Responding to Students in Emotional Distress
A Guide for Faculty

Student Life Committee of the Faculty Senate
Division of Student Affairs

This brochure is meant to assist faculty when one of their students exhibits signs of emotional distress or a mental health problem.
If we educate only our students’ minds,  
We have not truly educated them.  
—Bernard Coughlin, S.J.

About this brochure

This brochure has been jointly developed for faculty by the Division of Student Affairs and the Student Life Committee of the Faculty Senate. It is meant to assist faculty when one of their students exhibits signs of emotional distress or a mental health problem.

Faculty are often the first to recognize that a student is not functioning well academically or emotionally. It can be difficult to know how best to respond. A brief consultation with a professional staff member at Fordham’s Counseling Center (CPS) or the dean of students can help you sort out the relevant issues, explore your options and identify other resources on campus. Together, we can create an effective safety net for our students.

Faculty are often concerned that disclosing students’ personal information to counselors or deans constitutes a breach of confidentiality. According to Fordham University’s Office of Legal Counsel, this is not true.

“It is both morally sound and legally prudent for faculty who recognize a student is in emotional distress to offer the student some form of assistance that relates to their authority as educators concerned about their students’ physical and emotional well-being. Accordingly, faculty, even those with specialized training in relevant fields, should make prompt referrals to the dean of students if they suspect a student is in emotional distress or threatening harm to him/herself or others.”

This guide provides basic information about risk factors and symptoms associated with emotional distress, tips on how to approach students and resources available on campus. Please note that a guide can only mention a limited number of important items. Therefore, it is important to ‘trust your gut’ and seek consultation if you suspect that a student is struggling emotionally. In non-emergencies, you may contact the Counseling Center or dean of students. For information about mental health services available on campus, please call Fordham’s Counseling Center (CPS) and ask to speak with a staff psychologist, or visit the CPS website at www.fordham.edu/cps. At Fordham, help is just a phone call away 24 hours a day.
What to do in an EMERGENCY

If you are with the student, **DO NOT** leave the student alone or let him/her leave. Contact us immediately.

**Contact the dean of students** (during business hours) or the security supervisor (after hours or on weekends) and clearly state that you need to report a **MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY**. The dean of students or a member of the staff will respond directly to you. You may also walk the student to the offices below. Staff in these offices are trained to find a professional who will assist immediately. Faculty members should follow these procedures even if the student’s behaviors are ambiguous.

How to Contact Us

**During business hours:**
**Call the Office of the Dean of Students/Student Affairs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Rose Hill</th>
<th>Lincoln Center</th>
<th>Westchester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>9 a.m. - 5 p.m.</td>
<td>10 a.m. - 6 p.m.</td>
<td>10 a.m. - 6 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>(718) 817-4755</td>
<td>(212) 636-6250</td>
<td>(212) 636-6250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>McGinley Center 242</td>
<td>408 LL</td>
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**After hours and on weekends:**
**Call University Security** (if forwarded to front desk, ask to speak to the security supervisor).

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<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>(718) 817-4078</td>
<td>(212) 636-6076</td>
<td>(914) 367-3001/3333</td>
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Please know that the dean of students or staff members may share information with the appropriate school, class dean or college. For more information, visit: [www.fordham.edu/mentalhealthemergency](http://www.fordham.edu/mentalhealthemergency).

In non-emergency situations, you may call or walk students to the Counseling Center. Counselors are just a phone call away.
What you need to know

College is a time of growth and change; students encounter many firsts as they shed familiar supports and assume greater responsibilities. While most students can manage the demands of college life effectively, for some the challenges prove overwhelming and can impair their social, emotional and academic functioning.

While faculty members are often willing to assist a student in emotional distress, they often question whether the situation warrants intervention and the manner in which to approach the student. This guide is designed to help faculty recognize these students and respond effectively. Faculty members are also encouraged to consult the professional staff listed within this guide.

About Fordham’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS):

Professional staff at Fordham's Counseling Center (CPS) are available to assist you with student mental health concerns. CPS staff can offer guidance on a range of issues including how to approach a student in emotional distress, how to engage a resistant student and how to recognize when a student needs immediate help.

To speak with a CPS staff psychologist, just call CPS at (718) 817-3725 at Rose Hill or (212) 636-6225 at Lincoln Center. If the matter is urgent, let the staff member know that you need to speak with a staff psychologist immediately. You may also visit the CPS homepage at www.fordham.edu/counseling, where you will find more information about CPS services and other mental health resources such as anonymous screens for depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

The following warning signs may reflect psychological distress. The situation may be serious when academic or social functioning is affected.

Signs of possible psychological distress:

• Significant change in appearance or behavior
• Decline in quality of work or class participation; missed classes or assignments
• Social isolation or withdrawal
• Agitation, non-stop talking; disruptive or angry outbursts
• Expressionless face, appears sad; conveys hopelessness
• Indicates that she or he is ashamed or feels like a disappointment
• Disorganized or irrational thinking; in a fog or confused
- Disheveled appearance
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain
- Makes threats of harm to self or others, either vague or specific
- Writing/artwork with morbid, depressive or angry themes
- Inappropriate classroom behavior
- Verbal warning signs of suicide, either indirect or direct:
  “I can’t go on.” “My family would be better off without me.”
  “Who cares if I’m not around anyway?” I wish I were dead.”
  “If __________, I’ll kill myself.” (e.g., I fail this course, she leaves me.)
How to help a student (in a non-emergency situation)

In an emergency, follow the procedure on page 3 and in the “Responding to Mental Health Emergencies” brochure located at: www.fordham.edu/mentalhealthemergency.

What you should do

**DO** remain calm.

**DO** tell the student that you’re concerned and want to help.

**DO** comment directly on what you have observed. (“I’m concerned because you’ve missed several classes and today you seemed distracted. I also noticed you fell asleep in class the other day. How have you been feeling lately?”)

**DO** listen carefully to the student’s feelings and concerns, without judging, and take them seriously. (“It seems that the hardship you have experienced with your family is now compounded by the problems with your girlfriend.”)

**DO** respect cultural differences. Ask about students’ cultures and what it means to them, and listen for their cultural perspectives. Think about how your style of communication might be interpreted by students from other cultures. Consider how a history of racism, oppression or stereotyping could affect the students’ perception of Fordham and your attempts to help them. Validate and acknowledge the students’ experience—this need for understanding, while important for everyone, is often accentuated in marginalized students. Explore the wisdom of seeking help within the students’ more familiar cultural framework. For example, ask them if it might help to talk with elders, family members or religious leaders. Campus Ministry and the Office of Multicultural Affairs are great resources on campus.

**DO** suggest counseling or provide other helpful resources. Students may call Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) to schedule an appointment, or you can walk them over to CPS or the Office of the Dean of Students. If a student is not ready to make an appointment on the spot, you may ask a CPS staff member for the name of a psychologist whom the student may call; this way the student has a personal point of contact. You may also explore the CPS website with the student (www.fordham.edu/cps) to learn about CPS services and to find an array of other mental health resources. *Regardless, you are encouraged to contact help using the procedure in the brochure to best address the unique needs of the student.* Depending on the circumstance, a dean will reach out to the student, if they deem it appropriate.
DO call the class dean who can offer guidance and information about resources available.

DO follow-up to show that you care and make sure students have the resources they may need. Faculty can access students’ contact information through the class list available on the Faculty Dashboard of my.fordham.edu. If a faculty member has difficulty reaching a student, they may contact the dean of students at (718) 817-4755 at RH or (212) 636-6250 at LC or Westchester.

What you should not do

DO NOT agree to be sworn to secrecy. NEVER agree to keep suicidal or violent thoughts in confidence; it is important that the student meet with a counseling professional to get the support they need.

DO NOT ask students to “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” or ignore the problem.

DO NOT ignore the situation.

DO NOT get frustrated when your suggestions are resisted. At this point, it may be helpful for you to consult with a counselor at CPS or the dean of students about the student’s situation.

DO NOT judge students based on your own cultural norms. For example, a lack of eye contact in some cultures shows respect while in others may communicate deceitfulness; or loud and expressive language in some cultures may invite passionate and respectful dialogue while in other cultures it may be viewed as hostile or disrespectful. Attitudes towards authority figures and academic work are often shaped by students’ cultural framework.

Difficult scenarios: Be prepared that the student may initially reject help. It may take the student time to digest what you said or to acknowledge the problem. If you do not believe that the student is in crisis, then don’t force the issue. Your concern in itself can be reassuring, and the student may privately pursue the counseling resources that you provide. You may also suggest talking again after the student has had time to think it over.

If you think the student’s issues could be serious, or you’re not sure whether to be concerned, call a counselor or the dean of students to discuss the situation. You may tell the student that you will make this call to help them get the support that they need. While you may consult with a counselor or dean without letting the student know, it can help to be up front with the student.
**If emotions escalate**, acknowledge the intensity of the situation. ("I can see you’re really upset about the grade you received.")

**If the student displays bizarre or illogical thought patterns or behaviors**, remain calm and let the student know that you can see they need help. ("I know these things must be overwhelming for you. I’m concerned about you and I’d like to help.")

**If you think that a student may be suicidal, ask.** ("Since it’s been so painful lately, I’m wondering if you have considered harming yourself.” Or, “When you say that you can’t bear to go on, were you suggesting that you might kill yourself?”) If a student exhibits suicidal signs, it is imperative to contact the dean of students (during business hours) or the security supervisor (after hours or on weekends) and clearly state that you need to report a MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY. The dean of students or a member of the staff will respond directly to you. You may also walk the student to the offices listed above, in the “What to do in an Emergency” section. Staff in these offices are trained to find a professional who will assist immediately. Faculty members should follow these procedures even if the student’s behaviors are ambiguous.