A WORD ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is almost always a concern of someone who is considering counseling. The mental health staff is firmly committed to the code of confidentiality and ethics of professional practice; therefore, complete privacy can be assured UNLESS the student is a danger to himself or others. Without permission of the student, mental health records are not available to anyone outside or within the University. Avoid assurances of confidentiality if the issues of suicide or harm to others are present.

Mental Health Services

Recognizing and Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty, Administrators and Staff

Prepared by Washington University Mental Health Services
**Step 1**

**RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS**

Recognizing warning signs does not require expertise! It does, however, require an awareness of what to look for. Generally, warning signs fall into three categories: Academic, Physical/Psychological and Other Factors.

**ACADEMIC:**
- A dramatic drop in academic performance and/or GPA.
- Continued seeking of unusual accommodations (extensions for papers, exams, etc.).
- Papers that have themes of hopelessness, despair or rage.
- Inappropriate or exaggerated behavior, aggressiveness, emotional outbursts, crying.

**PHYSICAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL:**
- Visible, sudden increase or decrease in weight.
- Obvious substance abuse, such as smell of alcohol, slurred speech, bloodshot eyes.
- Marked changes in concentration, motivation or energy level.
- Sudden withdrawal from interactions with faculty, administrators, staff, peers.
- Persistent absence from class, missed appointments.

**OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER:**
- Written or verbal statements that indicate despondency.
- Sudden withdrawal from interactions with faculty, administrators, staff, peers.
- Expressions of concern about a student by peers.
- References to harming oneself or others.
- Your own sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss with the student.
- Expressions of concern about a student by peers.

**Step 2**

**LISTENING TO THE STUDENT**

If students share their concerns with you, it is important simply to listen in an open way. This will allow you to better determine if warning signs are present, in which case you may wish to refer the student to the Mental Health Services at Student Health Services. Try to speak with the student in person if you receive an email or voicemail that suggests the student is in need of further assistance.

Listen patiently and receptively and “be yourself” as much as possible. You will find the conversation less stressful if you are less self-conscious about how to interact with the student.

It is not necessary for you to solve the student’s problem. Do not underestimate the importance of listening to the student. You are providing support when a student can walk away feeling that his or her concerns have been heard and understood. In some cases, you may be the first individual who has really taken the time to listen and understand.

**Step 3**

**EXPRESSING CONCERN AND ENGAGING THE STUDENT**

Explain your concerns and their basis.

Avoid negative comments or implications about character or personality. For example, DO say, “I’ve noticed that you haven’t been yourself lately. Is everything all right?” DON’T say, “I’ve noticed that you’ve been slacking off lately.”

Explain why your observations of the behavior have led you to believe that talking with a counselor may be advisable. DO continue with a specific positive follow-up, such as, “Most of the time you make such valuable contributions in class, and I’ve been missing that recently.” This would be a good point at which to wait silently for a moment, to see if the student offers a response.

**Step 4**

**MAKING A REFERRAL**

WHEN to refer:
In addition to the warning signs listed above, consider referring a student when:
- you feel you have reached the limits of your ability to help the student.
- you identify too closely with the student and/or the problem.
- a student has physical complaints, such as insomnia, headaches, dizziness or stomach ailments. These symptoms may be manifestations of psychological or medical problems.
- a student expresses thoughts of suicide. Ethically, assertive intervention on your part is necessary. Call Student Health Services for consultation and further assistance as soon as possible at (314) 935-6695.

**HOW to refer:**
Remember that if you feel a student could benefit from counseling, you may always contact a member of the counseling staff for consultation at (314) 935-6695 prior to meeting with the student. We are available to help you with any questions you may have regarding how best to approach the student in distress.

The following information may be helpful for making a referral:
- **Assure the student that seeking counseling is an indication of strength, not weakness.**
- **Share your knowledge of the referral source, offering a specific name when possible.** Otherwise, a simple explanation of the function of the office being referred to may alleviate the student’s anxiety about the process.
- **Respect the student’s right to reject the referral suggestion, or to think about it first — UNLESS there has been talk of suicide. Remember that it is not unusual for the student to avoid taking action initially.**
- **In cases that do not involve concerns of suicide, but the student is hesitant to pursue counseling, be prepared to offer other options, such as peer counseling groups on campus, the student’s minister, priest, rabbi, physician or trusted family member.**
- **If the student is ready to accept a referral, the student should schedule a confidential telephone assessment. The telephone assessment can be scheduled online through the SHS portal studenthealth.wustl.edu. The health mental health service coordinator will assist the student in determining the appropriate next step.** If it is an urgent matter and the student is experiencing a crisis, the student should either come directly to SHS, or call 314-935-6695.

If you have immediate concerns about a student’s safety, stay with the student and notify SHS at (314) 935-6695. If the student refuses further assistance, he/she/safety is at risk, contact the Washington University Police Department at (314) 935-5555.