

# HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRESSED AND/OR DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

## A GUIDE FOR QUEENS COLLEGE FACULTY AND STAFF

### DEALING WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS

As a member of the Queens College community you may come into contact with students who are experiencing personal distress or difficulties coping with college. Students may reveal problems to you through personal communication or indirectly by their general behavior. Being aware of distress signals, methods of intervention, and sources of help for the student can help you feel more in control of situations that may arise, and put you in a better position to be helpful.

### DISTRESS SIGNALS

Listed below are some of the more prevalent signs of someone in distress. This list is intended to provide basic information only.

- 1. Depression.** While we all may feel depressed from time to time, “normal” depressions may consist of only one or two symptoms and usually pass within days. Clinically depressed people will exhibit multiple symptoms for a longer period of time. Some of these symptoms are sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, and preoccupation with death.
- 2. Agitation or Acting Out.** This would represent a departure from normal or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, exhibiting restlessness or hyperactivity, being antagonistic or emotional volatility (crying easily, losing temper).
- 3. Disorientation.** Some distressed students may seem “out of it.” You may witness a diminishment in awareness of what is going on around them, forgetting or losing things, misperception of facts or

reality, rambling or disconnected speech, and behavior that seems out of context or bizarre.

4. **Drug and Alcohol Abuse.** Signs of intoxication during class or interaction with College officials are indicative of a problem that requires attention.
5. **Suicidal Thoughts.** Most people who attempt suicide communicate early messages about their distress. These messages can range from “I don’t want to be here”, to a series of vague “good-byes”, to “I’m going to kill myself.” All suicidal references should be taken seriously.
6. **Violence and Aggression.** You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. This may be manifested by physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material.

While it is not expected that you be a “watchdog” or that you provide a thorough assessment, you may be the first contact for a student in distress and in a position to ask a few questions. The following guidelines are offered as suggestions for dealing with distressed students.

## INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

### **Dealing with students who may express a problem, but are not disruptive in class:**

1. A student may come to you with a problem or you may notice a problem from their behavior. If you notice a problem, but the student has not asked you for help, approach the student in writing or orally and suggest a meeting after class. If you would like a consultation regarding how to talk to the student prior to your meeting, contact the College Counseling & Resource Center, Counseling Services.
2. When you meet with the student indicate in a supportive manner that you have noticed that the student seems “troubled/upset”, “tuned out”.

3. If the student is willing to discuss his or her problems with you, listen attentively without making too many responses or suggestions. Discuss referring him or her to the College Counseling & Resource Center, Counseling Services.
4. If the student does not want to discuss any personal matters with you, gently indicate that counselors and psychologists are available in the College Counseling & Resource Center at no cost to the student. Give the student the location and phone number of the Center. You may want to offer to accompany the student to the Center if you are comfortable with this action and/or offer to call the Center to say that the student will be making an appointment.
5. Know Your Limits. You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can provide. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting them the assistance they require. You can do this by reinforcing them for confiding in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do.

Some signs that you may have overextended yourself include:

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by the situation
- Feeling angry at the student
- Feeling afraid
- Having thoughts of “adopting” or otherwise rescuing the student
- “Reliving” similar experiences of your own

### **Dealing with severe disruptive behavior in class:**

If in your judgment a student is exhibiting hostile, belligerent, and/or out of control behavior you need to take immediate action.

1. **Safety First!** Always keep safety in mind when you interact with a disruptive student. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent,

call Public Safety at 75912. If no phone is available, quietly, send another person to the nearest office or emergency phone to call.

- 2. Avoid Escalation.** Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Never embarrass a student in front of other students. Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. You may want to ask the disruptive student to leave the class. Be supportive but firm. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. When a student is hostile and defiant it is best to avoid a confrontation. One can always remind them of rules at a later time.
  
- 3. Notify the Queens College Behavioral Intervention Team (QCBIT).** Once the student is removed by Security or has left the class on his or her own, report the incident to the QCBIT. You can discuss the situation with a member of the QCBIT. Depending on the situation an intervention by the QCBIT, a counselor from the College Counseling & Resource Center, or another appropriate office may serve to resolve the situation. In some cases, depending upon the severity of the disruption, it may be necessary to pursue disciplinary action, including suspension from Queens College.

I hope that the following information is helpful. The College Counseling & Resource Center has a staff of psychologists and counseling professionals who see students for personal, psychological and/or academic counseling. All services are confidential and free of charge. Please feel free to contact me.

Elizabeth McCaffrey, Ph.D.  
Director of Counseling Services  
College Counseling & Resource Center

Prepared by  
**THE COLLEGE COUNSELING AND RESOURCE CENTER**  
**COUNSELING SERVICES**  
**FRESE HALL, FIRST FLOOR**  
**997-5420**

**Hours: Monday – Friday, 9am to 5pm**  
**Wednesday, 5pm to 7pm**