

## How to help a struggling student?

College can be a rich opportunity for intellectual growth and emotional development. Research suggests emotional development is as crucial to success as more conventionally defined forms of intelligence. While college is an exciting time for this development, it also can be a time of increased stress and emotional upheaval. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, others have more challenges with managing pressures, fears, concerns, loneliness or hopelessness. These feelings can cause disruption to academic focus and performance and may result in substance abuse and/or thoughts of suicide. **Faculty and staff** members are in a unique position to identify and help students who are in distress. This may be particularly true for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends and those who are not connected with campus resources. Anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in times of trouble. Your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in helping struggling students reestablish emotional equilibrium, which can have a dramatically positive effect on their academic career and lives.

The following is a list of some behaviors that, when present over a period of time, may suggest that the problems a student is dealing with are more than typical college stressors:

- Marked change in academic performance or behavior
- Appearing overly emotional, agitated, anxious, distracted, or argumentative
- Avoiding contact with you
- Noticeable changes in dress/presentation
- Academic problems or changes in academic performance
- Excessive absences, particularly in light of previous good attendance
- Pattern of tardiness or missed assignments
- An inability to concentrate or indication of memory problems
- Falling asleep in classes and meetings
- Health concerns such as head and body aches, preoccupation with weight and exercise, or stomach problems
- Poor hygiene and grooming; marked weight gain or loss
- Alcohol or other drug abuse as evidenced by scent on clothing or breath, red or swollen dilated eyes, disorientation
- Becoming tearful in class and leaving early, on more than one occasion

## How can I help?

1. Probably the most helpful thing anyone can do is to listen to the student. Utilize active listening and reflections to let the student know you hear him and that you care. For example, you might respond: "Sounds like you're feeling really alone after your roommate transferred." Or to another student: "You're really frustrated by this."
2. Normalize help seeking by saying something like: "A lot of students I know have utilized counseling and found it helpful."
3. Create a conducive environment for a conversation with the student. Talk with the student in private, such as in your office. Remove distractions like cell phones.
4. Don't promise confidentiality until you know what the student has to share. For example, if the student indicates risk for suicide, you will need to involve others.
5. Speak directly about your concerns. People in distress are almost always receptive to an expression of genuine interest, caring, and concern. Be specific about the behaviors you've observed that have caused your concern (e.g., falling grades, drinking too much, crying a lot, withdrawing from friends, statements about suicide, etc.). Clearly stating your observations makes it more difficult for the person to deny that a problem exists and also lets the person know that you care enough to notice.

6. If you refer the student to counseling services, remember that the decision whether or not to accept it rests with the student except in cases of emergency. If the person refuses the idea of therapy, it is usually best to resist pushing. Suggest that the two of you explore this matter again sometime in the near future.

## **What can I tell the student about counseling?**

- Sometimes people have preconceptions about counseling based on stereotypes from the media. Educate the student on the process. Let him know counseling at H-SC Counseling Services is free and voluntary and that he can terminate the process at any time.
- Make sure the student knows that therapy is confidential unless he is a risk to himself or another person. You can let him know that counseling sessions are usually scheduled on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and that a typical session is 45 minutes.
- Let the student know that counselors work hard to understand students, to see things from their point of view, and collaboratively figure out solutions.
- Usually students find comfort in the process after attending a session or two. However, assure the student that he can ask to meet with a different counselor with whom he may feel more at ease if he finds that he does not connect well with the first counselor. This happens sometimes and is natural.
- If the student is really upset, or if you're worried that he might not follow through, suggest that he make an appointment now. If he still hesitates, offer to make the call together now. Some faculty, staff, and friends have walked students directly to Counseling Services when that level of support has been necessary.
- Because people often mistakenly see attending counseling as a sign of weakness, frame the decision to seek it as a mature choice and a healthy way to cope that suggests he is not running away from problems.

After the first meeting with a counselor, follow up by asking how things went during the session. If he is ambivalent about continuing in counseling, some additional encouragement might be helpful. The therapy process can be difficult at the very beginning, and your encouragement may help him get over this initial hurdle.

## **Why haven't I heard from Counseling Services about the student I referred?**

The best way to find out whether a student has sought help as a result of your referral to Counseling Services is to ask the student directly. Due to the confidentiality of psychotherapy services, the psychologists and counselors will not disclose whether or not a student has made an appointment or has been seen by a Counseling staff member unless the student grants explicit, written permission. Sometimes a student may ask his counselor to contact a faculty member, staff person, parent, or other individual. In these cases, the student will sign a release of information form to enable this contact with the counselor.

\*Adapted from Randolph Macon College and Longwood University materials.