

Identifying and Assisting Distressed Students

Indiana State University Student Counseling Center

College is a time of change and transition for students. Because faculty and staff have daily contact with students, you are often the first people on campus to notice student distress. You may become aware of students' struggles with personal problems, significant changes in their behavior or academic performance, or odd speech or actions which make fellow students, faculty, and staff uncomfortable.

Faculty and staff are the eyes and ears of the Student Counseling Center. We need your assistance in identifying troubled students. According to the most recent National College Health Assessment survey¹, 40 percent of college students reported feeling so depressed that it was difficult to function one or more days during the school year. Nearly one in ten students endorsed the item, "seriously considered attempting suicide one or more times during the school year." Depression and anxiety are among the top ten health problems college students identify as interfering with their academic performance.

This brochure will help faculty and staff identify signs of distress in students, provide suggestions on what you can do to help them, and offer advice on making effective referrals that will benefit the student and the campus community.

¹ American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, *Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 55, No. 4, at 205 (Table 17) (Spring 2006).

Tips for Recognizing Distressed Students

Marked Changes in Academic Performance or Behavior

- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration, especially when this represents a change from previous functioning
- Inability to concentrate
- Significant decrease in academic performance
- Unusual or changed pattern of behavior
- Avoiding participation or sudden withdrawal from others
- Dominating discussions
- Excessively anxious when called upon
- Disruptive, verbally aggressive, or physically aggressive behavior
- Exaggerated emotional responses
- Easily agitated

Unusual Behavior or Appearance

- Marked change in mood, motor activity, or speech
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Swollen, red eyes, or bloodshot eyes
- Slurred speech
- Change in personal hygiene or dress
- Appears sad or exhausted
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Sleeping in class
- Strange or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality
- Speech that is disjointed, tangential, fragmented, or not based in reality

References to Suicide, Homicide, or Death

- Talk of helplessness, hopelessness, or despair

- References to suicidal thoughts and feelings, verbally or in written assignments
- Jokes publicly about killing himself/herself
- Suddenly withdrawing from organizations or clubs
- Giving away possessions
- Preoccupation with death
- Preoccupation with violent acts
- Homicidal threats

How You Can Help

Responses to Ambiguous Dangerous Behavior

- Talk to the student in private when you both have time
- Express your concerns in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms
- Listen to the student in a sensitive, non-threatening way
- Avoid judging, evaluating, and criticizing the student
- Clarify costs and benefits of each option for responding to the problem
- Maintain clear and consistent expectations
- Ask if student is considering suicide
- Share your hope that things will improve
- Consult with the Student Counseling Center staff
- Refer the student for help if needed
- Arrange a follow-up meeting with the student

If you choose to approach a student about whom you have concerns or if a student reaches out to you for help for personal problems, be aware that there is no "perfect formula" for interacting with a distressed student. People have different capacities for dealing with others' problems. It is very important to know your personal limits as a helper.

It is also important to be mindful that there are times when effectively

listening, offering encouragement, and empathizing with the student can help the student feel cared about as an individual and more confident in his or her ability to make decisions during stressful times.

Suggestions for Interacting with Distressed Students

- Approach the student respectfully and ask to speak in private when both of you have the time.
- Give the student your undivided attention.
- Listen to the student's thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way.
- If you have initiated contact with the student, express your concern about their behavior in non-judgmental terms. (For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I'm concerned.")
- Communicate that you understand the student by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both content and feelings. (For example, "It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus, and you're feeling left out of things.")
- Behavior that is strange or inappropriate should not be ignored. Comment directly about what you have observed.
- Do not discuss your concerns with other students.
- Call the Student Counseling Center for a consultation.

Responses to Imminently Dangerous Behavior

- Stay calm.
- Call 911 or Public Safety 237-5555.
- Call emergency referral numbers on back of this publication.
- Inform your supervisor.

Referrals

When to Make a Referral

- You are not comfortable in handling the situation.
- The help necessary is not in your area of expertise.
- Personality differences may interfere with your ability to help.
- You know the student well and think you may not be objective enough.
- The student is reluctant to discuss the situation with you.
- The student requests help.
- You see little progress in the student.
- You feel overwhelmed or pressed for time.

How to Make a Referral

- Be honest with the student about the limits of your time, ability, expertise, or objectivity.
- Assure them that many students seek help while in college.
- Let the student call for an appointment from your office. Our number is 237-3939.

Confidentiality of Services

It is very important for faculty and staff to understand that all Student Counseling Center contacts with students are confidential. Information about center contact with students cannot be released except upon a student's written request, in circumstances which would result in clear danger to the individual or others, or as may be required by law. Indiana State University's Student Counseling Center strictly adheres to this policy, which is in accordance with Indiana state law.

If you are wondering about the student's follow-through with the

referral, we recommend that you contact the student directly, as we cannot tell you whether the student has made an appointment or not.

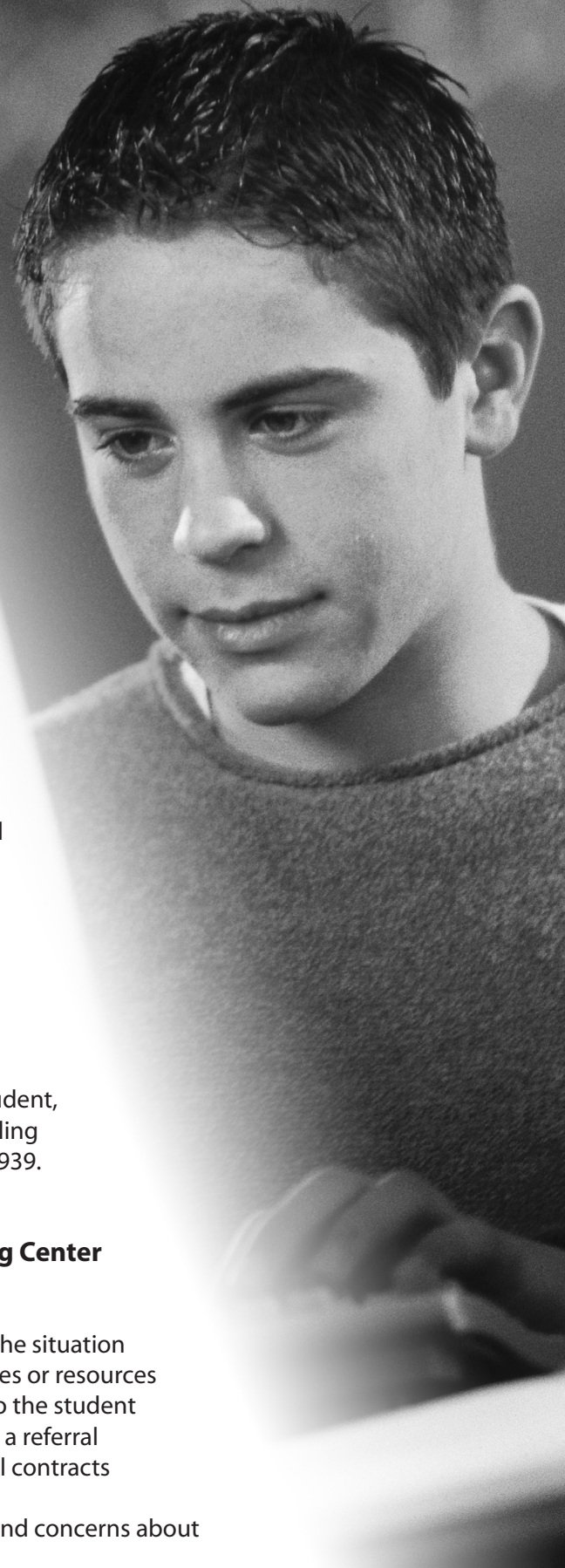
You are welcome to share information regarding a student with center staff. However, our staff must abide by the above guidelines and will not be able to respond without the student's consent.

Consultation Is Available

If you have concerns about a student, contact the ISU Student Counseling Center for consultation at 237-3939.

How the Student Counseling Center Can Help Faculty and Staff

- Assessing the seriousness of the situation
- Suggesting potential responses or resources
- Finding the best way to talk to the student
- Finding the best way to make a referral
- Assisting in writing behavioral contracts regarding student's behavior
- Clarifying your own feelings and concerns about the student or the situation



Student Counseling Center

Currently enrolled ISU students may use the various services offered by the Student Counseling Center:

- Crisis, walk-in counseling
- Individual counseling
- Group counseling
- Couples counseling

Students, faculty, and staff may use the following services offered by the Student Counseling Center:

- Talking to a counselor about your concerns for a student
- Workshops delivered for your class or student organization
- Self help resources on our Web site, www.indstate.edu/cns
- Faculty resources on our Web site, www.indstate.edu/cns

Office Hours

Monday-Thursday:
8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

Friday:
8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Summer Hours

Monday-Friday:
8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Student Counseling Center
Sycamore Center for Wellness and Applied Medicine, third floor
567 North 5th Street
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, IN 47809

Phone: 812-237-3939
Fax: 812-237-3964

www.indstate.edu/cns

After Hours

The Student Counseling Center is closed when the University is closed.

Emergency:
Call Public Safety 237-5555 or 911

Hamilton Center:
812-231-8200 or 800-742-0787
www.hamiltoncenter.org
620 8th Avenue
Terre Haute, IN 47804
(24 hours a day, seven days a week)

Supportive conversation with a trained professional:

Call 800-273-TALK or
800-273-8522
National Suicide Prevention Hotline

Additional Campus Resources

Dean of Students.....	812-237-8111
Public Safety	812-237-5555
Residential Life	812-237-3993 or 888-824-3920
Student Health Center.....	812-237-3883
Student Health Promotion.....	812-237-3939
Student Conduct and Integrity.....	812-237-3800



www.indstate.edu