

# FACULTY/STAFF GUIDE TO HELPING A DISTRESSED STUDENT

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## About the Counseling Center

The Caltech Counseling Center is committed to helping graduate and undergraduate students achieve academic excellence and enjoy a rewarding experience while studying at Caltech. We realize that while most students cope successfully with the challenges these years bring, a number of students find the various pressures of life stressful—sometimes to the point of interfering with their academic studies and emotional well-being. As faculty members, staff, and advisors, you may encounter these distressed students in your offices or classrooms. Many of these students have not sought any psychological help. Thus, your role can be a crucial one in identifying and referring students who are in distress. We hope the following information is useful in helping you with this process.

### Services offered at the Counseling Center

- Individual psychotherapy
- Couples therapy and counseling
- Substance abuse counseling, referrals, and drop-in hours
- Self-exploration, support, and theme-focused short-term group sessions
- Education and training
- Consultation
- Referrals
- Psychiatric evaluation and medication
- Crisis intervention and facilitation of emergency care
- Lending Library

### Contact Information

Young Health Center

1239 Arden Rd.

For appointments call 626-395-8331

[www.counseling.caltech.edu](http://www.counseling.caltech.edu)

Hours of Service:

Monday through Friday - 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

#### After Hours / On-Call Services

For psychological emergencies during evenings, weekends, and Institute holidays, call Security at (626) 395-4701 and ask to be connected to the after-hours crisis intervention service.

### Crisis Assessment Response Team

CAR Team is a group of key campus constituents who work as a team to address potential mental health crises. If you are concerned an individual's emotional state could escalate into crisis for them or others please call any of the following for advice: Caltech Counseling Center ext. 8331; Staff Faculty Consultation Services ext. 8360; Security, Gregg Henderson ext. 4701; Graduate Dean's Office ext. 6346; Undergraduate Deans' Office ext. 6351.

## **Emergencies and Acute Crisis Situations**

Situations require an immediate response when students are in such significant emotional distress that their ability to function is seriously impaired, or when they pose a threat to themselves, others, or property.

### *Signs and Symptoms of a Student in Distress That Require Immediate Attention*

- Threats to harm another person or property
- High levels of irritability, including unruly, aggressive, violent or abrasive behavior
- Impaired speech or garbled, disjointed thoughts
- Bizarre or strange behavior that is obviously inappropriate to the situation; e.g., talking to "invisible" people
- Overtly suicidal comments; e.g. referring to suicide as a current option

### **Whether or not the person of concern is a student, immediately call Campus Security at x5000 or (626) 395-5000 when:**

- There are high levels of irritability, including unruly, aggressive, violent or abrasive behavior.
- There is a serious and imminent threat to harm another person or property.
- You suspect a person has ingested a substance or has engaged in self-harm behavior that is life-threatening.

### **Immediately call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 when:**

- A student makes overtly suicidal comments; e.g., referring to suicide as a current option.
- A student is experiencing impaired speech or garbled, disjointed thoughts, bizarre or strange behavior that is obviously inappropriate to the situation; e.g., talking to "invisible" people.

### **Immediately call the Staff and Faculty Consultation Center at x8360 or (626) 395-8360 when:**

- The psychological emergencies described above do not involve a student.

### *Guidelines for Interacting with Students Who Need Immediate Attention*

#### **The Student Who Poses a Threat to Others or Property, or Who Exhibits High Levels of Irritability, Including Unruly, Aggressive Behavior**

Aggressive or violent behavior in students is rare but may occur when students are extremely frustrated and unable to manage their emotions more appropriately or are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. While the reasons for potentially violent behavior are often emotional, the first priority is to ensure everyone's safety.

#### What to Do:

- Remain calm.
- Know your limits and take action to protect yourself and others.
- Explain clearly what behavior is acceptable and set limits. (ex. "It's difficult to talk with you when you are yelling. Please lower your voice.")
- Call Campus Security at x5000 or (626) 395-5000 immediately to get help.

#### What to Avoid:

- Engaging in a power struggle.
- Touching the student.
- Threatening, daring, taunting, or physically pushing the student.

## **The Student Who is Out of Contact with Reality or Exhibits Bizarre Behavior**

If a student exhibits bizarre behavior (e.g. talking to invisible people, acting very agitated and can't be calmed down), has garbled speech, or seems impaired by disjointed thoughts or ideas that don't make sense, s/he will need immediate help.

### What to Do:

- Have a plan in place before you speak with the student alone that will allow you to obtain assistance from others should you need it; e.g. let another staff person know where you are.
- If the student does not appear to be a threat, shepherd the student away from distractions and speak with him/her in private.
- Talk with the student in a calm voice.
- Listen with warmth, concern, and a desire to understand his/her point of view.
- Respond with understanding and reason.
- Be firm and clear in your communication.
- Share your concern and belief that the student needs help.
- Tell the student that you would like to ask someone to help you help them and call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331.
- If at any time the student becomes threatening call Campus Security at x5000 or (626) 395-5000.

### What to Avoid:

- Arguing or challenging the irrationality of the student's thinking.
- Colluding with his/her fantasy, delusion, or hallucination.
- Dominating, pressuring, or making demands of the student.

## **The Suicidal Student**

If a student expresses thoughts or intentions of harming her/himself, you should take these statements seriously. While it is not uncommon for someone to think of suicide at some point in his/her life, it does indicate that the person needs immediate help. At times, a person helping someone who is thinking of suicide can feel manipulated by the threat of suicide. It is not possible to know with certainty if the person's thoughts of suicide are a manipulation, so take any mention of suicide seriously and provide immediate help by taking the following steps.

### What to Do:

- Talk empathically with the student. Take a non-judgmental approach.
- Listen to what the student has to say and do not shy away from discussing suicide. You will not plant the idea in his/her mind by talking about suicide or asking about the possibility of suicide.
- Recommend s/he seek help from the Counseling Center right away.
- If the student agrees to seek help, suggest s/he call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 from your office.
- Once those arrangements are made, make plans to speak with the student after s/he has seen someone at the Counseling Center to ensure that s/he has sought help.
- It is also helpful to call the Counseling Center yourself to speak with someone about the situation to see if there is more you should do.
- If the student is reluctant, offer to call the Counseling Center to arrange for him/her to be seen immediately.

- If the student refuses, insist that the issue must be addressed, and work out a plan for getting help. This could involve helping the student to meet with someone from the Graduate or Undergraduate Deans' offices, or a member of the Residential Life Staff.
  - If the student refuses to speak with anyone, gently but firmly let the student know that you would like to help them, and in order to do so you need to engage other resources. The goal is to help the student feel like they have some choice in the matter (i.e. who to speak with) but that they will speak with someone who can get them the assistance they need.
  - If the student agrees to see someone other than a psychologist at the Counseling Center, call the Counseling Center to discuss what has occurred and what should happen next.

What to Avoid:

- Minimizing the level of your concern.
- Not taking action.
- Threatening, daring, taunting, or physically engaging the student.

## **Students in Distress but Not in Immediate Danger**

### **Signs and Symptoms of a Student in Distress but Not in Any Immediate Danger:\***

- Excessive procrastination and very poorly prepared work, especially if this is inconsistent with previous work.
- Infrequent class or lab attendance with little or no work completed.
- Excessive avoidance of their research and of meetings with advisors.
- Dependency; e.g., the student who hangs around you, makes excessive appointments to see you during office hours or needs excessive amounts of direction or guidance.
- Inability to make decisions despite your repeated attempts to clarify and encourage.
- Repeated requests for special consideration; e.g., extensions for examinations or not making progress on their research.
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class or lab.
- Normal emotions that are displayed to an extreme degree or for a prolonged period of time; e.g., fearfulness, tearfulness, nervousness.
- Marked changes in personality.
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain.
- Behavior that regularly interferes with the decorum or effective management of your class, lab, or office.
- Use of alcohol or other drugs that leads to academic impairment or represents a change in use for the student; e.g., binge use, coming to class intoxicated or with a hangover.

*\*Not all of these symptoms need be present to indicate a student needs help. It is also true that telling the difference between an individual's personality style and symptoms of a problem can be difficult. The "symptoms" described above are behaviors that lead to problems for the individual and as such, are reasons for concern. If you are unsure as to whether someone's behavior is something to be concerned about, please call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 and we can help you determine if something should be done.*

## **Guidelines for Interacting With Students in Distress but Not in Any Immediate Danger**

What to Do:

- Talk to the student in private.
- Listen carefully.
- Show concern and interest.
- Use open-ended questions, and reflect back the essence of what the student has told you.
- Avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental.
- Consider the Counseling Center as a resource and discuss a referral with the student.
- If the student resists help and you are worried, call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 and ask for the director of the Counseling Services or for any other psychologist and discuss your concerns.
- Involve yourself only as far as you feel comfortable. Extending oneself can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.

## **Other Kinds of Problems**

Within an academic setting, the students who are often viewed as emotionally distressed are depressed, anxious, shy, or struggling with drug or alcohol problems. The following guide provides a brief description and some suggestions for helping these students. There are, of course, other issues students need help with (e.g., eating disorders, adapting to a new culture/environment).

If you have any questions about helping students with any kind of problem, call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331.

### **The Depressed Student**

Students who are depressed may experience a wide range of symptoms including difficulty concentrating, low energy, loss of motivation, loss of interest in things once thought to be pleasurable, depressed mood, feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal, feelings of inadequacy, excessive guilt, change in appetite and/or sleeping patterns, and possibly self-destructive thoughts, including suicide.

#### What to Do:

- Encourage the student to share what s/he is experiencing and feeling.
- Share your concern.
- Listen for suicidal thoughts or intentions, and if you are concerned about the possibility, ask directly whether the student has thoughts or a plan to kill him/herself.
- Recommend that the student seek counseling.

#### What to Avoid:

- Minimizing the situation or discounting the student's feelings, saying only things like "Don't worry." or "It will be better tomorrow."
- Assuming that all students who are depressed are also suicidal. If you are concerned about the possibility, ask.

## **The Anxious or Shy Student**

Students who are anxious appear tense, nervous, self-conscious or uncomfortable. Decision making can be difficult. Unknown and unfamiliar situations, as well as high and unreasonable expectations, can raise a student's apprehension and worry.

### What to Do:

- Be patient.
- Be clear and explicit about your expectations.
- Encourage the student to discuss his/her feelings and thoughts. This alone can relieve a great deal of anxiety.
- Reassure when appropriate.
- Ask the student what s/he has done to try to improve his/her situation.
- If the student hasn't sought counseling, recommend that s/he does so.

### What to Avoid:

- Being judgmental or critical.
- Getting caught up and lost in the student's anxiety.
- Disregarding the student's feelings.

## **The Student with Drug or Alcohol Problems**

Students with a substance-abuse problem may experience difficulty in many areas: academic performance, relationships, and health. Students who are abusing or misusing alcohol or other drugs are often hesitant to seek help, and need specialized, accessible services. If you are concerned that a student may have a drug or alcohol problem, it's important to encourage the student to seek help because of the potential negative effects on this student's overall functioning and emotional well-being.

### What to Do:

- You may call the Counseling Center for a consultation if you are concerned about a student but are uncertain about making a referral, or if a student seems reluctant to seek help.
- Consider assisting the student in making an appointment by calling the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 while the student is in your office.

### What to Avoid:

- Ignoring or minimizing symptoms or signs of a drug or alcohol problem.
- Judging or preaching.
- Assuming the problem is temporary.

## **How to Make a Referral to the Counseling Center**

- Suggest that the student call or come in to make an appointment. Give the Counseling Center phone number at that time: x8331 or (626) 395-8331.
- If the student is hesitant, suggest that you call the receptionist at the Counseling Center for an appointment while the student is in your office. If the situation is an emergency, call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 and tell the receptionist "The student needs an appointment immediately" when you call.
- Speak with a staff member of the Counseling Center before the student is seen to inform her/him of the reasons you are referring the student.
- Sometimes it may be useful or necessary to walk the student over to the Counseling Center for immediate assistance.
- If you are concerned about a student but are uncertain about the appropriateness of a referral, feel free to call the Counseling Center and ask for the Director or another psychologist to discuss your concerns.

## **Lending Library / Resource Materials**

The Caltech Counseling Center has a variety of written materials on topics related to mental health that are available for students' use. A student does not have to be seeing a counselor at the Center to use these materials. These books and pamphlets are kept in a bookcase in the Counseling Center lobby and students may sign them out on the honor system.