

# **Students in Distress: A Referral Guide for Faculty, Administration and Staff**

*Information provided by the  
UCD Student & Community Counseling Center*



**UCD Student & Community Counseling Center  
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## Services Provided

The UCD Student and Community Counseling Center provides 10 FREE individual, couple or family therapy sessions per year to CU-Denver students. After 10 sessions, a sliding scale fee structure is utilized. Our low cost sliding scale is also available to Denver/Metro community members. Clients pay for services at the time of the appointment.

We provide individual, couple or family counseling for clients facing:

- Relationship Issues
- School Issues
- Marital/Family Issues
- Life Change Issues
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Co-dependency
- Self-esteem
- Grief & Loss
- Stress Management
- Divorce/Divorce Adjustment

*When appropriate, we also provide referrals for clients to outside professionals.*

## UCD Student & Community Counseling Center

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## Introduction

College years bring fond memories to many, yet thinking back carefully, we may also remember those days as having been quite stressful. Most students are in the process of developing careers, relationships, life goals and their own individual identities. Situational and developmental problems can interfere with academic performance. In the college community, about 10 percent of students may be distressed by depression, acute anxiety, drug/alcohol abuse or more serious conditions.

Students realize that stress interferes with their own personal and academic goals and many will seek counseling services on their own. However, faculty and staff are often the first to recognize that a student may not be functioning well academically and/or emotionally. Students may turn to you for assistance. Faculty/Staff often handle these difficult decisions by themselves. While the number of contacts may be small, their significance is not.

You are in an excellent position to spot the emotionally troubled student. You may observe that at certain times of the year, particularly during exams and holidays, students experience increased anxiety. The student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your experience of him/her, could well constitute a cry for help.

## Signs of Distress

- Bizarre, alarming or dangerous behavior
- Depression, lack of energy
- Agitation
- Marked change in personal hygiene
- Increased irritability, undue aggressive or abrasive behavior
- Fearfulness
- Indecisiveness, confusion
- Nervousness
- Dependency
- Excessive procrastination, poorly prepared work
- Infrequent class attendance, little or no work completed
- Withdrawal from others

## Guidelines for Interaction

We encourage you to speak directly to a student when you sense s/he is in academic and/or personal distress. Openly acknowledge his or her distress and that you are sincerely concerned about their welfare. Offer to help them explore alternatives.

1. Request to see the student in private.
2. Briefly acknowledge your observations and perceptions of his/her situation and express your concerns directly and honestly.
3. Listen carefully to what the student is troubled about and try to see the issue from his/her point of view without agreeing or disagreeing.
4. Strange and inappropriate behavior should not be ignored.
5. Your receptivity to an alienated student will allow him/her to respond more effectively to your concerns.
6. Involve yourself only as far as you want to go. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than time or skill permits. Extending oneself to others always involves some risk, but it can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Suicidal Student (cont.)

#### Don't

- Minimize the situation or depth of feeling, e.g., "Oh, it will be much better tomorrow."
- Be afraid to ask the person if s/he is so depressed or sad that they want to hurt themselves: "You seem so upset and discouraged that I am wondering if you are considering suicide."
- Over commit yourself and, therefore, not be able to deliver on what you promise.
- Ignore your limitations.

***Remember you can always seek help from the Counseling Center. It is very important that you follow through on your concerns about a suicidal student.***

***Call (303) 556-4372 and ask to speak with the on-call Supervisor.***



## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Depressed Student (cont.)

#### Don't

- Say, “Don’t worry,” “Crying won’t help”, or “Everything will be better tomorrow.”
- Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think they may be.

### The Suicidal Student

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. The suicidal person is intensely ambivalent about killing themselves and typically responds to help; suicidal states are definitely time limited and most who commit suicide are neither crazy nor psychotic.

High risk indicators include: feelings of hopelessness and futility; a severe or threat of loss; a detailed suicidal plan; history of previous attempt; history of alcohol or drug abuse; and feelings of alienation and isolation. Suicidal students usually want to communicate their feelings; any opportunity to do so should be encouraged.

#### Do

- Take the student seriously—80% of those attempting suicide give warning of their intent.
- Acknowledge that a threat or attempt at suicide is a plea for help.
- Be available to listen, to talk, to be concerned, but refer the student to the Counseling Center or Student Health Center when you are getting overwhelmed.
- Care for yourself. Helping someone who is suicidal is hard, demanding and draining work.

## Guidelines for Consultation

If you are unsure how to handle a specific student, talk with a colleague or consult with one of the professional staff at the UCD Student & Community Counseling Center. Suggestions will be made for approaches you can take with a student.

UCD Student & Community Counseling Center is committed to helping students increase their skills and resources in meeting their academic and interpersonal challenges. The professional staff consists of licensed psychotherapists and master’s level students with excellent training and supervision.

Our services include: individual, couple and family counseling, as well as groups and workshops on issues such as stress management, grief & loss, and self-esteem. Staff also offer training and consulting services to student organizations, academic departments and other university agencies that have a high degree of contact with students.

## Making a Referral

If you feel professional counseling might be beneficial, refer the student to the UCD Student & Community Counseling Center. Be direct in letting the student know that you believe a counselor would be of help in this situation. Inform the student that the service is both confidential and free of charge (ten sessions).

Don’t force the issue if the student takes a defensive posture— simply restate your concerns and recommendations. You may even offer to contact a counselor and provide background information. If the situation seems urgent, you can call the Counseling Center at (303) 556-4372 and ask to speak with the on-call supervisor.

## Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Students

Students sometimes lack self-confidence in approaching a professor or may feel inadequate in expressing their concerns and needs. Highlighted here are a few communication skills that may be helpful as you interact with students:

- The physical setting can enhance or interfere with communication. Move away from distractions to convey interest. Remove objects like tables/chair in between you.
- Short beginning phrases lead the student into discussion, e.g., “I’m interested in hearing more about that.”
- Open-ended questions require at least a sentence in response. “Why does that seem difficult?” “What is on your mind?”
- Short phrases help keep the discussion going, e.g. “I see.” “Tell me more.” “I understand.”
- Paraphrasing, rephrasing content in your own words, conveys that you are listening to get the message right. Use leads such as “Let me see if I understand...” to paraphrase.
- Clarifying can work in conjunction with paraphrasing to help focus a vague presentation. Begin questions with, “Are you saying that...” followed by paraphrasing to help check accuracy of what the student is saying.
- Feeling description responds to the student’s feelings and conveys understanding, e.g. “You (seem, are, feel) angry, hurt, afraid, etc.” Use descriptive phrases like “You felt like the wind was knocked out of you.”
- Offering feedback by sharing your reactions and your feelings in a non-judgmental way can help the student clarify the situation. Feedback is best given as soon as you fully understand what the student is trying to convey. It is helpful to state your reaction in a supportive way, e.g., “There are still some things to work on, but I think you are making progress.”

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Substance Abusing Student

A variety of substances are available that provide escape from pressing demands. The most abused substance is alcohol. Alcohol and other drug-related accidents remain the greatest single cause of preventable death among college students.

#### Do

- Share your honest concern and encourage the person to seek help.
- Be on alert for signs of drug abuse: preoccupation with drugs, periods of memory loss, deteriorating performance in class.
- Get necessary help from campus police in instances of intoxication.

#### Don’t

- Ignore the problem.
- Chastise, lecture or in any manner encourage the behavior.

### The Depressed Student

These students show a multitude of symptoms, e.g., guilt, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy. Physical symptoms such as decreased or increased appetite, difficulty sleeping and low interest in daily activities are also symptomatic. They show low activity levels because everything else is an effort and they have little energy.

#### Do

- Let the student know you’re aware s/he is feeling down and you would like to help.
- Reach out more than halfway and encourage the student to express how they are feeling. These students are often reluctant to talk initially, yet attention from others helps students feel more worthwhile.
- Tell the student your concern for him/her.

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Anxious Student

Not knowing what is expected and conflict are primary causes of anxiety. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise anxiety; high and unreasonable self-expectations increase anxiety also. These students often have trouble making decisions.

#### Do

- Let them discuss their feelings. Often this alone relieves pressure.
- Remain calm and reassure when appropriate.
- Be clear and explicit.

#### Don't

- Take responsibility for their emotional state.
- Make things more complicated.
- Overwhelm with information or ideas.

### The Demanding Student

These students often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe the amount of time received is a reflection of their worth.

#### Do

- Let them, as much as possible, make their own decisions.
- Ignore them if possible, e.g., "Excuse me, I need to attend to other things."

#### Don't

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking; it makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.
- Play along: "Oh yeah, I hear the voices."
- Encourage further revelations of craziness.
- Demand, command or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Verbally Aggressive Student

Students usually become verbally abusive when in frustrating situations that they see as being beyond their control; anger and frustration become displaced from these situations to you.

Typically, the anger is not directed at you personally.

#### Do

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration: "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion: "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- Allow them to ventilate and tell you what is upsetting them.
- Reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or another quiet place (If you feel comfortable doing so).
- Tell them you are not willing to accept their verbally abusive behavior: "When you scream and yell at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen."
- Tell them they are violating your personal space and to please move back (if they are getting physically close): "Please stand back. You are too close."
- Help the person problem-solve and deal with the real issues when s/he becomes more calm.

#### Don't

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself: "You can't talk to me that way!"
- Press for explanation or reasons for their behavior: "Now I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so obnoxious."
- Look away and not deal with the situation.
- Give away your own rights as a person.

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Violent or Physically Destructive Student

Violence, because of emotional distress, is very rare and typically occurs only when the student is completely frustrated and feels unable to do anything about it.

#### Do

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation: “I can see you’re really upset and have some critical concerns on your mind.”
- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable: “You certainly have the right to be angry but hitting (breaking things) is not O.K.”
- Stay in open areas.
- Divert attention when all else fails: “If you hit me, I can’t be of help.”
- Get necessary help (other staff, University police, Student Health Center, or the UCD Student & Family Counseling Center).
- Remember that student discipline is implemented by the Director of Student Life.

#### Don’t

- Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, statements like, “You’re leaving me no choice.”
- Threaten, dare, taunt or push the person into a corner.
- Touch the person.

## A Guide to Helping Distressed Students

### The Student in Poor Contact with Reality

These students have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed. They may coin new words, see or hear things that no one else can, have irrational beliefs and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior.

#### Do

- Express compassion without intimate friendship. Remember that suspicious students have trouble with closeness and warmth.
- Be firm, steady, punctual and consistent.
- Be specific and clear regarding the standards of behavior expected.

#### Don’t

- Assure the student that you are her/his friend; instead—agree you are a stranger, but even strangers can be concerned.
- Be overly warm or nurturing.
- Flatter or participate in their games; you don’t know the rules.
- Challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.
- Be cute, humorous or ambiguous.

