

## Recognizing & Assisting Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty & Teaching Assistants

For most students at the University, personal and academic pursuits provide healthy experiences with positive results. However, for some, this time produces high levels of psychological distress and/or risky behaviors such as alcohol or other drug abuse. As a faculty member or teaching assistant (TA), your on-going relationship with students allows you to detect changes in an individual's behavior that may signal a more serious problem.

You can play a unique role in assisting students through a difficult situation or experience. Students appreciate faculty and TA opinions and you can serve as a reliable source of information about the resources already in place at UVa. Faculty and TAs are not expected to diagnose the source of distress or take on the role of counselor. The steps below can help you identify students in need of assistance and provide appropriate referral.

As of July 1, 2015, Virginia state law requires faculty and staff to notify Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) when a student exhibits suicidal tendencies or behavior. If you have any concerns that a student may be suicidal, notify CAPS immediately.

### 1. Be alert to signs of difficulty.

#### Academic indicators may include:

- Deterioration in quality of work
- A drop in grades
- A negative change in performance
- Repeated requests for extensions
- Missed assignments
- Repeated absences
- Disorganized or erratic performance
- Essays or creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, fear or despair

#### Communication indicators may include:

- Direct statements indicating distress, abuse, personal problems or other difficulties
- Disproportionate anger or hostility
- Becoming more withdrawn or more animated than usual
- Tearfulness
- Expressions of hopelessness, helplessness, fear or worthlessness
- Expressions of concern about a student in the class by peers
- Marked changes in eye contact
- Substantial withdrawal from others

#### Physical indicators may include:

- Deterioration in physical appearance or worsening personal hygiene
- Visible marks on the body
- Excessive fatigue
- Visible changes in weight
- Coming to class bleary-eyed, hung over or smelling of alcohol

#### Safety risk indicators may include:

- Written or verbal statements showing a sense of finality or a suicidal tone\*
- Written or verbal communications that indicate fear or abuse by another
- Previous suicide attempts, violent behaviors (directed at others or objects) or preoccupation with death\*
- Statements to the effect that the student is "going away for a long time" or giving away possessions\*
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors

*\* Under state law, any of these indicators require CAPS notification.*

**2. Trust your instincts and take these signs seriously.** If you are concerned about a student, it is important to voice your concerns. Do not question or second-guess your instincts. Contact the Office of the Dean of Students or CAPS immediately to discuss possible courses of action or intervention.

**3. In talking with the student, share your concerns.** Talking about a problem does not make it worse. This is the first step toward resolution. Specifically point out signs you've observed and ask what is wrong.

- "I wanted to talk to you because I notice you've been late recently, you no longer participate in class, and you seem distressed. I'm concerned about you. Would you like to know about some of the confidential resources on Grounds?"

**5. Listen carefully.** Many students will have trouble articulating their difficulties. Be available. Try not to get upset or communicate your own personal judgments. It is not always about having the "right" thing to say, but rather to show care, compassion, and empathy. Sometimes what is not said is as important as what is said.

**6. Assist the student in getting help.** Encourage the student to see a professional at CAPS. Remember that you can always walk a student to CAPS during business hours or call the CAPS after-hours line. You may need to address the student's concerns about counseling:

- "All sessions are confidential and free of charge."
- "If you like, we can call the office now to set up an appointment."
- "Recognizing and being willing to get help for a difficult situation is a sign of strength."

**7. Recognize an emergency situation.** An emergency means that the student's basic safety is jeopardized. This may include severe eating disorders, severe substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, or a serious threat from another person. Remember that you are required by state law to notify CAPS of any student exhibiting suicidal tendencies or behavior. Obvious examples that require such notification are marked (\*) in section 1. If you are worried about imminent harm, stay with the student and call 911 *immediately* and then follow up with CAPS. Police are well-trained in psychiatric emergencies and can take students to the Emergency Room for a full psychiatric consultation immediately.

**9. Respect confidentiality.** Do not discuss the student's name or problem in public areas or with anyone who does not have a direct need to know this information. When talking with the student, avoid making sweeping promises of confidentiality. Students who are suicidal need swift professional intervention. Pledges of absolute confidentiality are not consistent with state law reporting requirements and may make a serious situation more difficult.

**10. Follow up.** Check in with the student to see if the student is receiving adequate help. Often, students feel even more supported by the follow-up expression of concern than the initial contact.

## Resources

Contact any of these offices for a consultation or to make a student referral. They welcome the opportunity to assist you with any student situation, not just an emergency. **CAPS is the only confidential resource listed below.** Link to a [complete list of confidential resources on Grounds](#).

- **Counseling and Psychological Services** (CAPS) – 400 Brandon Avenue  
*M-F daytime on-call clinician* 243-5150  
*After hours & weekend emergency* 297-4261  
Link to [CAPS faculty resources](#)
- **Office of the Dean of Students** 924-7133  
After-hours, on-call staff (cell) 243-3326
- **University Police** (general) 924-7166  
Emergency 911
- Referral to BASICS alcohol intervention (free): [www.virginia.edu/basicsprogram](http://www.virginia.edu/basicsprogram)