After the first appointment, the counselor and student collaborate to determine the best course of action.

- Office hours are 9:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. Monday - Friday. After hours concerns should be directed through Campus Police or residence hall staff on duty, and they will contact a counselor as appropriate.
- There is a counselor available to consult with you about concerns you have about a particular student. You can call for a telephone conversation or arrange a face-to-face visit.