When a Student is Upset

Counseling Services
210 Wellness & Recreation Center
(478) 445-5331
General Tips

LISTEN while the student talks it out. The student needs to feel that someone is really hearing what he or she has to say.

EMPATHIZE with the feelings expressed, without siding one way or the other. “I can see how upset you are about what’s happened.”

HELP the student get specific about what the problem is and how he or she wants to handle it. “What do you think the basic problem is?” “What do you want to do about it now?” Be careful with wording. If you ask, “What do you want to see happen?” the answer will probably be something like, “I want the jerk fired!”

RECOGNIZE who is responsible for what. If a student is upset about getting a lower-than-hoped-for grade because of fear of losing a scholarship, realize that it’s the student’s responsibility to do the required work necessary to get the grade.

BE AWARE that sometimes actions can be misinterpreted. It’s okay to touch someone to comfort them, but be alert to non-verbal cues that suggest discomfort or misunderstanding. If you’re not sure, err on the side of caution, especially when crossing gender or culture lines.

AVOID giving advice unless specific information is needed and wanted.

REFER if that seems warranted: Counseling Services, community resources, hotlines, etc.

Handling Disruptive or Confusing Behavior

Faculty and staff sometimes ask for assistance from Counseling Services when they are concerned about students’ psychological well-being. Occasionally, students submit written work which causes alarm, or they may speak or behave in ways that seem disruptive or confusing in the classroom or residence hall. Counselors are available to faculty and staff for consultations in such situations, and we strongly encourage you to document your concerns. If you are ever afraid that there is an immediate threat to your safety, or the safety of others, contact Public Safety immediately.

How to Refer

Students (and the rest of us, too!) don’t always like the idea that they can’t handle things going on in their lives. In addition, there’s often a lack of awareness about what counseling is and how it can help. To get someone to Counseling Services:

BROACH the subject gently. You don’t want the student to get the feeling of a run-around. You might say something like “I’d like to help, but I don’t know much about these things. Let me find someone who might be able to do something about it.” Then be sure to pass on any expectations you or the student have of the referral source.

EXPLAIN, if appropriate, what counseling is. We often tell groups that counseling is designed to help normal people deal with normal problems – and that they’ve already paid for the service through student fees. We work with all kinds of academic, personal, and career concerns, and refer when needed. It may help to remind the student that counseling is confidential.

CALL to make sure that there is a counselor available to meet with the student. If no one is immediately available, help the student to make an appointment or to leave a phone number for a return call. If it’s an emergency (the student is in danger to self or others), say so and we’ll either get someone there quickly or direct you to call another emergency service.

WALK over with the student unless he or she doesn’t want you to. Sometimes this feels less intimidating.

STAY or LEAVE while the student is meeting with a counselor, depending on the student’s wishes, and yours.

Other resources are available in the college and community, and you can always refer directly to them if you are familiar with them. If not, Counseling Services staff have contacts with many offices and agencies, and can help students locate the assistance they need.