Recognizing and Intervening with Distressed and Disruptive Students

Training Team
Susan Hart  Director, Counseling & Wellness Center
Debbie Morgette  Coordinator of Judicial Affairs

Purpose
To assist faculty and staff in recognizing and intervening with students in distress and/or who are disruptive.

Contents
- How to identify possible warning signs of distress and disruptive behavior
- How to appropriately respond to students in distress, or who are disruptive
- When and how to refer students who may need assistance
- Understanding cross cultural communication
- Campus resources for assisting and responding to distressed and disruptive students

Your Role
- You often get the first glimpse of students in trouble.
- Knowing what to do for students can be confusing and overwhelming.
- Recognizing the signs and acknowledging your concerns to the student can be critical to successful problem resolution.

Distressed vs. Disruptive
- Distressed students are those experiencing emotional and/or psychological problems which are interfering with their ability to learn.
- Disruptive students are those that make teaching and learning difficult for others in the class because of their behavior.
- Disruptive students may also be distressed.

DISTRESSED STUDENTS
College life can be stressful and a student's mental health can be impacted by happenings on and off campus. Most students experience at least one of the following during their academic career. These situations are mostly the normal ups and downs of life and may not represent a student in distress.

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TOP TEN WARNING SIGNS OF POOR ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE LIFE

1. Isolation. It is not healthy to be uninvolved with others and campus activities. Isolation can breed negative thoughts and feelings and is often an indication of anxiety and depression.

2. Irritability. Feeling angry or antagonistic toward others can be a sign of many different types of problems. When ignored, such feelings can escalate into many other problems.

3. Poor class attendance. Attendance in class ought to be a top priority for students. When it is not, it is often due to other problems such as those listed here.

4. Too much partying. Excessive alcohol and drug use can pervade a student's life and interfere with personal and academic goals.

5. Going home every weekend. The college years are a time to develop independence and autonomy. This cannot be accomplished when a student never really leaves home emotionally, which in turn limits relationship development.

6. Sleeping and eating poorly. When physiological processes such as sleep and appetite are disrupted, these are signs of underlying medical or emotional problems. Also, one cannot function well as a student when the body is not appropriately nurtured.

7. Stress. While some stress is inevitable, prolonged periods of high stress resulting from any of the items in this list are serious warning signs. It means that, sooner or later, the body and emotions will begin to break down.

8. Poor communication skills. Lack of assertiveness or aggressiveness in communications with others will nearly always produce other problems and interfere with many aspects of college life.

9. Relationship problems. All people experience tensions and conflicts in relationships. When most or all relationships are filled with such things it affects other areas of life and can produce anxiety and depression.

10. Poor concentration. Academic life requires students to focus and concentrate. Students who find this difficult because of distractions are likely to experience problems in adjustment to the demands placed upon them.

Stress

Stress is a common human phenomena and a normal part of life as a college student. Overwhelming anxiety is likely to affect an individual's mental, emotional and physical functioning. The source of stress may be related to negative events (e.g., failing a class, break up of a relationship, etc.) and positive events (e.g., graduation, marriage, etc.). People react to stress in different ways but acquiring effective coping strategies is crucial to healthy functioning in life. In the short term, stress can cause disruptions in everyday life (e.g. difficulty studying, head-aches, etc.) but in the long term it can cause significant health problems (e.g., ulcers, depression, etc.). In the college community, about 10 percent of the students may be distressed by depression, acute anxiety, drug or alcohol abuse, or more serious conditions.

Many students realize that stress is interfering with their personal and academic goals and seek counseling on their own. At other times, faculty and staff are first to recognize that undo stress is preventing a student from functioning academically and/or emotionally. You may observe that at certain times of the year, particularly during exams and holidays, students experience increased levels of anxiety. The student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your experience of him/her, could well constitute a nonverbal attempt to draw attention to and offer a "cry for help."

When you notice a student in distress, openly acknowledging to that students that you are aware of the distress she/he is feeling, that you are sincerely concerned about her/his welfare, and that you are
willing to help explore alternatives to assist with the discomfort. Whenever possible, speak directly to the student when you sense that he/she is in academic and/or personal distress.

Depression
If you suspect that a student has a problem with depression, take time to talk with him/her. The student may not even realize that he/she is suffering from depression. Listen to the student and make sure that he/she knows that you care. Help the student to understand that no matter how overwhelming his/her problems seem, help is available.

One of the most serious dangers associated with depression is the possibility of suicide. Don't hesitate to ask students if they have thought about, intend, or have plans to commit suicide. By using this direct approach you won't be giving them new ideas, and you may save a life. If the student admits to feeling suicidal, stay with him/her and seek professional help immediately. This may entail finding a way to get the student to the Emergency Room where she/he can receive a psychological evaluation and possibly be admitted for more intensive treatment. If there doesn't seem to be an acute need to intervene, it would be good to refer the student to a counselor or psychologist for further assessment. You can also provide important support by helping the student with information and referral to campus and community agencies. [National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center]

Warning Signs of Depression (usually seen every day for at least 2 weeks)
- Sadness (with or without crying)
- Anxiety
- Lack of energy and/or motivation
- Temper outbursts and/or violent episodes
- Easily irritated
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Little or no appetite, or eating too often
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities usually enjoyed (including school activities)
- Feelings of fear (even if there is no conscious reason)
- Feelings of extreme guilt or shame
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor memory
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Worsening grades
- Skipping school or classes
- Self-critical remarks
- Feelings of hopelessness to change a situation
- Feelings that things will never get better
- Comment(s) about death or dying
- Writing, drawing, or listening to music about hopelessness, guns, or death
- Threatening suicide (even in a joking manner)
When 4 or more of the above are observed or suspected for more than 2 weeks, an assessment by a mental health professional is advised.

Signs a Student May be Contemplating Suicide
- Threats of suicide – either direct or indirect
- Verbal hints such as “I won’t be around much longer,” “It’s hopeless” or “I won’t see you again.”
- Putting affairs in order (giving away favorite possessions or throwing away important belongings)
- Sudden cheerfulness after a period of depression
- Hallucinating or experiencing bizarre thoughts

When You Are Concerned a Student May Be Suicidal
Ask directly if he/she is considering suicide. Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask the student directly if he/she is has been having thoughts of harming him/herself.

You need not be afraid to ask these questions. You will not be "putting ideas in their heads" by doing so. Most distressed students are relieved to know that someone has noticed and cares.

Ask the student whether he or she has a specific plan and whether she/he has done anything to carry it out. Explain the reasons for your concerns. Listen openly to the student. Tell her/him that you care and that no matter how overwhelming his/her problems seem - help is available. Then, help the student to get professional help.

If the student will not talk with you or you are uncomfortable talking with the student, document the facts about your concerns, and then contact a counselor to collaborate on ways to intervene.

If a student has a detailed plan or appears acutely suicidal and will not talk, he or she could be in immediate danger and it is important to get help right away. Do not leave the student alone, and seek help immediately, getting him/her to a hospital emergency room if necessary.

While it is true that some students appear distressed in order to get attention or relief from responsibility, only a thorough assessment can determine if this is the case. Attention-seekers can have serious problems and be in danger, too.

Intervention
When you notice a distressed student, the ideal way to intervene is with the “three R’s”:
- Recognize when a student appears to be struggling with stressful circumstances.
- Respond to the student by asking questions and expressing concern about observations.
- Refer the student to appropriate resources such as the Counseling & Wellness Center (934-5816).

Collaboration and communication among many segments of the campus is often essential to a successful resolution. The counseling center staff can provide vital direction and assistance in this process.

Avoid Escalation
Distressed students can be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. It is usually not a good idea to "pull rank" and assert authority unless you are certain of
the student’s mental health status. Distressed students need for you to listen and assure them. A reminder about rules can be added at a later time.

Safety First!
Always keep safety in mind as you interact with a distressed student. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call 911 or the UAB Police at 934-3535. After stabilizing the situation, also notify the Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs at 934-4175 or 975-4412.

Know Your Limits
You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can offer. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting them the assistance they need. You can do this by affirming them for confiding in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, trying to identify the problem area, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do.

DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS
- Makes teaching and learning difficult for others due to their behavior.
- Behavior is a departure from what is considered normal or socially appropriate behavior. May include unruliness, restlessness, or antagonistic behavior.

UAB Expectations Regarding Disruptive Behavior
- Faculty/staff should treat students with dignity, understanding and respect.
- Students are expected to treat faculty/staff the same.
- Disruptive student conduct is prohibited by UAB’s Student Rights and Responsibilities and Non-academic Conduct Policy (Direction, pgs. 45-48).

Disruptive Behavior May include:
- Persistently speaking without being recognized
- Interrupting other speakers
- Behavior that distracts the class
- Behavior that interferes with the instructor’s teaching such as cell phone or MP3 player use
- Repetitive tardiness
- Physical threats, harassing behavior or personal insults
- Refusal to comply with direction from faculty or instructional assistants.

Strategies for Preventing and Responding to Disruptive Behavior
- Safety First!
- Maintain a safe distance.
- Identify a route of escape in case you need it.
- If danger seems imminent, to you or to another student, call 911 or the UAB Police at 934-3535.
- After the situation is stabilized, notify the Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs at 934-4175 or 975-4412.
Set Expectations
State expectations for conduct in the syllabus. Examples may include:

- Guidelines for communication
- Use of cell phones and pagers
- Attendance/tardiness policy
- Late assignment policy
- Plagiarism and cheating
- Link to Direction, Non-academic Conduct Policy (pgs. 45-48)
- Disclosure for students with disabilities (Disability Support Services)

Set Clear Consequences
- If certain behaviors are knowingly disruptive, include a statement in your syllabus regarding expectations and the consequences.
- Also, discuss expectations and consequences the first night of class, and at other times if necessary.

Guidelines may include:
- Use of cell phones is prohibited. Students must turn off all cell phones during class. Cell phones that disrupt will be taken up.
- Students are expected to show up on time. Students who are late more than 2 times will have 5 points deducted from their class participation grade.
- Food and drink are not allowed in class.
- If you need a restroom break, please leave quietly and return quickly.

Responding to the Disruptive Student

USE PROGRESSIVE STEPS

Level 1 Response: First Disruptive Behavior
- Self Check- Have you set clear expectations regarding the behaviors you are observing as disruptive? If not, let the class know what you expect of them.
- Consult with a colleague.
- Document what you observe.

Level 2 Response: Address the Disruptive Student
- Maintain confidentiality- discreetly ask the student to meet with you in a confidential environment, such as your office.
- Do not address the student in front of their peers.
- Consider e-mailing the student, or simply writing a note on a paper you return, to suggest a meeting.
- Communicate concern- Let the student know you are concerned about his/her behaviors you have observed in class.
- Describe specific behaviors- use concrete examples of the disruptive behavior.
- Ask for an explanation for the disruptive behavior. If the student indicates a mental health or other disability concern, refer to the Counseling & Wellness Center or Disability Support Services.
• Set clear expectations
• Communicate consequences for not following behavioral expectations
• Follow-up with an e-mail to summarize the conversation.
• Document any kind of communication you have with a student.

**Note: If a behavior is dangerous or threatening, call the police immediately to have the student escorted out of the building.

Level 3 Response: Continued Disruptive Behavior-Increasing Consequences
• Consult with faculty peers and include your Chair. If the student is registered with Disability Support Services, consult with that office.
• Follow through with consequences you set.
• Increase severity of consequences up to and including lower or failing grades and being removed from the class.
• Continuously communicate to the student the consequences of their behavior and the steps you are taking.
• Document your consultations and actions.

Level 4 Response: Involve Judicial Affairs
• If the student’s behavior continues, you may want to involve judicial affairs. You will be asked to provide concrete examples of the student’s disruptive behavior and the interventions you have taken.
• Continue to document.

Check Stigma & Assumptions
• Do not make assumptions about a possible mental health concern or disability.
• You cannot ignore threats, but recognize that most students with mental health concerns are not dangerous.
• Treat students with objectivity and fairly.

Keep Focused on Behavior
Keep your interventions placed on the student’s behavior and your expectations for the classroom.

Make Appropriate Referrals
• Counseling & Wellness: 934-5816
• Judicial Affairs: 934-4175 or 934-4412
• Disability Support Services: dss@uab.edu; 934-4205
• UAB Police: 911 or 934-3535 (emergency); 934-4434 (non-emergency)

Students with Disabilities
• If a student discloses they have a disability, it is important that you address the disruptive behavior as you would any other student.
Students with disabilities are expected to adhere to the same behavior standards as non-disabled peers.
Contact Disability Support Services if you are aware that the student is registered there and you would like support on how to intervene.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
- How many internationals at UAB?
- How many countries are represented at UAB?
- Which three countries make up the largest international populations at UAB?

Cross-Cultural Communication
- Communicating across differences can be a major factor in faculty and staff members’ ability to teach, support and guide students.
- Be mindful of how your communication style might be interpreted by a student from another culture.

When Working with Internationals
Do:
- Respect cultural difference
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Use e-mail to communicate when possible

Don’t:
- Automatically judge a student and their problems based on your cultural norms
- Make assumptions based on a student’s cultural background
- Avoid using English idioms like: she is dressed to kill, or he turns me off
- Talk louder

Cultural Resources
International Scholar & Student Services- 934-1205
UAB Training & Development-Cultural Etiquette courses- www.uab.edu/traindev
UAB English Language & Culture Institute-975-6628

NON-ACADEMIC JUDICIAL AFFAIRS
UAB is a community of scholars and learners, and, therefore, all participants are expected to maintain conduct that:
1) facilitates the institution’s pursuit of its educational objectives;
2) exhibits a regard for the rights of other members of the academic community; and
3) provides safety to property and persons.
Through appropriate due process procedures, disciplinary action will be taken in response to conduct that violates these principles. Non-academic conduct is generally considered to involve actions of students related to standards of behavior that are established for the purpose of maintaining an acceptable level of propriety within the UAB community.

Student Discipline Procedures

Serious consideration should be given to filing a misconduct complaint against any student who, following clear warning, persists in exhibiting disruptive behavior, or who threatens or commits an act of violence or abuse. Students warned of the need to correct disruptive behavior should be held accountable if the behavior continues. Corrective measures are also appropriate when a student commits what you believe to be a single act of serious misconduct. You may initiate formal judicial action by calling the Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs at 975-4412 or the Office of Student Life at 934-4175. You are encouraged to contact our offices for advice in filing a complaint as well.

Initiating a Non-academic Judicial Misconduct Complaint

Anyone can report a complaint alleging a violation of the UAB Code of Conduct. A complaint exists once it is put into writing and received by the Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs. A written complaint may be submitted in any form as long as it includes the following information:

- Full name and, if known, phone number and email address of the student against whom the complaint is filed.
- A detailed description of the misconduct, including date, time and place of the occurrence.
- Names of witnesses, an explanation of what they observed, and how to reach them.
- Supporting documentation/evidence of the misconduct.
- Information concerning any similar previous incidents involving the student against whom the complaint is filed and/or any appropriate documentation of meetings with the student regarding the misconduct.
- Your name and how you may be reached by phone and email.

Initiation of Student Discipline

The Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs initiates formal disciplinary charges against a student. Upon review of a written complaint a determination is made whether there is sufficient information to suggest a Code violation. If so, the following steps are taken:

1. The student is notified in writing of the alleged violation and the opportunity to be made aware of the evidence against him or her.
2. A preliminary hearing for the purpose of rebutting the charges will be scheduled no later than two weeks after a notice of the charge has been sent to the student.
3. The opportunity to admit or deny the alleged violation and request an administrative hearing, or a hearing before a disciplinary committee.
4. The opportunity to bring to the hearing an advisor of his or her choice.
5. If a disciplinary action results in a reprimand, probation, community service or developmental sanctions, a student may appeal in writing to the Vice President of Student Affairs. If a disciplinary action results in suspension, restitution or expulsion, the Vice President of Student Affairs shall review the case and make the final decisions after consultation with the President of the University.

Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
- Protects students against third party access to information contained in their educational records.
- Except as permitted by law, a student must provide written authorization for release of information in their student educational record to a third party. This includes matters of discipline.

Questions about Records Release?
- Contact the Registrar's Office at 934-8152 for information regarding general educational record release practices and policies.
- Contact the Office of Non-academic Judicial Affairs at 975-4412 for information regarding student discipline educational records.

OTHER RESOURCES
- UAB Counseling & Wellness Center 934-5816
- Women’s Center 934-6946
- Campus Counseling Center 934-3779
- UAB Police 911 or 934-3535 (emergency), 934-4434 (non-emergency)
- Andy March, Non-academic Judicial Officer 934-4175
- Disability Support Services 934-4205
- Crisis Center 323-7777
- Rape Response 323-rape (323-7273)
- Student Health Services 934-3580
- Safe Zone 934-4175
- UAB Hospital ER 934-4322