

How to Assist the Anxious Student

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This piece offers guidelines for assisting a student who is feeling particularly stressed and anxious by the current global, national and local events. It is excerpted from *Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student – A Guide for Staff and Faculty*, which is a complete reference “tool kit” created to help you and your department with difficult situations. (Web address follows.)

Introduction

As a faculty or staff member interacting daily with students, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavior changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. A student’s behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could well constitute a “cry for help.”

Certain signals that distressed students give out may go unnoticed for a variety of reasons. And even when we do notice them, it can be very difficult to intervene. We may feel we are “in over our heads,” or we may have competing concerns, such as other students waiting to see us. It is important to know that it is quite likely that the problem will not go away unless there is an intervention. Part of a good intervention requires knowing how to act during these incidents and what resources to call upon.

Understanding the Anxious Student

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one’s well-being or self-esteem. For some students, the cause of their anxiety will be clear; such as their worries about the current world events. But for others it may be difficult to determine.

Regardless of the cause, one or more of the following symptoms may be experienced: rapid heartbeat, chest pain or discomfort, dizziness, sweating, trembling or shaking, and cold clammy hands. The student may also complain of difficulty concentrating, always being “on edge,” having difficulty making decisions, sleeping problems or being too fearful to take action.

In rare cases, a student may experience a panic attack in which physical symptoms occur spontaneously and intensely in such a way that the student may fear he or she is dying. The following guidelines are appropriate in most cases.

It is helpful to:

- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves some of the pressure.
- Provide reassurance.
- Talk slowly and remain calm.
- Be clear and directive.
- Provide a safe and quiet environment until the symptoms subside.

It is not helpful to:

- Minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting.
- Take responsibility for their emotional state.
- Overwhelm them with information or ideas to “fix” their condition.
- Become anxious or overwhelmed.

Referral for Professional Help

Encourage the student to seek professional help if the anxiety is interfering with their normal routine such as they are unable to study, sleep or relationships have been affected. When you discuss a referral to Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS), it is helpful for that student to hear in a clear and concise manner, your concerns and why you think counseling would be helpful to get help with their anxiety & to learn strategies to cope.

To schedule an appointment, the student should come to the CPS reception desk on the third floor of The Tang Center and request to see a counselor (phone appointments are not available). The student who requests an urgent appointment will be asked to wait and talk with the next available advice counselor. A student who does not request an urgent appointment will be offered an appointment with a counselor in the next few days. The referral of a student who is in crisis is facilitated by a phone call to CPS to alert us regarding the student’s concerns and when he or she will be coming to CPS for an appointment.

- Offer to walk the student to our office if you doubt he or she will follow through.
- If the student seems distressed and is not open to idea of counseling, call CPS to consult with a counselor.

Also see:

Assisting The Emotionally Distressed Student – A Guide for Staff and Faculty. This complete reference “tool kit” offers straightforward advice, techniques and suggestions on how to cope with, intervene, and assist troubled and/or difficult students in or out of the classroom.

This pdf file is available at

www.uhs.berkeley.edu/Students/pdf/CPS/AssistingtheEmotionallyDistressedStudent.pdf.