Responding to Distressed Behavior at Oregon State University

Faculty and staff can play an extremely important role in referring students for help. You are frequently in a position to first observe signs of distress and, although it’s not always apparent, students typically hold faculty and staff in high regard.

Signs that a student is distressed include:
- excessive class absences
- declining academic performance
- poor emotional control
- excessive moodiness
- sleeping and/or eating habits that change dramatically
- excessive concern about personal health, persistent depression
- talking openly about suicide
- repeatedly engaging in risky behavior.

Helping the Distressed Student
A simple and straightforward expression of concern is, in most cases, the most powerful way of helping a student. Tell them what you have observed and that you are concerned about their well-being and their success. Explain that there are services available on campus (see below) to help students get back on track when life circumstances are getting in the way. In some cases, it may be helpful to offer to walk over to Counseling Services (5th floor, Snell Hall) with the student or to call to let the office know that a student is coming over. Assure the student that counseling services are a confidential place to discuss their concerns.

If you are unsure about whether or how to intervene with a student who appears to be distressed, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this student’s behavior distressingly out of the ordinary?
- Is this beyond my skill level?
- Is the behavior getting worse?
- Does the behavior place anyone at (immediate) risk?
- Am I feeling like I want to talk with someone about my observations and concerns?

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, it is probably a good idea to consult with a colleague. Call University Counseling & Psychological Services (UCPS) and ask to talk with the on-call counselor. If that person is not immediately available and you don’t feel you can wait, ask if someone else is available for consultation. UCPS can help you evaluate the situation and assist you in considering your options for intervention.

If you have answered the question, “Does the behavior place anyone in immediate risk?” in the affirmative and the very serious or threatening incident of distressed behavior occurs in the classroom, academic building, or on the campus, Oregon State Police should be contacted immediately by calling 737-7000.

UCPS
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