

HOW TO HELP A STUDENT IN DISTRESS



CAMPUS WELLNESS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

As a member of Concordia University faculty or staff, you are in contact with students every day. You will at some point witness a student in distress and may wonder how to help them. Faculty and staff are a critical part of the “web of support” that can identify and help students who are suffering. This document from Concordia University Health Services will:

- Help you identify the student in distress;
- Offer suggestions on how to support the student;
- Help you link the student to resources at Concordia

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: SIGNS OF DISTRESS

Every person experiences and exhibits stress in their own unique way. Signs that a student may be dealing with a serious personal problem include:

- Talking about distress
- Academic difficulties
- Changes in personality
- Changes in mood/emotions
- Changes in behaviours
- Talking about suicide
- Relationship difficulties
- Changes in personal hygiene, physical appearance or health
- Problems with drugs and alcohol

HOW TO APPROACH THE STUDENT

I. Be Prepared

Familiarize yourself with the various services available at Concordia. Direct links to the following services are available at: <http://www.concordia.ca/students/health/topics/MentalHealth/how-to-help-a-student-in-distress.html>

- Physical health, mental health and health promotion services through **Health Services**;
- Personal counseling and workshops through **Counselling and Psychological Services**;
- Learning specialists, workshops, and English/French conversation through the **Student Success Center**;
- Workshops, discussion groups, pastoral counselling, personal/spiritual support and development, the

Emergency Food Fund, social gatherings, and the Interfaith Ambassadors Program through the **Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre**;

- Problem-solving and conflict resolution through the **Ombuds Office**;
- **Student Parents Center** through the Dean of Students Office;
- Financial assistance through the **Financial Aid and Awards Office**;
- Practical assistance through the **Access Center for Students with Disabilities**, the **Aboriginal Student Resource Centre**, and the **International Students Office**;
- Support for those who have been affected by sexual violence and/or harassment through the **Sexual Assault Resource Centre**;
- Services (including peer support and advocacy) and resources to promote gender equality and empowerment through the **Centre for Gender Advocacy**;
- Assistance in identifying and managing disruptive behaviours through the **Office of Rights and Responsibilities**. This is a resource for all members of the Concordia community; if you have a problem related to someone’s behaviour on campus, and you are not sure how to deal with it, the Advisor can help you evaluate your options.
- Useful services to help with common student challenges through the **Concordia Student Union**, including a Housing and Job Bank, Advocacy Centre and Legal Information Clinic.
- Students who are enrolled in the student health plan (studentcare.ca) have access to “**Empower Me**”, which allows them to connect with qualified counsellors, consultants, and life coaches for a variety of issues. Sessions are delivered in person, by telephone, by video-counselling, or by e-counselling. 1-844-741-6389, 24/7.

2. Express Your Concern

- Invite the student to talk with you in a quiet location one-on-one, like your office or after class.
- Be specific. Identify particular behaviors that you are concerned about. For example, say “I have noticed that you have missed three classes in the past month, and I’m concerned,” rather than “Why have you missed so many classes lately?”
- Many students are hesitant to talk with a counselor or mental health professional because they believe it might make a bad impression, it might affect their reputation, or it is unacceptable to talk to people outside the family about personal feelings. Let the student know that talking with a mental health professional is simply another way to improve their academic performance, enhance their peace of mind, and achieve their goals, akin to attending tutorials or accessing the library.
- Listen carefully and in a nonjudgmental manner. Demonstrate empathy and caring, but avoid showing shock or dismay at what the student reveals. This may cause the student to withdraw if they feel judged, and prevent them from receiving the help they need.

3. Provide Information and Referral

Inform the student about the various services that are available to help them at Concordia University. If the student refuses a referral, reinforce with them that you are available to follow up on the offer of referral at a later date.

Do not expect that the student will immediately reveal the issues that are concerning them, or that they will discuss all of the different issues that are troubling them with you. However, your concern will let the student know that there are people who care and are willing to help. Remember, your goal is not to solve the student’s problems; it is to give them hope, letting them know that things can get better and that there are many resources available to help them through this difficult time.

4. Follow up

If possible, arrange a follow-up meeting with the student to demonstrate your support and commitment to helping them. If the student accessed the resources you suggested, you can ask about the experience (if they

seem interested in sharing this). If they did not get in touch with the resources, continue to encourage them and share your confident expectation that things can get better.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

You may be interested in learning more about how to help students in distress. A helpful resource is a guide from the University of Connecticut called “Helping Students in Distress” that provides some specific phrases and practical hints to help you navigate these challenging interactions: (<https://production.wordpress.uconn.edu/stamfordstudentlife/wp-content/uploads/sites/418/2013/12/HelpingStudentsInDistressGuide.pdf>).

WHAT IF IT IS AN EMERGENCY?

If you believe the student is in immediate danger of hurting them-self or another person, you must act immediately to help the person, and those around them. You may witness:

- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g. aggression);
- An inability to communicate clearly (e.g. disjointed or rambling speech), or;
- A loss of contact with reality (e.g. seeing/hearing things which others cannot; beliefs or actions that are not based in reality).

Call Security at 514-848-3717, who will contact 911 for you. Offer the student a safe, quiet place to wait.

FINALLY...

Faculty and staff members are in a special position to identify and help students who are in distress. A person who is seen as trustworthy and willing to listen can become a significant resource to the student in difficulty. When you show your concern, caring, and support to a student who is suffering, you can play an important role in the final outcome of the student’s experience. By linking the student to resources at Concordia University, they can get the help they need to cope with the situation, experience healing, and succeed in their academic careers and other life goals.

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Health Services

SGW CAMPUS
1550 de Maisonneuve W., GM-200
514-848-2424 ext. 3565

LOYOLA CAMPUS
7141 Sherbrooke St. W., AD 131
514-848-2424 ext. 3575

concordia.ca/health

Counselling and Psychological Services

SGW CAMPUS
1550 de Maisonneuve W., GM-300
514-848-2424 ext. 3545

LOYOLA CAMPUS
7141 Sherbrooke St. W., AD 103
514-848-2424 ext. 3555

concordia.ca/counselling

Access Center for Students with Disabilities

SGW CAMPUS
1550 de Maisonneuve W., GM-300
514-848-2424 ext. 3525

concordia.ca/access