

# Helping Students Succeed

## Referral to Counseling:

Identifying a student who would benefit from being referred to counseling is easy. Making that referral happen by successfully connecting the student in crisis to the first counseling appointment is a bit of an art form. Staff and faculty who are successful in making these referrals do several things.

First, they understand how counseling works on their campus. They know the office hours and phone numbers; the costs of service and which counselor may work best with the student in question. They come across this knowledge by reviewing the counseling website, visiting the center and requesting introduction programs for their classes, workshops, and meetings.

Second, staff and faculty are tenacious about personally getting the student to the first counseling appointment. They encourage without pestering and offer to walk the student over without being evasive. They care and are truly “bought-in” to the idea of being a partner in getting the student to the first appointment.

## Communication with BIT:

Keeping in touch with your campus behavioral intervention team on mental health issues is essential. Campus behavioral intervention teams are designed to help prevent campus violence and potential crisis situations from getting out of control. They are also helpful in assisting in case management and work with the campus conduct office to ensure students follow through with their sanctions.

Building positive communication channels can be a challenge for some campuses. Good communication is built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect for team members. It is also helpful for team members to understand how other departments work. Using tabletop exercises like these case studies and asking the conduct officer to play the role of a counselor or have the police play the role of the residential life staff can further this understanding.

## Referral to Academic Support:

Along with referrals to counseling services and health services, a referral to academic support makes up the trifecta of essential referrals for faculty and staff to have at the ready. These kinds of referrals are easier to make if staff and faculty understand how and where academic services are offered on your campus.

Staff and faculty can help students use tutoring services, encourage them to keep their appointments and develop more effective study skills. Connecting students who may be struggling with academics to support services is crucial for their academic success.

Adapted from *Campus Mental Health Case Studies* by Dr. Brian Van Brunt

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## Residence Life:

It is likely that residential life staff will be the first in place to identify and assist students struggling with mental health issues. The frontline staff forms the backbone of observation and support for residential college students. A well-trained staff of residential advisors and directors are in the best position to respond to students who are struggling.

The staff is also in an excellent position to encourage students who are not yet connected to services such as counseling, academic tutoring, and various student clubs and organizations. Training and support that is put into residential life is the kind of preventative care and support that pays off for students, faculty, and staff alike.

## Follow-up:

Responding to an initial acute emergency involves many departments working together to make sure the student involved is safe. After the acute crisis, it is important to follow up with the student. Some major dangers for students after a mental health crisis are the feelings of abandonment, hopelessness and confusion that follow the crisis. The student may feel better briefly, but then find himself alone and struggling with the knowledge he just experienced an emergency, worried his friends and family, and may now have medical bills and other stresses to handle.

Staff and faculty should follow up with students after a crisis. This involves checking in with them, making sure they attend appointments they agreed to go to and helping prevent a potential re-occurrence of the initial crisis.

## Offering Support:

It's not just for counselors anymore! Faculty and staff should not shy away from offering help and support to students who are struggling. Too often, these folks are hesitant to offer their support and insight to students out of fear they are stepping on the toes of the counseling staff. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Staff and faculty are instrumental in assisting students who are in a mental health crisis. This often involves actively listening to the student's concerns and taking time to offer help and communicate caring. Too often, staff and faculty express concern that they don't know what to say or worry that they aren't a counselor and may be straying too far into an area they don't know enough about. While there are certainly some cautions to be aware of (e.g. not giving advice to stop medication, meeting an excessive number of times with a student), most faculty and staff efforts to help are well received by the student and should be encouraged.

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## **Stress Management:**

Managing stress is essential to the skill set for a college student. Stress comes in its helpful form (eustress) and its less than helpful counterpart (distress). Helpful stress includes things like practicing before a big game or studying a long time before a big test. Distress occurs when students become worried and then overwhelmed about things they cannot change.

The developmental process of adjusting to college involves students learning how to better manage their stress and find ways to take breaks to keep from becoming too overwhelmed. It is helpful for staff and faculty to listen to students who are feeling overwhelmed, and to offer them a chance to vent and feel listened to.

## **Advocacy:**

There comes a time when a student needs someone in his corner. This often requires a staff or faculty member to step out beyond what is required as part of their job description and offer more to a struggling student.

Faculty and staff are successful in advocating for a student when they understand the frustrations the student is facing and find ways to offer support. This support is often used to help the student navigate the bureaucracy and paperwork that occurs in a higher education setting. Students with mental health problems experience a high amount of stress and often lack the skills and patience to work through what's required to obtain special accommodations and help with their problems. Dedicated faculty and staff can support students in these situations (e.g. finding testing for ADA requirements, filling out a late withdrawal appeal, serving as a character support in a judicial hearing). It is these extra efforts from faculty and staff that help students through their crises.

## **Limit Setting:**

It can be a challenge for faculty and staff to set limits with students who are in crisis. These limits, however, are essential to keep students from spiraling further and further out of control. If a student is yelling at other students in class or cutting themselves in the residence halls, these behaviors can only be successfully addressed through the interventions of a caring faculty or staff member.

This requires the faculty or staff to have a willingness to tolerate conflict and approach the student in question. It also requires the faculty or staff to be aware of their own "buttons" and emotional reactions to being challenged or talking with a student whose behavior is unacceptable on a college campus.

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