

## **Responding to Students in Distress**

### ***The staff role in responding***

As a university staff member you are in an excellent position to recognize behavioral changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. A student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations could well constitute an inarticulate attempt to draw attention to his or her plight, (i.e., a "cry for help"). Your ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress and courage to acknowledge your concerns directly to the student are often noted by students as the most significant factor in their successful resolution of their problems.

### ***Signs of Distress***

Look for and be aware of any of the following signs of distress:

- Confusion, indecisiveness, inability to concentrate
- Persistent worrying
- Social isolation, depression
- Increased irritability, restlessness
- Bizarre or dangerous behavior, mood swings
- Missed class/assignments, procrastination
- Disheveled appearance
- Change in prior level of functioning, such as sleep patterns, appearance, eating, classroom attendance
- Traumatic change in personal relationships
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse

### ***Your Response***

Involve yourself only as far as you are willing to go. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than time or skill permits. It is important to know the boundaries and limitations of your intervention. If you decide to take action, you should follow these guidelines when approaching a distressed student:

- Request to see the student in private. This may help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.
- Openly acknowledge to the student you are aware of their distress.
- Speak directly and honestly and acknowledge you are sincerely concerned about their welfare and you are willing to help them explore their alternatives.
- Strange or inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. Comment directly on what you have observed.
- Listen carefully to what the student is troubled about and try to see the issue from

his/her point of view without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.

- Attempt to succinctly identify the student's problem or concern and explore alternatives to deal with the problem.
- Refer the student to professional help when appropriate.
- Inform your supervisor