

A FACULTY AND STAFF GUIDE TO

# Helping Students in Distress



Eastern Nazarene College  
The Brickley Center Counseling Services

## ***Dear ENC Faculty and Staff:***

Are you concerned about student stress levels?

Have you ever worried about a student's mental health?

Do you want to learn more about resources to support students?

If you answered, "Yes" to any of these questions, you are not alone. More and more ENC faculty and staff are referring students for professional counseling due to personal and academic stress.

## **Overview**

The Spring 2018 American College Health Association annual report surveyed approximately 88,000 students at 140 schools of higher education who expressed concerns about their psychological health, with 25% reporting they 'felt very sad'; 23% 'felt very lonely'; 23% 'felt things were hopeless; 22% 'felt overwhelming anxiety'; 19% 'felt so depressed it was difficult to function'; 16% 'felt exhausted [but not from physical activity]'; and 8% 'seriously considered suicide' in the last 12 months. And more recent studies show these numbers are only rising.

Many college students successfully cope with college life; however, some become overwhelmed. A significant number of students have their education and personal lives disrupted by psychological problems. When psychological difficulties go untreated, the results can be serious and include academic failure and even withdrawal from school. Many psychological problems, even serious disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and posttraumatic stress – have high rates of recovery if appropriate help is received. Unfortunately, many students fail to get the help they need for any number of reasons, including lack of knowledge about the early signs of psychological difficulties, denial, and lack of information about campus resources that can provide help.

## **Your Role**

Faculty and staff play a key role in identifying and responding to distressed students. As a faculty or staff member you often get the first glimpse of students in trouble and may be the first person that students turn to for help. Responding to students, however, can be confusing and overwhelming. Our staff counselors have prepared this guide to assist you in responding to students in distress.

If you wish to consult with a Brickley Center counselor or believe that a student should do so, we welcome the opportunity to help. Please call 617-745-3892 for assistance. We appreciate your role supporting students on campus, and hope that this guide will be useful to you. Thank you for your continued efforts in supporting student health and wellbeing.

The Staff of The Brickley Center's Counseling Services

We thank our colleagues at the Rhode Island School of Design, the University of Maryland College Park as well as the University of Connecticut, as we have adapted some of their material to create this guide.

# FACULTY AND STAFF GUIDE

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Special Note: Students seek out help and support for issues beyond the ones stated in this guide. They also seek out help for bi-polar disorder, eating concerns and body image, substance abuse, difficulties with relationships, trauma, anger management, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder among others. We chose for this guide a sample of issues presented at the Brickley Center as well as those that are most often presented in college counseling services across the country.

## Responding to Student Emergencies

The Brickley Center encourages and will support staff and faculty decisions to respond to students in distress. Students in distress can display behavior that may pose a threat to self or others.

Such behavior may include:

- Suicidal gestures, intentions, or attempts
- Other behavior posing a threat to the student (e.g., active drug abuse, out of touch with reality)
- Threats or aggression directed toward others
- Demonstrated inability to care for oneself.

Campus resources for responding to mental health emergencies are:

For consultation with a mental health clinician, call the Brickley Center at 617-745-3892. The Center is open Monday through Friday, 9:00-12pm and 1:00-5:00pm. During these times, you may also accompany the student to the Center. If a student is in crisis, a clinician will be available for consultation immediately.

If after hours or on weekends, you can contact Campus Security at 617-745-3911.

If the student requires immediate medical attention or hospitalization or is unmanageable (e.g., aggressive, hostile), or if you feel directly threatened by a student or feel others are at risk, do not hesitate to call Campus Security at 617-745-3911.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Read up on page 7 of this guide relative to Quick Tips for Intervening with Emotional Distress.
- Talk directly to the student in a quiet and secure place if possible.
- If necessary, enlist the help of someone else so the student isn't left alone and you aren't left alone with the student.
- Listen attentively and respond in a straightforward and considerate way.
- Alert the Office of Student Development (617-745-3718) and/or The Brickley Center (617-745-3892) as soon as possible.

## Referring a Student to Counseling Services

### WHEN TO REFER

In many cases of student distress, faculty and staff can provide adequate help through empathic, non-judgmental listening, facilitating open discussion of problems, instilling hope, validating and normalizing concerns, conveying acceptance, giving reassurance and offering basic advice. In some cases, however, students may benefit from professional help to overcome problems.

#### **Any of the following signs indicate a student may need counseling:**

- Expresses difficulty concentrating and focusing.
- The student becomes increasingly isolated, unkempt, irritable, or disconnected.
- The student's academic or social performance deteriorates.
- Reports low energy and motivation.
- The student's behavior reflects increased hopelessness or helplessness.
- You find yourself doing ongoing counseling rather than consultation or advising.
- The student remains distressed following repeated attempts by you and others to be helpful.
- The student shows significant and marked changes in behavior and mood.

### HOW TO REFER

- If you are concerned about a student, share your concerns with them utilizing your connection and ask if they would consider talking with a counselor. You can be direct, firm and caring.
- Inform them of the no extra cost, confidential counseling services available on campus.
- If the student is not ready at this time, encourage them to consider the option in the future if things do not improve. Follow up with them in a few days.
- If a student is hesitant, consider offering to call the center to help schedule an appointment for the student or if you are comfortable, you can offer to go to the center with them to talk to the receptionist and to complete an intake form.
- The student can either call 617-745-3892 or ext.3892 to request an intake form or come to the office to receive a form. Usually an appointment can be scheduled within a few days depending on the student's schedule.
- If you perceive the concerns as urgent then encourage them to state that to the receptionist and an appointment will be scheduled as soon as possible.
- If you are concerned that the situation is a mental health emergency (risk of harming themselves or others) then encourage them to come to the Brickley Center with you so that a counselor can assist them. When you arrive, let the Receptionist know that this is an emergency. If after hours of the Brickley Center you can call ENC's Security Office at 617-745-3911.

## How to Consult with Counseling Staff

Please feel free to consult with a counseling staff member if you are concerned about a student. We would be happy to think through how to best help and encourage the student and if necessary to encourage them to seek out counseling services.

You may be aware that a student is seeing a particular counselor and have some concerns that you believe needs to be shared with the counselor. Due to issues of confidentiality the counselor cannot talk with you about your concerns or acknowledge that they know the student without the student's permission. In these situations we would suggest the following:

- Ask the student permission to share concerns with their counselor and have them give their counselor permission to talk with you.
- Talk to a more senior member of the SDO/Student Life staff and consult with them about options and suggestions.
- Request a consultation appointment with another counselor or call another member of the counseling staff to have a general consultation.
- If you are concerned that the situation is a mental health emergency (risk of harming themselves or others) then encourage them to come to the Brickley Center with you so that a counselor can assist them. When you arrive, let the Receptionist know that this is an emergency. If after hours of the Brickley Center you can call ENC's Security Office at 617-745-3911.

## Quick Tips for Intervening with Emotional Distress

There is no single correct way to address issues with a potentially troubled student. As a general rule, you should rely on your strengths and always stay within your comfort zone (NCCC, 2008\*). However, there are some additional general recommendations to keep in mind when intervening:

- 1) Speak directly to the student** when you sense academic or personal distress. Avoid asking his or her friends, roommates, classmates, or other individuals about the student. It is much more effective and less embarrassing or stressful to deal with the student directly.
- 2) Openly acknowledge your awareness** of the student's distress and express your sincere concern about his or her welfare and your genuine willingness to help explore options for getting additional assistance. Let the student know that you care and that you have seen behaviors that concern you.
- 3) Respect the student's privacy by **not discussing your observations about the student in front of others****, whether they are other students or professors. These are not conversations to have in passing, at the student union, or as class wraps up. These are serious issues, so request to see the student in private, and express your concerns directly and honestly.
- 4) Be sure you do not do all the talking.** Listen carefully and try to see the issue from the student's perspective without agreeing or disagreeing.
- 5) Do not ignore strange and inappropriate behavior.** You do not need to resolve the behavior, but you can inform the student that the behavior is distracting and inappropriate. Sometimes students want help but need someone else to initiate the conversation.
- 6) Show receptivity to an alienated student.** It will allow him or her to respond more effectively to your concerns and will enable you to better help the student identify options for action and explore possible consequences. In other words, it helps students to know that someone is on their side and wants to help them even if you cannot ultimately solve their problems.
- 7) Be open about the limits of your ability** and capacity to help.
- 8) Take threats of self-harm or harm to others seriously.** Do not promise to keep threats confidential. When students appear to be in imminent danger of hurting themselves or others, immediately consult the counseling center or campus police (NCCC, 2008).

\* North Carolina Community College System Department of Student Development Services

--adapted from *How to Respond to Signs of Depression In College Students*, The National Center for Student Life, 2015

Need Help? Contact Brickley Center at 617-745-3892 or go to <https://enc.edu/about/additional-services/the-brickley-center/>

## **Awareness of Cultural Differences**

Students from underrepresented groups may perceive greater barriers to obtaining support services, and they may be less likely to seek out help as a result. The fears of stigma or stereotype may be more acute among certain populations. Many cultural factors, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, can add nuance to issues and interventions. Knowing what groups and other resources your institution offers for different student populations is helpful. Ultimately, sincerely communicated support, concern, and understanding can bridge many differences. When you are sensitive to each student's unique needs and help individuals identify the resources that can address those specific needs, the outcomes will generally be more successful (University of Southern Florida, 2010).

## Responding to Emotional Distress

### The Student Who is Anxious

#### Facts About Anxiety

Anxiety can be generalized across a range of situations, or it may be situation-specific (e.g., test anxiety, social anxiety, public speaking anxiety).

#### Symptoms of anxiety include:

- stress
- panic
- avoidance
- fears (losing control, phobias, dying, falling apart)
- excessive worry (ruminations and obsessions)
- sleep or eating problems; trouble with focus and concentration
- depression

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk to the student in private.
- Remain calm.
- Help the student develop an action plan that addresses the main concern.
- Refer the student to the Brickley Center for counseling.

#### AVOID

- Overwhelming the student with information or complicated solutions.
- Arguing with the student's manner of thinking about things.
- Devaluing the information presented.
- Assuming the student will get over the anxiety without treatment

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## Responding to Emotional Distress

### The Student who is Depressed

Facts about Depression:

- Depression is a common mental health problem that varies in severity and duration.
- In its less serious form, depression is a temporary reaction to loss, stress, or life challenges. It can be alleviated through the passage of time and/or the natural healing effects of social supports, daily routines, and simple coping strategies like distraction, a structured daily schedule, and exercise.
- Severe or chronic depression requires professional help.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness
- a deep sense of sadness
- an inability to experience pleasure
- irregular eating and sleeping
- difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision-making
- fatigue, low motivation, and/or social withdrawal

Sometimes depression includes irritation, anxiety and anger.

In its most serious form, depression can be accompanied by self-destructive thoughts and intentions as a way to escape from the emotional pain. Research shows that depression can be highly responsive to both psychotherapy and medication.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk to the student in private.
- Listen carefully and validate the student's feelings and experiences.
- Be supportive and express your concern about the situation.
- Ask the student if he/she has thoughts of suicide.
- Discuss clearly and concisely an action plan, such as having the student immediately call for a counseling appointment.
- Refer the student to the Brickley Center's Counseling Services (617-745-3892).
- Be willing to consider or offer accommodations (e.g., extension on a paper or exam), if appropriate, as a way to alleviate stress and instill hope.

#### AVOID

- Ignoring the student.
- Downplaying the situation.
- Arguing with the student or disputing that the student is feeling depressed.
- Expecting the student to stop feeling depressed without intervention.

Need Help? Contact Brickley Center at 617-745-3892 or go to <https://enc.edu/about/additional-services/the-brickley-center>

## Responding to Emotional Distress

### The Student Who May Be Suicidal

#### Facts About Suicide

- Although suicide is a rare event, it is the second leading cause of death among college students.
- Suicidal states can be associated with major depression, a combination of acute anxiety and depression, post traumatic stress disorder, drug and alcohol abuse, and bipolar disorder.
- People who are suicidal often tell people about their thoughts or give clues to others about their feelings.

Some factors associated with suicide risk are:

- suicidal thoughts
- pessimistic view of the future
- intense feelings of hopelessness, especially when combined with anxiety
- feelings of alienation and isolation
- viewing death as a means of escape from distress
- previous suicide attempts
- personal or family history of depression and/ or suicide
- personal or family history of suicide attempts
- substance abuse
- history of self-injury

**Be confident to ask directly about suicide.** Asking a student if they are suicidal will not put the idea in their head if it isn't there already and will make a secret no longer secret which is the first step to a solution. A student who is suicidal and who confides in someone is often ambivalent about suicide and open to discussion. Students who are at high risk usually have a specific plan, have a means that is lethal (e.g., medication, knife, gun), a time frame in which they will kill themselves and tend to be or feel isolated

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

**Call 617-745-3911 if the student is in immediate danger to themselves.**

- Talk to the student in private.
- Remain calm and take the lead.
- Take a student's disclosure as a serious plea for help ("I hear clearly that you are really considering killing yourself to just end the pain of how badly you are feeling").
- Ask the student directly about feelings and plans ("Are you thinking of killing yourself?" "How have you thought about doing it?").
- Express care and concern, and assure the student that you will help him or her reach a professional ("I believe and trust everything you are saying and that you have not gotten to this point easily. I am highly concerned for you and want you to believe and trust me now that seeking help can make a difference even if it doesn't feel this way right now").
- If the incident occurs during business hours, escort the student to the Brickley Center.
- Call the Center at 617-745-3892 or, after hours, call Campus Security at 617-745-3911.

*(continued)*

**AVOID**

- Minimizing the situation. All threats must be considered potentially lethal.
- Arguing with the student about the merits of living.
- Allowing friends to assume responsibility for the student without getting input from a professional.

## **Campus Resources**

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### **Emergencies:**

Campus Security for on-campus emergencies 617-745-3911

Off campus emergencies Call 911

### **Offices of Student Services**

Career Services 617-745-3892

Center for Academic Success 617-745-3836

Community Life 617-745-3774

Counseling Services 617-745-3892

Health Services 617-745-3892

Multicultural Affairs/Intercultural Center 617-745-3595

Residential Life 617-745-3718

Spiritual Development 617-745-3536

Student Development 617-745-3718