RECOGNIZING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

As faculty and staff members, you may be the first to notice a student who is experiencing difficulty. You do not have to take on the role of counselor or diagnose a student.

Often, there are indicators that a student is experiencing distress long before a situation escalates to a crisis. To assist our students in maintaining their mental health and maximizing their intellectual growth, it is important to identify difficulties as early as possible. The presence of one of the following indicators alone does not necessarily mean that the student is experiencing severe distress. However, the more indicators you notice, the more likely it is that the student needs help.

We encourage you to speak directly to students when you sense that they are in academic or personal distress. Openly acknowledge that you are aware of their distress, that you are sincerely concerned about their welfare and that you are willing to help them explore their options. Not all students will be receptive to your help. In some cases, and in order to ensure students of concern do not fall in the gaps between observers and interveners, a referral to Student Advocacy and Accountability may be warranted.

**ACADEMIC INDICATORS**

* Repeated absences from class, section, or lab
* Missed assignments, exams, or appointments
* Deterioration in quality or quantity of work
* Extreme disorganization or erratic performance
* Written or artistic expression of unusual violence, morbidity, social isolation, despair, or confusion; essays or papers that focus on suicide or death
* Continual seeking of special provisions (extensions on papers, make- up exams)
* Patterns of perfectionism: e.g., can’t accept themselves if they don’t get an A+
* Overblown or disproportionate response to grades or other evaluations

**BEHAVIORAL & EMOTIONAL INDICATORS**

* Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or loss
* Angry or hostile outbursts, yelling, or aggressive comments
* More withdrawn or more animated than usual
* Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness; crying or tearfulness
* Expressions of severe anxiety or irritability
* Excessively demanding or dependent behavior
* Lack of response to outreach from course staff
* Shakiness, tremors, fidgeting, or pacing

**PHYSICAL INDICATORS**

* Deterioration in physical appearance or personal hygiene
* Excessive fatigue, exhaustion; falling asleep in class repeatedly
* Visible changes in weight; statements about change in appetite or sleep
* Noticeable cuts, bruises, or burns
* Frequent or chronic illness
* Disorganized speech, rapid or slurred speech, confusion
* Unusual inability to make eye contact
* Coming to class bleary-eyed or smelling of alcohol

*RECOGNIZING Students in Distress*

**OTHER FACTORS**

* Concern about a student by his/her peers
* A hunch or gut-level reaction that something is wrong

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN TO ACT?**

You may notice one indicator and decide that something is clearly wrong. Or you may have a “gut-level feeling” that something is amiss. A simple check-in with the student may help you get a better sense of his or her situation.

It’s possible that any one indicator, by itself, may simply mean that a student is having an “off” day. However, any one serious sign (e.g., a student writes a paper expressing hopelessness and thoughts of suicide) or a cluster of smaller signs (e.g., emotional outbursts, repeated absences, and noticeable cuts on the arm) indicates a need to take action on behalf of the student.

*\*\*When in doubt, if any personal information the student tells you raises red flags, consult with the Student Advocacy and Accountability team.* [*https://webapps.mccneb.edu/bcat/*](https://webapps.mccneb.edu/bcat/)