Recognizing & Responding to Students in Distress

Prepared by Princeton University Counseling & Psychological Services

A Guide for Princeton University Faculty, Administrators, and Staff

Recognizing Signs of Distress

Academic Indicators:
- Missed assignments or repeated absences
- Deterioration in work quality
- Written work with disturbing content (e.g., suicidal thoughts, violent thoughts)
- Disorganized or erratic performance

Personal/Physical Indicators:
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Coming to class bleary-eyed or hung over
- Sleeping in class or excessive fatigue
- Inappropriate or exaggerated behavior (e.g., aggressiveness, emotional outbursts, crying)
- Withdrawal from interactions with faculty and peers

Other Factors:
- Peers expressing concern about a student
- Direct knowledge that a student has experienced a trauma or a loss
- References to harming oneself or others
- Online postings that seem threatening or concerning

Faculty and staff are often the first contact for students in distress. This guide outlines steps to respond compassionately and effectively to our students.

Counseling & Psychological Services (CPS) is always available to faculty and staff for consultation, guidance and training in responding to students in distress. Call us @ (609) 258-3141. https://uhs.princeton.edu/counseling-psychological-services

In an emergency, it is always appropriate to contact Campus Public Safety @ 9-1-1

CPS Cares Line: (609) 258-3141
(access to counselors 24/7)

McCosh Infirmary: (609) 258-3139
(access to medical after-hours)

Public Safety: 911
(access to deans on call after-hours)
Reaching Out to Distressed Students

DO

- Speak with the student privately
- Listen carefully, ask open ended questions, and reflect what you hear
- Focus concerns on behaviors that you have observed that concern you
- Ask how the student has tried to cope, and what else the student thinks might help
- Express willingness to help
- Help him/her explore options for help and sources of support
- If able, offer to follow up with the student, plan a time to check in
- Give the student time to talk; know that you don’t have to fill silence

DON’T

- Don’t promise your confidentiality (though you may note that CPS is confidential)
- Don’t leave the student alone if you have concerns about their safety
- Don’t offer reassurance before you’ve heard the student out
- Don’t rush into problem solving
- Don’t underestimate the power of listening and validating
- Don’t involve yourself beyond your limits
- Don’t debate with an angry student; often after having a chance to vent, students will be more open to help
- Don’t meet in an isolated place if you have any concern for your or the student’s safety

Is it OK to Ask?

One of the biggest barriers to reaching out is the worry that it’s none of our business or that students will be embarrassed. But students actually feel cared for and recognized when asked how they’re doing.

Asking about suicide is difficult but potentially life-saving. If you hear or see signs of hopelessness or depression, you might say: “Sometimes when people are feeling bad they have thoughts of suicide. Have you had any thoughts about hurting or killing yourself?” Asking about suicide will not give someone the idea or make things worse. In fact, it may be a relief for the student to know you’re open to hearing about whatever they’re feeling.

If a student is having thoughts of suicide, continue talking. Find out if they’ve acted on or plan to act on the thoughts. Express concern and say that you want to make sure they get connected to further help. Call CPS with the student, or walk them over to McCosh Health Center. If the student refuses, call the student’s director of student life with the student, in order to make a plan to keep them safe.
DID YOU KNOW?

- CPS is located in McCosh Health Center, 3rd Floor.
- CPS services are free to all undergraduate and graduate students and their eligible dependents.
- CPS is confidential. Outside of situations involving imminent risk of harm, information is not shared.
- CPS offers walk-in Urgent Care appointments.
- The CPS Cares Line is available 24/7. To speak to a counselor, call our main number (609) 258-3141 and press 2 to be transferred to a counselor.
- For students who prefer treatment off campus, CPS can offer referrals to therapists and psychiatrists within walking distance.
- Faculty, staff, parents, coaches, and other students may call CPS with concerns about a student and for advice on how to respond to a student in need.
To learn more about university mental health and suicide prevention…

Princeton Distress Awareness & Response (PDAR) is a brief training and opportunity to talk with a CPS clinician about responding to students in distress. Contact CPS (609-258-3141) to schedule the training for your office or department.

Jed Foundation for campus mental health: https://www.jedfoundation.org/mental-health-resource-center/

### Connecting Students to Help—Other Campus Resources

- **Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students:**
  Call the student’s residential college Dean, Assistant Dean for Student Life, or Associate Dean Mellisa Thompson at 258-3052. [https://odus.princeton.edu/services/well-being](https://odus.princeton.edu/services/well-being)

- **Office of the Dean of Graduate School:**
  Contact Associate Dean Lily Secora for concerns about a student’s well-being (258-3014; lsecora@princeton.edu).

- **SHARE (Sexual Harassment/Assault Advising, Resources, & Education):** 258-3310

- **Gender + Sexuality Resource Center:** 258-1353; gsrc@princeton.edu

- **Office of Disability Services:** 258-8840; ods@princeton.edu

- **Peer Health Advisors** (students who can answer questions about health services and provide referrals to other students): princeton.edu/uhs/healthy-living/peer-advising

- **Office of Religious Life:** Clergy available to counsel students. [http://religiouslife.princeton.edu/](http://religiouslife.princeton.edu/)

### Following Up with Students of Concern

Consider reaching out to the student after you talk, encouraging them to let you know if they need further support.

You may file an Academic Early Alert @ https://odocweb.princeton.edu/aea/ or speak directly to the student’s dean, assistant dean or director of student life (DSL). Deans & DSLs may reach out to students and follow up on concerns.

Contact CPS (609-258-3141) to discuss concerns you have about the student, and decide whether there are any other steps to take.