

HOW TO HELP: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Parents are often among the first to notice students who are encountering overwhelming amounts of stress in their lives. Below are some indications of students in distress and guidelines to follow if you are concerned.

Signs and Symptoms of a Student in Distress

Your observations:

- Outbursts of anger, volatile or aggressive behavior, increased irritability
- Signs of excessive alcohol or drug use
- Social isolation, withdrawal from others
- Loss or gain of a significant amount of weight
- Frequent crying spells
- Significantly heightened level of energy or extreme activity level
- Disorganized thinking and speech, signs that student is “out of touch with reality”
- Inability to focus on a specific topic in a conversation or activity
- Bizarre behavior, unusual ritualistic or repetitive behavior
- Any abrupt change in style, manner, or personal hygiene

Student’s Complaints:

- Persistent worrying, extreme restlessness, inability to relax or concentrate
- Suspiciousness, expression of irrational fears
- Loss of interest in formerly pleasurable or meaningful activities
- Physical symptoms (e.g., stomach pains, headache) without a medical explanation
- Marked increase or decrease in sleep or appetite
- References to death or suicide, expressions of hopelessness

Student’s Background:

- Previous periods of poor functioning
- History of emotional disturbances (e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorder, alcohol/drug abuse)
- Traumatic event(s) such as divorce of parents, serious illness of family member, past sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- Loss of an important person (either by death or by separation/break-up)

Guidelines for responding to a student in distress

When you are aware that your son/daughter is experiencing a cluster of the signs and symptoms stated above, you are in a good position, because of your relationship, to begin a dialogue. Whether you begin the conversation or your son/daughter approaches you, let him/her know what you are aware of that leads you to be concerned. Try to be specific in identifying the bases of your concern. You need not be certain there is a problem.

Let your son/daughter know that you care about how things are going. Encourage a conversation about his/her situation, struggles, and feelings. Take the time to listen in a nonjudgmental and respectful manner. It is important to listen first to the situation and your son/daughter's feelings about it. Try not to offer solutions early in the conversation; problem solving needs to wait until he/she feels heard and understood. Consider, when the time feels right, gently suggesting the option of counseling.

When to Refer:

- Your son/daughter expresses a direct or indirect desire to speak with a professional about his/her concerns.
- The problems observed or described are beyond your level of comfort or competence.
- After a reasonable amount of time and effort, you believe your son/daughter is not making progress.

How to Refer:

- Share some basic information about the office of Counseling Services (see Contact Information below). Offer assurance that counseling is confidential. To learn more about the office of Counseling Services, go to www.jewell.edu. Click on Office and Services, find Student Affairs and then select Counseling Services.
- Suggest that your son/daughter call, e-mail, or visit the office of Counseling Services during office hours to arrange an appointment. He/she needs to schedule the appointment. Appointments cannot be made by a third party without the student talking directly with one of the counselors.
- If your son/daughter seems hesitant about counseling or would like support in making counseling arrangements, consider encouraging him/her to make the call while you are there (816-415-5946).
- Once a referral is made, communication between the student and the counselor is confidential. You may be concerned and feel compelled to know what is happening in counseling; however, you may have to accept this discomfort as the student begins to work with a counselor.
- If there is information that you want the student's counselor to know about his/her situation, you may call the office and speak to one of the counselors. Please explain to your son/daughter that you plan to do this and why, so that during the first (or next) session, the counselor may acknowledge to the student that he/she is aware of the information that you have shared. Remember that when you speak with a counselor he/she will only be able to listen to your concerns. No response will be offered regarding the student (even as to whether or not the student has been seen in the office).

- After making a referral, let your son/daughter volunteer further information to you if he/she wishes to do so. Communicate continued concern and openness to help.

When a Student Refuses to Seek Counseling

When a student refuses counseling, it may simply be because he/she needs some time to think about your recommendation. If your son/daughter is not potentially dangerous to self or others, give some time for consideration. He/she may choose not to see a counselor. In some cases, no further intervention is advisable; in other cases, it is important. If you are unsure about this, you may call and speak to one of the counselors about the situation and determine together whether further attempts to intervene are warranted and how best to proceed. *Note: In an emergency situation, call 911 immediately.*

To Determine Whether a Student Followed Through with Your Referral

If you believe your son/daughter would be receptive to this line of inquiry, ask whether an appointment was made, how the first session went, and whether he/she plans to continue. Your interest and support may encourage continuation of counseling.

You may also ask your son/daughter to grant permission to the office of Counseling Services to follow up with you in terms of whether he/she attended the first session. Because of professional ethics and legal issues, it is necessary to have the student's written permission to release this or any other information to parents pertaining to the student's contacts with the office of Counseling Services. Confidentiality regarding counseling services is very much like that connected with consulting a physician.

If the Student Wishes to Explore Off-Campus Evaluation or Therapy

In some instances a student may prefer to see an off-campus counselor or may need to access a psychiatrist for an evaluation or follow-up regarding medication. Please feel free to contact the office of Counseling Services for a list of appropriate referrals.

Additional Considerations

Do not attempt to make a referral to counseling when your son/daughter is so upset and confused that it is not really possible to listen carefully or process information. Please wait until he/she has calmed down enough to be able to absorb your suggestion about counseling as well as the information required to access counseling.

Conclusion

Your role as a parent is obviously crucial in the life of your son/daughter. Your encouragement and support may be critical factors that influence his/her willingness and ability to face difficult life experiences and to muster the courage to seek counseling. Your relationship with your son/daughter and continued support can be a source of hope

and strength. While it is probably not possible for you to fix the thorny problems that he/she may be facing, your steady, affirming presence can be a powerful healing force.

Contact Information

Office of Counseling Services

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William Jewell College Security

Calling from on-campus phone: extension 1411

Calling from off-campus phone: (816) 365-0709