

## **Helping a Student in Distress**

### **A Guide for Concerned Parents and Caregivers**

At Bay Path University, we strive to support students with emphasis on caring for the personal, intellectual and ethical growth of students. All members of the college community (faculty, staff, and students) are dedicated to the highest standards of education and share the responsibility of maintaining a safe learning and living environment. The campus community is committed to helping students grow both intellectually and personally so that they develop emotional resilience that enables them to respond to life events in ways that support their well-being and integrity. It is important that caregivers and parents recognize and acknowledge when a student is experiencing distress. You might be the first person to notice, or you might be the first person who is in a position to assist the student. It is important that you consult with campus resources, speak directly with the student or refer the student to an appropriate resource. If you encounter a student who exhibits problematic behaviors, you can contact the appropriate resource(s) listed in this guide.

*If you believe the situation is an emergency:*

*On campus - contact Bay Path University Campus Public Safety at (413) 565-1225*

*Off campus - call 911*

### **Identifying Students in Distress**

As a parent or caregiver interacting regularly with your student, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavior changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. A student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could well constitute an attempt to draw attention to their plight: "a cry for help." Your ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress and your courage to acknowledge your concerns directly to the student, are often noted by students as the most significant factor in their successful problem resolution. Below is a list of signs that may indicate that a student is in distress:

#### Academic Signs:

- Significant shift in quality of work
- Missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absence from class, exams, and other activities
- Continual requests for unusual accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed exams, etc.)
- Essays or papers that expresses hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented classes
- Inappropriate disruptions or monopolizing classroom time

#### Physical or Psychological Signs:

- Excessive anxiety or panic
- Apathy, lack of energy, a change in sleeping or eating habits, or dramatic weight gain or loss
- Marked changes in personal hygiene, work habits, or social behavior
- Mood elevation
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Overtly suicidal thoughts, such as referring to suicide as a current option
- Giving away treasured personal possessions
- Increased irritability or aggressive behavior
- Bizarre thinking, seemingly at odds with the reality of the situation (such as paranoia)
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs

#### Other Factors to Consider:

- Direct statements indicating family problems, personal losses such as death of a family member or the break-up of a relationship
- Expressions of concern about a student by peers
- Written note or verbal statement that has a sense of hopelessness or finality
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss

### **What You Can Do**

Taking the step to assist a student can save a life (or many lives). An individual who is distressed often wants help but doesn't know how to ask. You can begin the process by expressing your concern in a caring, nonjudgmental way. By offering assistance, you can play an essential role in maintaining the health and wellness of our students in their pursuit of academic excellence (continued on reverse).

- Find a private, comfortable place to talk (even if over the phone). Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel comfortable about what to do next. Ask if the student has ever talked about this problem with anyone else, including a counselor. Try to get an accurate understanding of the issues, and, if appropriate, encourage the student to talk about the situation with a professional.
- In your own words, express your concern using statements like, "I'm concerned that...".
- Ask open-ended questions. The student may choose not to answer, but may feel relieved to know you are trying to understand.
- Don't feel compelled to find a solution. Often, listening is enough.
- Suggest that the student can get more help if needed.
- Don't hesitate to ask for support from the the Counseling Center staff or the Dean of Students.

### **How to Make a Referral**

Do not attempt to make a referral when the student is so upset and confused that they cannot understand or listen to you. Wait until the student has calmed down enough to be able to converse and respond to your suggestions.

- Suggest that the student schedule a same day session at the Counseling Center by calling (413)565-1544.
- If the student is hesitant to make an appointment, explain to the student that:
  - Counseling at Bay Path University is confidential. This means that information about the student cannot be released to other University offices, family members or faculty without the student's written permission (except when the student is in danger of harming themselves or others).
  - Counseling records are not kept with any academic records and are protected by law.
  - The services are free to currently registered Bay Path students.
  - There is no requirement to continue with on campus counseling if they do not find it beneficial.

### **Students In Crisis**

A crisis is a situation in which an individual's usual style of coping is no longer effective, and the emotional or physiological response begins to escalate. As emotions intensify, coping becomes less effective, until the person becomes disoriented, nonfunctional, or attempts to harm themselves or others. If a student is in a serious mental health crisis, you might see or hear the following signs:

- Suicidal statements or suicide attempts
- Written or verbal violence or acting out violently
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality)
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence)

### **What to Do When You Suspect a Serious Crisis**

If you believe there may be imminent danger of harm to a student or the community, as evidenced by these crisis symptoms, get help immediately.

On Campus: Call Campus Public Safety at (413)565-1225.

If you need help in assessing the situation *during business hours* contact the Counseling Center at (413)565-1544.

If you need help in assessing the situation *outside business hours* contact the BHN Crisis Line at (413)733-6661.

Off Campus: Call 911.

Special thanks to Cornell University for language borrowed from their handbook on "Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress."