

A FACULTY AND STAFF GUIDE TO
**HELPING STUDENTS
IN DISTRESS**



UNIVERSITY
of Prince Edward
ISLAND

PUBLISHED BY THE
COUNSELLORS AT THE
DEPARTMENT OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION

Many students encounter difficulties or trouble in their personal, social, academic, career, or emotional lives. Often these students come to Counselling Services on their own. Sometimes, however, they are referred by others at the University who become aware of their distress and hope that counselling might be helpful. In fact, faculty and staff who have frequent contact with students are in an excellent position to identify troubled students and assist them in getting the help they need.

This booklet is intended to give faculty and staff guidelines about referring students to Counselling Services. It will provide information about our services and how to access them in order to assist our students with educational, social, career, or personal concerns.

COUNSELLING SERVICES

Personal Counsellors

Heidi MacDonald » 566-0738 » hemacdonald@upei.ca

James Reddin » 566-6067 » jareddin@upei.ca

Career Counsellor

Kylah Hennessey » 566-0738 » khennessey@upei.ca

Front Desk

566-0488

Health Services

566-0616

OVERVIEW OF COUNSELLING SERVICES

Counselling is available for supportive or problem-solving assistance related to academic, career, emotional, personal, or social concerns. Counsellors, Heidi MacDonald, James Reddin, and Kyla Hennessey will help explore these issues, identify problems and solutions, and assist students to work toward achieving the goals they have set for themselves. To do this, the following free, confidential services are provided:

PERSONAL COUNSELLING

Counsellors are available to provide supportive and problem-solving assistance for emotional difficulties, interpersonal problems, or stressful life situations. Some students find that an initial meeting or two is all they need to explore and clarify their feelings and options.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Advisors are available to help students with course and major selection as well as discussing long-term academic plans. Advising services are focused on first and second year students while upper year students are encouraged to work with faculty advisors as they specialize in a particular area for their major. That being said, we are still available to upper year students who feel they need a perspective outside of their current major.

CAREER COUNSELLING

Career planning and counselling are available. Testing and assessment of interests, abilities, and personality are available as well. Many students have questions or confusion about this issue and find that one or two meetings will help them find their path.

CONSULTATION AND REFERRALS

In addition to providing direct services to students, counsellors are available to consult with faculty and staff about concerns that pertain to the welfare of students. Faculty and staff are invited to call a counsellor for consultation. If one is not available, you can leave a message on the voice mail system or send an email. Our counsellors strive to return all calls in a timely manner. Counsellors can also provide referrals to outside services and community groups to help students.

OUTREACH PROGRAMMING

Counsellors may be available to provide activities or educational workshops for various groups (e.g., student organizations, residence communities, classes, faculty and staff, etc.) on a variety of topics (e.g., career, stress management, anxiety, emotional health, relationships, etc.). Please contact the counsellor if you are thinking about offering such a program to discuss times and dates that will work. At the time of contact, please provide the following information: a description of what is to be presented, possible dates and times, intended audience and estimated number.

COMMON CAUSES OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

- Relationship break-up
- Family conflict
- Loss of a loved one
- Divorce
- Feeling lonely
- Academic pressure or failure
- Serious illness or injury of self or others
- Difficulty adjusting to university
- Homesickness
- Not fitting in with peers
- Coming out issues
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Religious conflicts
- Sexual or physical abuse or assault
- Identity confusion
- Depression
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Career indecision
- Loss of goal or dream
- Occupational setback
- Body image issues

THE STUDENT LIFE CYCLE

In addition to the cycle of developmental progress students typically undergo over the course of their post-secondary studies, staff in a student service capacity throughout the region have found that there is a cycle over the course of the academic year in terms of what concerns, issues, and stresses typically emerge at various times of the year.

SEPTEMBER

Excitement & new freedoms » Homesickness » Anxiety about roommates, classes and professors

OCTOBER

Personal conflicts » Do I belong » First mid-terms » Change becomes real

NOVEMBER

Academic realities settle in » Cold & flu Season » Procrastination » Exam anxiety

DECEMBER

Self & Home have changed » Exam crises » Christmas break challenges relationships (new and old)

JANUARY

Fresh start optimism/resolve » Consequences of first term » Return to school from home

FEBRUARY

Cabin fever/SAD » Potential for increased substance use » Valentine's Day » Spring Break realities

MARCH

Anxiety about next year's plans » Mid-terms » Summer employment » Anxiety about the changes the year brought on (physical and emotional)

APRIL

Re-visiting decisions on major » Summer plans » Relationship disruptions » Final exam anxiety/crises

SIGNS OF STUDENT DISTRESS WHICH REQUIRE IMMEDIATE REFERRAL OR ATTENTION

- Expressions of suicidal thoughts or intent
- Expression of violence towards others
- Severe loss of emotional control
- Bizarre behaviour or gross impairment in thinking ability

FOR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

Monday – Friday 8:30-4:30 » Call Student Services at 566-0488

When calling Student Services for a response to a crisis, please inform the staff person who answers that this is a crisis call and tell them, briefly and without specific details, the nature of the crisis you are facing (i.e., “I have a student in my office who needs to be seen immediately” versus “I have a student in crisis and I need a counsellor to call me back as soon as they are free”). Front-line staff face a difficult decision about whether to interrupt a current session (which may also be critical) and the information you can give them can help them make that decision.

Evenings or Weekends » Call Campus Security at 566-0384

If danger to self or others appears imminent » Call 911

COMMON WARNING SIGNS OF STUDENTS’ DISTRESS

ACADEMIC SIGNS

- Career and course indecision
- Excessive procrastination
- Uncharacteristically poor preparation or performance
- Repeated requests for extensions or special considerations
- Disruptive classroom behaviour
- Excessive absence/tardiness
- Avoiding or dominating discussions
- References to suicide or homicide in verbal statements or writing
- Uncharacteristic lack of participation

INTERPERSONAL SIGNS

- Asking instructor for help with personal problems
- Dependency on advisor or avoidance of advisor
- Disruptive behaviour
- Inability to get along with others
- Complaints from other students
- Withdrawal from others

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- Change in personal hygiene
- Dramatic weight gain or loss
- Frequently falling asleep in class
- Irritability
- Unruly behaviour
- Impaired speech
- Disjointed thoughts
- Tearfulness
- Intense emotion
- Inappropriate responses
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physically harming self

Unsure if some “signs” indicate student distress in a particular situation?

Trust your instincts and consult a colleague or counselling services staff.

RESPONDING TO THE STUDENT IN NEED: HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you have noticed warning signs, you are faced with the decision of whether to intervene. Your interest in your student's well-being can make an important difference to a person in distress. If you decide to intervene, here are some suggestions that will help you to be a good listener and to increase a student's willingness to accept a referral to Counselling Services or other resources:

- Talk to the student privately to help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.
- Listen carefully to the student, and respond to both the content and the emotions of the situation. For example, "Sounds as if you are disappointed because the test did not go as you expected." OR "You feel sad because you didn't get accepted to the program in which you are really interested."
- Discuss your observations and perceptions of the situation directly and honestly with the student. For example, "I notice you haven't attended class lately and that is uncharacteristic of you."
- Express your concern in a non-judgmental way.
- Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.
- Help the student identify the options for action and explore possible consequences.
- Be frank with the student about the limits of your ability to help them.
- If the student appears to be in imminent danger of hurting his/herself or others, consult Student Services (during office hours) 566-0488 or campus security (after hours) 566-0384. If the student discusses thoughts of harm to self or others call Counselling Services. Do not promise to keep threats to self or others a secret.
- Discuss campus resources. If the student is interested, make a referral to Counselling Services.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

While sometimes difficult to do, it is important that you realize the limits of your own responsibility when assisting distressed students. If you are involved in an intervention with a student:

- It does not mean you must (or can) resolve the student's difficulties
 - You are not responsible for the student's emotional well-being.

HOW TO MAKE A REFERRAL

Presenting yourself as knowledgeable about campus services can ease a student's discomfort about seeking help. Here are some suggestions for emergency and non-emergency situations.

EMERGENCY REFERRALS

Emergencies are those situations that require immediate attention (e.g., situations in which a student is highly agitated, cases in which there is an immediate danger of harm to oneself or others, instances in which a student's ability to function is substantially impaired and normal coping skills are not working).

- If the emergency occurs during office hours, call 566-0488 and ask to speak to a counsellor. If the counsellor is unavailable, explain to the person answering whether the nature of the emergency is such that you need the counsellor to stop what they are doing (likely an appointment with another student) to speak with you immediately, or whether you can wait for the end of the current appointment for a return call.
- Provide the counsellor with a description of the situation which has led to your concern.
- The counsellor will gladly consult with you about how to make a referral and discuss whether immediate intervention is necessary.
- Whenever possible, inform the student in crisis that you are sharing information with the counsellor.
- If emergency situations should arise outside of Counselling Services office hours, students may be referred to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Emergency Room – please note that the QEH will NOT provide over-the-phone advice.
- If the student or another person is in immediate danger, call 911 or campus security at 648-5675.

NON-EMERGENCY REFERRALS

- Invite the students to call Counselling Services to schedule an initial appointment. Let the student know that, except in emergency situations, it may take a week to be seen.
- Offer to let the student call from your office if you believe he/she needs the extra support and encouragement (as long as you are comfortable with this).
- Consult with the counsellor when you think the student's circumstances may require an immediate appointment. He or she will assist you in determining whether emergency intervention is warranted and talk with you about the specific arrangements that need to be made.
- Assure the student that our counsellors are competent, well-trained, and professionally certified individuals.
- Discuss Counselling Services' confidentiality of services that are outlined on our webpage.
- Provide information on other appropriate campus resources (Student Health Centre – 566-0616; Financial Aid – 628-4382; Career Counsellor – 566-0738; Pathways to Academic Success – 894-2835; Writing Centre – 628-4320; Accessibility Services – 628-4364).

WHAT ABOUT STUDENTS WHO ARE RELUCTANT TO GO TO COUNSELLING?

If it seems clear that a student needs or could benefit from counselling, but is reluctant to go, you might mention any of the following that seem appropriate for that student:

- The student can try one session to see if this is potentially helpful.
- The visit will be kept strictly confidential.
- All the student has to do to get an appointment is go to the counsellor's office, email, or telephone.
- It's free.
- Students with very troubling concerns often get help at Counselling Services.
- A person doesn't have to be having a crisis to go see a counsellor.
- The student can call and speak to the counsellor or visit the webpage to learn more.
- The counsellor will make referrals to agencies in the community if the student prefers to go elsewhere for therapy.

ACCEPTING THE STUDENT'S RIGHT TO SAY NO

Except in certain life-threatening situations (suicidal intent, violence towards others), the choice of whether to seek professional help at Counselling Services is completely up to that individual. If a distressed student remains adamant about not seeking counselling, you need to accept the student's decision.

If you are quite concerned about such a student, consult with Counselling Services. Perhaps the counsellor could suggest alternative ways of approaching the student, to help you more effectively intervene on the student's behalf, or confirm that you have done all that you could do.

FOLLOWING UP: WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

Once you have connected the student with Counselling Services, you might be curious about how counselling and the student's concerns are going. You can follow-up with the student by asking how he/she is doing – this communicates your ongoing concern/care for the student and lets him/her know that you also continue to be a resource to him/her, if that is a role you are comfortable fulfilling. Keep in mind that change is a process and usually it is a slow and variable one. Therefore, it may be useful for you to share this with the student and to keep this in mind yourself as you look for the student's improvement. You cannot follow-up with the counsellor to see how the student is doing, however, because the counsellor is bound by the principles of confidentiality as defined by the profession. These are listed on the next page.

PROTECTING THE STUDENT'S CONFIDENTIALITY

This means:

- We cannot give information about the student without permission from the student.
- We cannot say whether the student has come for an appointment.
- We cannot discuss any specifics of the situation.
- We can answer your general questions about making referrals to Counselling Services.

- We can offer you information about psychological concerns and problems in general.
- We can provide other referral ideas.
- We can take information from you regarding specific behaviours of the student, though whenever possible we ask that you inform the student that you are sharing information with us. Also, because a trusting relationship is a key to working with our clients, it is important that we be able to share with students where our information is coming from.
- We will thank you for your concern and interest.

THE MATTER OF ACCOMMODATIONS

Typically, students with disabilities (whether they be physical, learning, sensory, or psychiatric disabilities) will have worked, or need to work, with the UPEI Accessibility Services to coordinate communication of their diagnosis, their accommodation needs and have negotiated the necessary accommodations at or near the start of the term. Students in crisis and students with emerging mental health concerns are, in some ways, atypical in this regard as mental health concerns are often (usually, even) episodic and crisis are, by their very nature, unexpected by the person going through the crisis. For this reason, when dealing with a student in distress you or the student may consider the need for some special accommodation.

The process of negotiating accommodation in response to a situation of distress can involve four different roles:

1. **THE STUDENT** – barring highly unusual circumstances, accommodations should involve the student. There may be times when concerned faculty and staff will make a student aware of this option and maybe even encourage that they pursue it, but ultimately, the student is responsible for her or his education and she or he must be an active player in negotiating how it will be pursued.
2. **THE FACULTY MEMBER** – At Student Affairs we support that faculty are not only the expert in the subject matter they are teaching, but also in the delivery of instructional materials and in the assessment of the learning process. Consequently, we will provide consultation as support – as well as information on statutory and university policy requirements – but decisions the timing and nature of assessment is left to the professor to negotiate with the student.

3. THE REGISTRAR'S OFFICE – With a responsibility for academic records and the maintaining of academic regulations, the Registrar can be an important ally in determining how the regulatory framework can be used to help the student be fairly assessed while still maintaining all the standards of our academic regulations.
4. EXPERT CONSULTATIONS – Whether these be in-house supports such as the counsellors at Student Affairs, or external sources such as physicians, clergy, officers of the court, etc. – consultations can provide material information about how the student is affected by the distressing situation he or she is in. Whether you are receiving or seeking out such a consultation, you may want to keep the following in mind:
 - i. Professionals outside the university itself may not be familiar with what information you need/want to make your decisions. You may want to speak to the professional directly, or talk to the student, or ask to have a counsellor from Student Affairs act as liaison to improve the type of information you receive.
 - ii. Counselling staff at Student Affairs do not provide psychiatric or psychological assessments or diagnoses. However, in working with students we can provide information and support about the impact of the distress the student is going through.
 - iii. As a relationally based process, counselling is more effective in the context of an on-going relationship. As such, consultations provided after a student is sent to our office (or comes in on their own) for a single session will be less informative than one in which we have known the student for some time.
 - iv. While counselling staff may support a suggested action or maybe offer suggestions if asked, they will refrain from telling other university staff what to do.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Responding to distressed students can trigger complex personal thoughts and feelings for faculty and staff. It is important to obtain support for yourself as you engage in work with students in distress. This support might come from colleagues, partners, friends, or through consultation with Counselling Services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Portions of this brochure have been adapted from Bowling Green State University website:

<http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/sa/counseling/page13260.html>

<http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/sa/counseling/page13309.html>



STUDENT AFFAIRS

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