

Distressed Students: A Guide for Dean College Parents

Parents are a Key Factor in identifying when their student may be in distress or crisis.

Possible warning signs of a Student in Distress

Academic

- Deterioration in quality of work
- Missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absence from class or lab
- Continual seeking of unusual accommodations
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented classes or labs
- Inappropriate disruptions

Physical

- Marked changes in behavior and/or appearance
- Excessive fatigue or sleep difficulties
- Visible increase or decrease in weight
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion)
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Irritability, constant anxiety, or tearfulness
- Marked changes in concentration or motivation
- Overtly suicidal thoughts

Other Signs

- Isolation
- Dependency or seeking a lot of your attention
- Direct statements indicating social and academic problems, personal losses, break up, etc.
- Written notes, emails, or verbal statement that has a sense of hopelessness or finality
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously

Emergencies

Emergencies are likely if the student is exhibiting:

- Suicidal behavior, attempts, and/or explicit statements
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Severe obsessive thinking
- Inability to communicate (garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts)
- Confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, or delusions
- Highly disruptive behavior (hostility, aggression, violence)
- Also be aware of the potential for violence, particularly if you notice:
 - Alcohol or drug intoxication
 - Homicidal threats, written or verbal, or attempted **assault**
 - Paranoia, agitation, hostility, aggression, recent acts of violence or property damage
 - Destruction of property or other criminal acts

If you believe there may be an imminent danger of harm to the student or someone else, immediately call Public Safety, at 508-541-1888 or 911.

Consulting with Dean Counseling Services

If you are concerned your student is in distress, please call Dean Counseling Services, 508-541-1838, to consult with any of the Dean Clinicians. We can discuss options with you on how to handle the situation and make arrangements to connect with your student.

A Dean Clinician will help you:

- Assess the situation, its seriousness, and the potential for a referral
- Propose possible interventions
- Explore resources, on and off campus
- Find the best way to make a referral, if appropriate
- Clarify your own feelings about the what is going on and consider ways you can be most effective
- Discuss follow-up concerns after you have spoken with your son or daughter.

If you believe there may be an imminent danger of harm to the student or someone else, immediately call Public Safety, at 508-541-1888 or 911. Call Counseling Services for help in assessing the situation.

Talking with your Child

Talk with your student when there is privacy and both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.

- Be direct, specific, and non-judgmental, and especially when expressing your concern.
- Avoid judging, evaluating, criticizing, even if he/she asks for your opinion.
- Avoid offering advice outside your area of expertise.

Listen carefully and sensitively, to his/her thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening manner.

- Give your child your undivided attention.
- Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what he/she has told you.
- Let your child talk; don't minimize or immediately provide reassurance. Telling them that things aren't that bad, will likely discourage further disclosure of feelings.
- Praise them for being open and honest with you.

Ask specific questions about their level of risk (regarding suicidal thoughts)

Ask if they have thoughts about suicide. Use the word suicide. This does not increase the risk, and most students are relieved to have someone to talk to about this.

- "Do you ever feel so badly that you have thought of suicide?"
- "Do you have a plan?"
- "Do you know when you would do it (today, next week)?"
- "Do you have access to what you would use?"

Never agree to keep suicidal thoughts in confidence.

Suicide can be a scary topic, especially for a parent, but it can be a very serious one that needs attention.

