

## Identifying and Assisting a Student in Distress

### Do you suspect a student is in distress?

- Has the student reported significant problems to you or sought advice?
- Have you noticed signs of distress or significant changes in behaviour or mood?
- Is the student exhibiting behaviour that is erratic, aggressive, or extremely emotional?
- Have staff, faculty members, or students expressed concern to you about this student?

### The situation is urgent when:

- **A person makes direct or indirect references to suicide**
  - All references to committing suicide must be taken very seriously
  - Indirect references can include:
    - Expressed feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or helplessness
    - Feelings that family or friends would be better off without them
    - Unreasonable feelings of guilt
- **There is a risk of harm to others**

Threats to others and disruptive behaviour includes:

  - Verbal and non-verbal threats
  - Intimidating behaviour
  - Violent acts (to people or property)

### Urgent – What to do?

If the student is on campus, call Protection Services.

**613-562-5411**

### Non-Urgent – What to do?

- Ask if the person needs help. Listen, show your concern, be non-judgemental.
- Ask questions that will help you determine what kind of assistance would be appropriate.
- Suggest the student contact SASS Counselling and Coaching Service for information, resources or a referral:

**613-562-5200, 100 Marie Curie (4th floor)**

- If the student is willing to receive help but hesitant to call SASS, offer to make the referral or accompany the student.
- If the student is unwilling to call, respect the student's decision and encourage them to stay in touch with you.
- Report the incident to Protection Services and advise the appropriate vice-dean or your supervisor.



# Emergency services

Situation	On campus	Off campus
<b>Suicide – <i>Threat or attempt</i></b>	Protection Services <b>613-562-5411 (24/7)</b>	Emergency <b>911</b>
	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	
<b>Suicide – <i>Suicidal thoughts</i></b>	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	Crisis line (24/7) <i>Within Ottawa</i> <b>613-722-6914</b> <i>Outside Ottawa</i> <b>1-866-996-0991</b>
	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	
<b>Emotional crisis</b>	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	Crisis line (24/7) <i>Within Ottawa</i> <b>613-722-6914</b> <i>Outside Ottawa</i> <b>1-866-996-0991</b>
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	
	Peer Support Phone line (7 p.m. to 1 a.m.) <b>613-562-5604</b>	
<b>Sexual assault</b>	Protection Services <b>613-562- 5411 (24/7)</b>	Emergency <b>911</b>
	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	Ottawa Hospital Assault Treatment Program <b>613-738-3762</b>
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre <b>613-562-2333</b>
		Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women <a href="http://www.octevaw-cocvff.ca">www.octevaw-cocvff.ca</a>

		Emergency <b>911</b>
	Protection Services <b>613-562-5411</b> (24/7)	Assaulted Women's Helpline <b>1-866-863-0511</b>
<b>Physical assault / Domestic abuse</b>	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women <a href="http://www.octevaw-cocvff.ca">www.octevaw-cocvff.ca</a>
	Protection Services <b>613-562-5411</b> (24/7)	
<b>Drug and Alcohol</b>	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	Drug & Alcohol Helpline <b>1-800-565-8603</b> <a href="http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca">www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca</a>
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	
	Protection Services <b>613-562-5411</b> (24/7)	
<b>Problem Gambling</b>	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	Ontario Problem Gambling <b>1-800-230-3505</b> <a href="http://www.problemgamblinghelpline.ca">www.problemgamblinghelpline.ca</a>
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	
	Protection Services <b>613-562-5411</b> (24/7)	
<b>Mental Health</b>	Counselling and Coaching Service <b>613-562-5200</b>	Good2Talk <b>1-866-925-5454</b> <a href="http://www.good2talk.ca">www.good2talk.ca</a>
	Health Services Clinic <b>613-564-3950</b>	

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# Identifying and Assisting Students in Distress

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A Guide for Faculty and  
Staff Members

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Student Academic Success Service



uOttawa

Service d'appui au succès scolaire  
Student Academic Success Service

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## IDENTIFYING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

The University of Ottawa is committed to ensuring the health and well-being of its students and understands the importance of promoting good mental health in enabling students to achieve their full academic potential.

Faculty and staff members are often in a position to identify and assist those students who may be experiencing emotional distress. This document is designed to assist the University community in recognizing the signs of emotional distress and to provide its members with guidelines on how to respond appropriately.

### HOW TO IDENTIFY A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

#### *Signs to look for include:*

- *Stated need for help*
- *Changes in behaviour*  
(Changes in usual behaviour may indicate psychological distress.)  
Examples include:
  - Withdrawal from social interactions or academic work
  - Disruptive behaviour, unexplained outbursts or irritability
  - Noticeably rapid or slow speech
- *Marked changes in mood*  
Examples include:
  - Change in mood from one class to the next
  - Expressed feelings of hopelessness or despair
- *Obvious changes in appearance*  
Examples include:
  - Noticeable weight gain or loss
  - Disheveled appearance, poor hygiene
  - Absence of facial expression
- *Difficulty communicating or apparent distortion of reality*  
(This may indicate a severe psychological problem that requires assessment and treatment of the student by a professional.)  
Examples include:
  - Irrational conversations
  - Disturbing material in academic assignments
  - Suspiciousness, a constant feeling of being watched
- *Significant changes in identity or relationships*  
Examples include:
  - Changes in family circumstances or a break-up
  - Illness or death of a family member or close friend
- *Health concerns*  
(Health issues may impede a student's progress and increase stress levels.)  
Examples include:
  - Long-term illnesses
  - Frequent short-term illnesses
  - Disordered eating

- *Serious academic concerns*  
Examples include:
  - Missed, late or incomplete assignments
  - Disorganized presentation of information
  - Plagiarism or use of unauthorized aids
- *Violence*  
Examples include:
  - Recent experience involving assault or abuse
  - Violence towards self or others

## WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT IS IN DISTRESS

*If you are concerned about a student and you are unsure, uncomfortable or unable to intervene:*

- **Contact** appropriate office before acting (Protection Services or SASS Counselling and Coaching).
- **Notify** your supervisor of your concerns.

*If you decide to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student reaches out to you for help:*

1. **Listen** carefully as the student describes the situation.
2. **Ask** questions to clarify whether you understand the student's specific needs.
3. **Acknowledge** and express concern.
4. **Offer hope** and reassure the student that things can get better.
5. **Discuss options** and **resources** available and suggest that the student make an appointment with SASS Counselling and Coaching or with Health Services.
6. **Give printed information** from the website or write out the name and phone number of the service(s).
7. **Arrange a follow-up** with the student to show you care and determine whether the referral was effective.

*If the student appears hesitant or reluctant to make use of services:*

- Offer to contact the service yourself while the student is still in your office.
- Offer to sit with the student during the initial phone call.
- Offer to accompany the student to the appointment, if appropriate, and if you're comfortable doing so.

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Those of us who encounter students in distress can experience a range of emotions based on our own unique experiences and attitudes towards mental health. We can feel a deep sense of satisfaction in trying to help or we can experience frustration and anxiety. We may sometimes even feel threatened by events as they unfold.

If you experience exhaustion, sadness, anxiety, trouble sleeping or irritability, consider seeking support and counselling. Free confidential assistance is available through the University of Ottawa Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Information can be found at:

[www.shepellfgiservices.com/app/itsite/index.aspx?ipclient=111088&ippwd=Univ1110](http://www.shepellfgiservices.com/app/itsite/index.aspx?ipclient=111088&ippwd=Univ1110)

## CONFIDENTIALITY

When inviting students to discuss their concerns with you, it's important to be clear about the limits of your ability to keep information confidential. Even if a student insists, never promise absolute confidentiality. Rather, let them know that you'll respect their privacy to the best of your ability but that certain situations require you to inform others about the situation.

You should not withhold information about a student if:

- You have concerns about the student's physical safety.
- You have concerns about the safety of others.
- You believe the student is not competent enough to care for himself or herself.
- You have concerns about the neglect or abuse of a minor.
- The student tells you something that involves an academic or criminal offence.
- You are concerned about a situation involving a minor student (under the age of 18).

The University of Ottawa is committed to upholding the principles of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA).

In situations where a student engages in behaviour that places the student or others at risk, the University is committed to taking steps to protect the student as well as the larger community. If you're concerned about a student, it's important that you communicate your concerns to the appropriate office or service, such as **Protection Services**, so staff can use their expertise and training to evaluate the situation and make recommendations to any other professionals or services.