

HELPING A DISTRESSED FRIEND



Although everyone feels “stressed” at times, excessive stress (i.e., distress) can manifest itself in a number of ways. Although the following list is by no means all-inclusive, you should suspect that a person might be distressed if any of the following apply to them:

- Trouble sleeping
- Vague physical aches and pains and/or lack of energy
- Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Lack of motivation
- Excessive tension or worry
- Restlessness; hyperactivity; pressured speech
- Excessive alcohol or drug use
- Decline in academic performance; drop in class attendance
- Social withdrawal
- Changes in eating patterns
- Unusual or exaggerated response to events (e.g. overly suspicious; overly agitated; easily startled)



Counseling and Psychological Services
2222 Bancroft Way, 3rd Floor (510) 642-9494
uhs.berkeley.edu/counseling

How to help:

Suggestions about what to do for a distressed person for whom you are concerned - or if such a person comes to you.

- **Take the person aside and talk to them in private.**
Try to give the other person your undivided attention. Just a few minutes of listening might enable them to make a decision about what to do.
- **Listen carefully and with sensitivity. Listen in an open minded and nonjudgmental way.**
- **Be honest and direct focusing on observable behaviors, but nonjudgmental.**
Share what you have observed and why it concerns you. For example: “I’ve noticed that you’ve been missing class a lot lately and you aren’t answering your phone or text messages like you used to. I’m worried about you.”
- **Note that distress often comes from conflicting feelings or demands.**
Acknowledge this, and from time to time, paraphrase what the other person is saying. For example: “It sounds like on the one hand, you very much want to please your family but on the other hand, you aren’t sure that what they want for you is what you really want to do.”
- **Make a referral.**
Direct the person to Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). Encourage them to call and make an appointment right then and there. Even better yet: offer to accompany them to CPS.
- **Follow up.**
Let the person know that you’ll be checking back with them later to see how things turned out. Responding in a caring way to a person in distress can help prevent the distressed person’s situation from escalating into a crisis.

Flip over for more information

CRISIS: A situation in which a person's coping mechanisms are no longer working.

By definition, a crisis is a highly unpleasant emotional state.

The nature of a crisis can be highly subjective and personal, and its severity can range from mild to life-threatening. But regardless of its nature, a crisis should always be taken seriously and responded to as swiftly as possible.

When a person is in a state of emotional crisis, you might see or hear the following:

- Extreme agitation or panic
- References to or threats of suicide, or other types of self-harm
- Threats of assault, both verbal and physical
- Highly disruptive behavior:
 - Physical or verbal hostility
 - Violence
 - Destruction of property
- Inability to communicate:
 - Slurred or garbled speech
 - Disjointed thoughts
- Disorientation:
 - Confusion
 - Loss of contact with conventional reality

Protecting your own safety and wellbeing, recognizing the limits of what you can and can't do.

In dealing with a distressed person, your own safety and wellbeing are just as important as that of the person in distress. Recognizing the limits of what you can and can't do to help someone else is a crucial part of this.

What you should do:

Please dial 911 if you ever have an emergency concern about a student's health.

Both the University of California Police Department and the Berkeley Police Department have training in how to handle emergency mental health situations.

Consultation is Key

Call a CPS counselor to discuss the situation and determine next steps at (510) 642-9494. CPS has an after-hours counseling line for non-emergency urgent calls.

Crisis drop-in

Students can be seen without appointments for urgent concerns Monday–Friday from 10am–5pm.

You should not take it upon yourself to approach someone who is highly agitated or violent or decide by yourself what is in the person's best interests.

For your safety - as well as that of others and the person in distress - those decisions should be left to trained professionals.

What you can do:

- **Be genuinely concerned and supportive.**
- **Be honest with yourself** about how much time and effort you can afford to spend in helping.
- **Be aware of your own needs** and seek support for yourself.
- **Maintain and respect healthy boundaries.**

What you can't do:

- **Control how another person is going to respond to you.**
- **Decide for another person whether or not they want help or want to change.**

July 2016

For more information please see our Depression Awareness and Suicide Prevention Training at:
uhs.berkeley.edu/depressiontraining