RECOGNIZING & REFERRING STUDENTS IN DIFFICULTY

A companion document for faculty, instructors, staff and TA/TMs to the SFU Supporting Students in Distress Response Guide.
1. **Recognize indicators** of distress and how they may show up differently for each person
2. Describe the process and strategies for referring a student to support
3. Understand your role and shared responsibility for providing a supportive response to students in distress that aims to be humanizing, dignifying, and empowering

Consult with the Office of Student Support, Rights & Responsibilities (SSRR): At any point you can to reach out to SSRR to consult with the office when concerns about a student’s safety, well-being or impact upon others is present. They will work with you to develop a way to approach or respond.
Distress is a noticeable change in the way an individual usually thinks, feels, responds, and behaves. All of the above could be signs of distress if you notice a sudden or gradual shift in the way someone usually behaves or responds. We all experience and show signs of distress differently.
Your role as a faculty, instructor, staff member, or TA/TM in a situation where a student is in distress includes four steps: Recognize, Check-in, Refer, Follow-up.

1. **RECOGNIZE**

Recognize the signs that a student may be struggling with something. We all show signs and indicators of being in distress differently. If you’re unsure about what a student has said or think it would be helpful to consult with someone, there are resources here to support you.

**I’ve noticed you haven’t been attending class regularly, are you okay?**

**I think it may be helpful to speak to someone at Health & Counselling. How about we call them together and get an appointment set up?**

2. **CHECK-IN**

Listen in an open, caring and non-judgmental way when asking open-ended questions. Creating a space where the person sharing feels comfortable and safe is important. Try to empathize with the person and how they feel.

**That sounds so tough, I am sorry to hear you are going through such a hard time.**

**I’d really like to hear how things are going with you. Would you feel comfortable checking back?**

3. **REFER**

After listening, paraphrase what you may have heard from the other person. Offer resources/referrals as needed and work towards finding long-term support. Remember, you do not need to solve their problems or diagnose them.

**4. FOLLOW UP**

Follow-up with the individual after some time has passed to ask them how they are doing and if they have had a chance to connect with a formal resource. If they have not, that is ok! Encourage them to reach out again and ask if there is anything you can do to make the connection easier.
**IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT SUICIDE**

**WARNING SIGNS**

Warning signs are indicators that a person may be considering suicide or planning a suicide attempt. These include:
- Seeking access to means
- Talking about death/dying or joking about suicide
- Giving away possessions.

**PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

Protective factors include:
- Access to healthcare
- Connectedness
- Life skills
- Self-esteem and purpose/meaning in life
- Future planning
- Cultural/religious/personal beliefs that discourage suicide.

**ACTION STEPS**

If you are worried about someone:
1. Ask them if they are considering suicide in a clear, direct, and confident manner. “Are you thinking of killing yourself?” is the recommended wording if you are unsure. Asking the question will not “put ideas in their head”.
2. After asking, use **good communication** and **active listening skills** to give them space to talk about their distress
3. Offer to help **connect** the person to someone who can help, and follow through
4. It is not your responsibility to assess a person’s risk of suicide; only **trained professional staff** can make that determination

For more information, check out these resources and/or workshop:
- **Supporting Students in Distress Response Guide** or join a **Support Over Suicide & Students in Distress (SOS/SID)** workshop
- **Responding to Disclosures Booklet**

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**Research shows that**

- **10%** of SFU students consider suicide
- **2%** of SFU students attempt suicide every year

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**Most common reasons people consider suicide:**

- Burdensomeness
- Hopelessness
- Emotional pain
CONSULTING CAMPUS RESOURCES

You could be one of several people to support a student in distress - **you are not expected to do this by yourself**. There are people and services on campuses to assist you in supporting with students in distress. The following resources are available for determining the seriousness of the situation and how quickly it needs to be addressed, as well as determining a plan for responding.

**ASSESS THE SITUATION**

You can help by clarifying what help looks like and assuring people that services are confidential.

**URGENT**

If a person **considering suicide** is unable to keep themselves **safe** for any reason, this is an urgent referral and requires an **immediate response** (get them to help right away, call 911, and don’t leave them alone).

**NON-URGENT**

If a person is **confident** in their short term **safety**, this is a non-urgent referral and the goal is to help get them connected to a mental health professional. Acknowledge that is the **student’s choice** to take the referral and reinforce that taking that step may help them reach positive change.

**NON-EMERGENCY**

For non-emergency situations where you are unsure about what a student has said or if you think it would be helpful to consult with someone, the following resources are available to you:

**HEALTH AND COUNSELLING SERVICE**

Connect with someone for advice on what to do. Refer to this [Identity-Based Support webpage](#) for additional resources you can refer students to.

Tel: **778-782-4615**

Hours: **9:30 - 4:30 PM, Monday to Friday**

**MY SSP**

Receive 24/7 assistance to support a student.

Tel: **778-782-9456** or **778-782-6601**

Email: **ssrr@sfu.ca**

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE SUPPORT AND PREVENTION OFFICE**

Reach out to the Sexual Violence Support and Prevention Office (SVPSO) for confidential support, information, and advice about sexual violence.

Tel: **778-782-7233**

Email: **sv-support@sfu.ca**

**OFFICE OF STUDENT SUPPORT, RIGHTS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Share your concern with someone at the Office of Student Support, Rights, and Responsibilities who can identify the appropriate type of support for the student.

**EMERGENCY**

For emergency situations where you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911 and if at SFU also call Campus Public Safety at 778-782-4500 to help direct emergency services. Contact SSRR to provide an update and a Case Manager will reach out to the student to follow up.
Supporting students who are experiencing personal challenges or difficulty can bear a lot of weight on the person offering support. It is important to prioritize your own well-being on an ongoing basis. Being well will also enable a person to be better able to support others.

**REMEMBER TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

The following are a few reminders about boundaries and caring for yourself when you are in a helping role:

- Assume responsibility for observing your personal limits, and being honest and clear about your limits with yourself and others. Your role is to listen and offer referrals, not to take on the role of a counsellor.
- Consult with others if you are unsure at any stage
- Don’t impose your own values - ask for clarification rather than make assumptions
- Avoid problem solving or making promises
- Show respect and expect respect

**SELF CARE RESOURCES**

Additional pathways for self-care include the following resources:

- SFU Human Resources Wellness and Recovery resources
- SFU Health and Counselling Faculty and Staff Well-Being resources
- SFU Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP)
- SFU TA/TM training on health and wellness

If you have questions or additional needs about faculty or staff health and wellness, please contact SFU Human Resources or Faculty Relations.