

Any member of the Earlham community may come into contact with a distressed student. The more resources you have, the better you will be able to respond to situations that may arise. The counselors in Counseling Services are available to faculty and staff for consultation regarding general or specific situations. Call us at 765/983-1432 or send us an e-mail through our Web page.

WARNING SIGNS/DISTRESS SIGNALS

Below are some of the more prevalent signs of someone in distress. The list is not exhaustive and provides basic information only.

1. **Depression.** Everyone gets the blues now and then. Persons with major depressive disorder will exhibit multiple symptoms for more than two weeks. Some of these symptoms are sleep disturbance, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, poor concentration, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, preoccupation with death, social withdrawal.
2. **Agitation/Acting Out.** This would be a departure from usual or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, restlessness or hyperactivity, being aggressive or antagonistic, and increased drug/alcohol abuse.
3. **Disorientation.** Some distressed students may seem “out of it.” There may be a decrease in awareness of their surroundings, misperception of reality, rambling or disconnected speech, bizarre behavior, and hallucinations.
4. **Drug and alcohol abuse.** If you see signs of intoxication during class or in interactions with college faculty or staff, this usually indicates a problem that requires attention.

5. **Suicidal thoughts.** Sometimes students who attempt suicide give signals about their distress before their attempt. Signs can range from very blunt: “I plan to kill myself,” to vague good-byes or “I don’t want to be here.” Nonverbal signs can include giving away possessions, acquiring the means to kill themselves, and putting legal, financial, and college affairs in order. All the above messages should be taken seriously.
6. **Violence and Aggression.** You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. You may see this through physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You are not expected to provide a thorough assessment when faced with a student in distress, but you may be the first contact for that student and in a position to ask a few questions and gather some information for others to assess. Following these suggestions can lead to a positive outcome for everyone.

1. **Safety first!** Always keep safety in mind when interacting with a distressed student. Maintain a safe distance and an escape route in case you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call Campus Safety & Security right away at x1400.
2. **Avoid escalation.** Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. It is usually not

a good idea to assert authority unless you are certain of the student’s mental health status. Distressed students need support, validation, and listening. You can remind them of rules later.

3. **Ask direct questions.** Be calm and matter-of-fact. Ask students directly if they are drunk, confused, or have thoughts of hurting or killing themselves or others. You will not “put ideas in their heads” by asking these questions. Students are often relieved that someone has noticed and is paying attention.
4. **Do not assume you are being manipulated.** True, some students appear distressed in order to get attention or get out of work, but only a thorough assessment can determine this. Attention-seekers can have serious problems and be in danger, too.
5. **Know your limits.** You can help many distressed students just by listening and referring them to the proper resources for further help. Some students will need more than that, and more than you can provide. Respect your own feelings of discomfort and focus on getting the students the help they need. You can do this by reinforcing them for confiding in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, trying to identify the problem area, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do that takes a lot of strength and courage.

Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself are:

- Feeling stressed or overwhelmed by the situation
- The help needed is not your expertise

- Feeling angry at the student
- Feeling afraid
- Personality differences may interfere with your ability to help
- Having thoughts of “adopting” the student or otherwise rescuing the student
- “Reliving” similar experiences of your own

Remember these key points, especially when interacting with a student who is suicidal:

- DO stay calm and matter-of-fact.
- DO show that you take the student’s feelings seriously. Validate the feelings.
- DO let the student know you want to help.
- DO listen attentively and with empathy.
- DO get help as soon as possible and stay close to the student till help arrives.
- DON’T try to shock or challenge the student.
- DON’T try to analyze the student’s motives.
- DON’T become argumentative.
- DON’T react with shock or disdain at the student’s thoughts or feelings.
- DON’T minimize the student’s distress.

Campus resources:

Campus Safety & Security	x1400
Counseling Services	x1432 or x1449
Health Services	x1328
Student Development	x1311 or x1317
Residence Life.....	x1317
Campus Ministries	x1501
Center for Academic Enrichment.....	x1341
Wellness Programs.....	x1791
Career Development Help Desk.....	x1232
Service Learning/Career Dev.	X1893
Registrar.....	x1515

Financial Aid	x1217
Multicultural Affairs.....	x1317
Action Against Rape	See Bathroom List

COUNSELING SERVICES MISSION STATEMENT

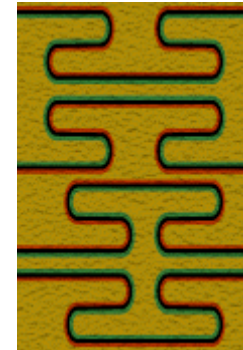
Earlham Counseling Services provides a professional and confidential setting for the psychological, emotional, and developmental support of students as they pursue academic goals and explore personal growth, and by acting as a resource for faculty and staff to assist with their interactions with students.

COUNSELING SERVICES PROVIDES:

- Crisis intervention
- Short-term counseling
- Referrals to other resources
- Mental health consultation, education, and outreach programs for students, faculty, and staff.

Much of this material is from a brochure titled “How To Deal With Distressed Students” by the University of Alabama Counseling Center, disseminated on the AUCCCD listserv on January 17, 2002, and from a brochure titled “Helping Students in Distress” by the University of Alaska/Fairbanks Center for Health and Counseling, disseminated on the AUCCCD listserv on August 5, 2005.

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS



A Guide for Earlham College Faculty and Staff

Prepared by:

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For counseling appointments go to <http://www.earlham.edu/~sas/health/> and click on the link