

How to Help Students in Distress



**A Guide for Tufts
Faculty, Staff and TAs**

TUFTS UNIVERSITY
Counseling and Mental Health Service
(CMHS)
617-627-3360

<http://students.tufts.edu/health-and-wellness/counseling-and-mental-health>

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a fact of life for undergraduate and graduate students at Tufts, who are typically juggling academic demands in the context of many other new and challenging experiences. For some students these pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable and may precipitate or exacerbate mental health problems. Academic functioning, social relationships, and emotional well-being can all suffer when mental health problems arise.

Tufts faculty and staff members are in a unique position to identify and help students who are in distress. This may be especially important for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends. Anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential student resource in times of trouble. Your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in supporting a student's well-being or even saving a student's life.

Tufts University has developed this document as a guide to assist faculty and staff in recognizing certain signs and behaviors that might indicate that a student is in distress and requires assistance. In addition, this guide sets forth specific options for intervention and for referral to campus resources. In particular, the Tufts University Counseling and Mental Health Service (CMHS); 617-627-3360, and the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs (DOSA); 617-627-3158. are available to consult with you about how to respond to students in distress.

TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING STUDENT DISTRESS

Students may come to you directly to discuss a concern, but often difficulties are expressed indirectly. Sometimes signs of distress are evident through academic performance or classroom behavior. At other times students may communicate personal problems to you via email, or through references to personal or emotional difficulties in written class assignments.

The following list identifies signs which may indicate that the student

is distressed and would benefit from assistance, *especially if the signs are persistent*, severe or represent a marked change.

Academic indicators

- Poor performance or preparation in class or program activities
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Unusual or sudden changes in interactions with you or others
- Marked inattentiveness or sleepiness in class
- Attending class under the influence of alcohol or drugs

Psychological or physical indicators

- Noticeably depressed, sad or apathetic mood
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Noticeable anxiety or panic
- Deterioration in personal hygiene
- Dramatic weight gain or loss
- Disruptive or inappropriate behavior
- Signs of loss of contact with reality
- References to feeling hopeless or helpless

Social and interpersonal indicators

- Significant withdrawal from social interactions
- Concerns expressed by peers, faculty/staff or others

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

A student who is distressed often doesn't know how to seek services, or may be hesitant to do so. You can make a critical difference by talking with a student about your concerns in a caring manner. Whether you reach out to a student or a student approaches you directly, here are some suggestions for how to help.

Talk to the student in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel cared about as an individual and more confident about what to do.

Be direct by expressing your concerns in behavioral, non-judgmental terms. For example, “I notice you’ve been absent from class a lot” or “You seem to be having a hard time lately – I’m concerned about you.”

Avoid judging, evaluating or criticizing, even if the student asks your opinion. This can help a student open up and be more receptive to getting help. It is important to respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.

Listen to the student’s thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Don’t feel that you have to be an expert or offer a solution. The most important thing is to listen.

Maintain clear and consistent boundaries. It is important to preserve the professional nature of your relationship with the student. Assistance with academic matters such as course withdrawal can be discussed with the Academic Deans, when appropriate.

Give hope that things can get better and that there are ways to get through their current difficulties. Let the student know that they are not alone and that there are many resources and people who can help them.

Refer students to the Counseling and Mental Health Service or the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs. Point out that we all need help at some point and that seeking help is a sign of strength rather than weakness. Remind students that getting professional help for other problems (e.g. medical or legal) is good judgment. Tell the student what you know about the referral person or service in order to help them feel more comfortable.

It’s their decision whether or not to seek counseling, except in emergencies. Sometimes students need time to consider your suggestions for getting more help.

Follow-up with the student later to see whether or not she or he followed your referral suggestion. Even if the student did not take this step it will show your continued interest.

Know your own limits. You don’t have to try to help a student alone. Faculty and staff are always welcome to call the Counseling and Mental Health Service or the Dean of Student Affairs Office to discuss concerns about a student.

If you have concerns about a student who is difficult to reach or unresponsive to suggestions about counseling, you may also contact the Dean of Student Affairs office (DOSA) at 617-627-3158.

The DOSA staff is trained to respond in a variety of ways to student crises, and has established protocols for determining whether further intervention is necessary. That office also has the authority to require a student to receive an evaluation at the Counseling and Mental Health Service, if necessary.

After hours, there is always a Student Affairs Administrator On-call to respond to emergency situations.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

When is it an emergency?

- Statements about suicidal thoughts, intentions or attempts
- Imminent threats or aggressive behavior toward others
- Incoherent or disjointed speech
- Loss of contact with reality, including hallucinations and delusions
- Extreme panic

What to do in an emergency

- If the student expresses intentions or threats to harm him or herself
 - Do not leave the student alone.
 - During business hours (M – F; 9am-5pm), call CMHS (617-627-3360)
 - Evenings/weekends: Call TUPD (617-627-3030 or x76911). Ask them to page the on-call counselor. Give the police your name, the name of the student in question, your phone number, and your location.
- If the student expresses intentions or threats to harm others
 - Take care of your own safety first
 - Call TUPD immediately (x76911)

COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

How to make an appointment

To make an appointment with a mental health counselor, students can call 617-627-3360. CMHS in Medford is open weekdays, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Hours on the Fenway campus vary – call for more information. In order to facilitate a referral, sometimes concerned faculty and staff members call while the student is in their office or escort a student to the counseling center in person.

Confidentiality

Counseling is confidential, and information can be released only with a student's permission, except in certain emergency situations. However, we can always listen to and consult with you regarding your concerns about students. Feel free to ask students directly if they have followed up with a referral you have made.

Services

- Consultations to faculty, staff and others about student mental health concerns
- Brief individual counseling for Tufts students
- Groups and workshops
- Couples counseling (when both partners are Tufts students)
- Psychiatric services
- 24 hour emergency coverage for student mental health crises
- Referral services for specialized or continued counseling
- Educational programming

RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

TUPD Emergency Line: 617-627-6911 (anytime)

TEMS Emergency Line: 617-627-6911 (anytime)

Dean of Student Affairs Office: (617-627-3158) M – F, 9 – 5)

Student Affairs Administrator On-Call: 617-627-3030
(After hours through TUPD)

National Hotline: 1-800-SUICIDE

CMHS 617-627-3360 (M – F, 9 – 5)
During office hours

CMHS Counselor-on-call: 617-627-3030

For after-hours mental health emergencies