

# How to Help Distressed Students: A Handout for Georgetown Law Faculty

These recommendations and resources are provided by Dean of Students Mitch Bailin and the Georgetown Counseling and Psychiatric Service (CAPS).

## IMPORTANT CONTACTS

### **Consultation about and Referrals for Distressed Students:**

- Mitch Bailin, Dean of Students: W 202-662-4066; H 703-683-1091; Mobile 703-967-5594
- Georgetown Counseling and Psychiatric Service (CAPS): (202)687-6985 (M-F 9-5); 202-444-PAGE (after hours); <http://caps.georgetown.edu>

### **Emergencies:**

- Law Center Department of Public Safety (will also contact Senior Administrator on Call--SAOC): 202-662-9325
- Mitch Bailin, Dean of Students: W 202-662-4066; H 703-683-1091; Mobile 703-967-5594
- CAPS on-call hotline: (202) 444-PAGE, available 24/7

## WHY FACULTY ARE SO IMPORTANT

Faculty members are in an important position to identify and help students who are in crisis. You are often the first to witness early signs of a student's distress, whether in the classroom or in your office hours. This may be particularly true for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends. Many of these students have not sought counseling and may be unaware of the many services available to them on and off campus. Because you are seen as respected, caring, and trustworthy, students are apt to turn to you, especially if they perceive you as available and willing to listen. Your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in saving a student's academic career or even her life.

## POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS OF A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

### **Academic**

- Repeated missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absence from class
- Continual requests for unusual accommodations
- Writing or comments that have themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, despair, death
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented classes
- Inappropriate disruptions in class, or incoherent or rambling comments unrelated to the subject under discussion
- Marked deterioration in quality of work

### **Physical**

- Marked changes in behavior, hygiene or appearance
- Excessive fatigue or sleep difficulties
- Visible increase or decrease in weight
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion)
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Irritability, constant anxiety, or tearfulness
- Marked changes in concentration or motivation
- Overtly suicidal thoughts

### **Other Signs**

- Isolation
- Dependency or seeking a lot of your attention
- Direct statements indicating family problems, personal losses, break up, etc.
- Expressions of concern about the student by peers
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss

## **A RECOMMENDED FIRST STEP: CONSULTING WITH THE DEAN OF STUDENTS**

If you are concerned about a student's wellbeing, you are encouraged to contact Mitch Bailin at 202-662-4066, prior to or after meeting with the student, to discuss various options on how to handle the situation. You also should feel free to refer the student to Mitch, who will take the lead in coordinating resources and facilitating counseling if appropriate. The concerns need not rise to the level of urgency for a consultation to be useful. When you refer a student to Mitch, please emphasize that the student is not in trouble and that the Dean of Students has no disciplinary role or authority at the Law Center. This is a common misconception students hold from their undergraduate years.

### **EMERGENCIES**

If you are concerned that a student is in extreme crisis, and may be at risk of imminent harm to herself or others, you should call our Department of Public Safety (202-662-9325) and the Dean of Students immediately. The Dean of Students or the Senior Administrator on Call (who will be called immediately by DPS) can arrange to accompany the student to the hospital or the counseling center. You also should feel free to call the on-call psychiatrist at CAPS at (202) 444-PAGE for support and consultation.

The situation may be urgent if the student is exhibiting:

- Suicidal statements or attempts
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Severe obsessive thinking
- Inability to communicate (garbled speech, disjointed thoughts), confusion, hallucinations, or delusions
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g. hostility, aggression, violence)

Also be aware of the **potential for violence**, particularly if you notice:

- Alcohol or drug intoxication
- Homicidal threats (written or verbal) or attempted assault
- Paranoia, agitation, hostility, aggression, recent acts of violence or property damage
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Don't provoke violence. Be non-threatening and non-confrontational; speak in a calm and reassuring manner; avoid touching the student. And don't deal with the situation alone.

### **ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH TROUBLED STUDENTS: TALK, LISTEN, ASK, REFER**

**Talk** with the student in private, when both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.

- Be direct, specific, and non-judgmental, and especially when expressing your concern.
- Avoid judging, evaluating, criticizing, even if the student asks for your opinion.
- Know your limits: Avoid offering advice outside your area of expertise or engaging in a pseudo-therapeutic relationship. And never agree to keep suicidal thoughts, threats, or other troubling communications in confidence.

**Listen** sensitively to the student's thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening manner.

- Give the student your undivided attention.
- Let the student talk; don't minimize or immediately provide reassurance. Telling them that things aren't that bad could discourage further disclosure, and may increase his/her sense of guilt or hopelessness.
- Eventually emphasize that help is available.

**Ask** specifically about the student's level of risk if you have reason to be concerned.

- Ask if they have thoughts about suicide. Use the word suicide. This does not increase the risk, and most students are relieved to have someone to talk to about this. You CAN ask "Do you ever feel so badly that you have thought of suicide?" "Do you have a plan?" "Do you know when you would do it (today, next week)?" "Do you have access to what you would use?"
- Asking the above questions will allow you to determine if the student is in immediate danger, and to get help if needed. If the student is or may be in immediate danger, consider this an emergency.
- If you feel the student isn't in immediate danger, acknowledge the pain as legitimate and offer to work together to get help. Make sure you follow through.

**Refer** the student to the Dean of Students and/or CAPS:

- Indicate that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage rather than a sign of weakness or failure, and is also a sign of good judgment and the appropriate use of resources.
- Let them know that help is available: give the student the Dean of Students and CAPS contact numbers.