

# Helping Students in Distress: A Faculty/Staff Resource Guide



Could one of these students be in distress?

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This booklet has been adapted from work done by Townson University

The *Helping Students in Distress: A Faculty/Staff Resource Guide* was developed to provide a useful resource for recognizing students who may be experiencing emotional, physical, or developmental challenges or difficulties. This brochure will provide some basic guidelines for a wide range of student behaviors. It also serves as a guide to assist you in making voluntary referrals to campus resources. We are not expecting that you would act as a professional counselor, but hope this information is helpful as you work with students in your role as a faculty or staff member.

University students typically encounter a great deal of stress during their academic experience. Although many students cope successfully with the demands of university life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students may experience stress as they attempt to perform well academically, begin their career path, navigate interpersonal relationships, and as they balance academic, social, work and family obligations. Some may feel isolated, sad, helpless and hopeless. The emotional and behavioral consequences are often played out on campus in classrooms, hallways, or offices.

As a faculty or staff member interacting with students, you are in a unique position to identify and help students who are in distress. You are likely to be the first person a student reaches out to for help. Your ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress and potential health issues and to make an initial intervention can have a significant impact on a student's future well-being. The purpose of this brochure is to help you to recognize some of the symptoms of students in distress, be supportive of their needs, and facilitate appropriate referrals to the WSU Spokane counselors, AWARE Network, other campus resources, or off-campus resources. These resources are available to assist and provide consultation to you regarding problems or situations that you encounter with students. You may report students of concern through the following link <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

## Signs of Distress

### Academic Problems

- career and course indecision
- excessive procrastination
- uncharacteristically poor preparation or performance
- repeated requests for extensions or special considerations
- disruptive classroom behavior
- excessive absence/tardiness
- references to suicide or harm to others in verbal statements or writing

### Behavioral Problems

- change in personal hygiene
- dramatic weight gain or loss
- frequently falling asleep in class
- irritability
- unruly behavior
- impaired speech
- disjointed thoughts
- tearfulness

### Interpersonal Problems

- always asking for help with personal problems
- dependency
- hanging around office
- disruptive behavior
- inability to get along with others
- complaints from other students
- avoiding or dominating discussions
- withdrawing
- difficulty concentrating
- physically harming self
- destruction of property
- anxiety and panic
- inability to communicate clearly
- loss of reality contact (e.g., hallucinations)
- intense emotion
- inappropriate responses

## Common Causes of Emotional Distress

- relationship problems/break-ups
- family problems
- grief and loss
- divorce of parents
- loneliness
- academic pressure or failure
- serious illness or injury
- difficulty adjusting to college life
- anxiety
- eating disorders
- difficulty adjusting to American culture
- sexual or physical abuse or assault
- identity confusion
- depression
- drug/alcohol abuse
- career indecision
- loss of goal or dream
- low self-esteem
- unplanned or undesired pregnancy
- language barriers
- financial issues

## What You Can Do

A faculty or staff member is often the first person to recognize when a student is in distress and to reach out to that student. Faculty and staff are not expected to provide personal counseling to students. Rather, faculty and staff play an important role in encouraging students to use campus resources, including facilitating a referral to on- or off-campus resources. We encourage you to speak directly to students when you sense that they are in academic or personal distress. Openly acknowledge that you are aware of their distress, that you are sincerely concerned about their welfare, and that you are willing to help them explore their options.

*The following pages identify some specific issues you may encounter with students and how you can work with the students.*



## **Suggestions for Supporting Students**

- Request to see the student in private.
- Briefly acknowledge your observations and perceptions of the student's situation and express your concerns directly and honestly.
- Listen carefully to what the student is troubled about and try to see the issue from their point of view without agreeing or disagreeing.
- Follow up with the student to see how they are doing.
- Strange and inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. The student can be informed that such behavior is distracting and inappropriate.
- Your ability to connect with an alienated student will allow the student to respond more effectively to your concerns.
- Help the student identify options for action and explore possible consequences; if possible, offer to phone or accompany the student to the counselors or other resources.
- Avoid labeling the student's behavior or the issues presented.
- Inform the student about what can be gained by meeting with a counselor to talk issues.
- Be open about the limits on your ability to help the student.
- If the student appears to be in imminent danger of hurting self or others, consult the counselors or the WSU Spokane Safety and Security Department immediately. You may also call 911 if the danger is immediate. **DO NOT PROMISE TO KEEP THREATS TO SELF OR OTHERS SECRET.**

### ***Specific Issues You May Encounter***

#### **Students with Troubling Behavior**

**Troubling behavior from a student usually causes us to feel alarmed, upset, or worried.**

When faculty or staff members encounter troubling behavior, they feel concerned about the student's well-being. Students exhibiting troubling behavior may have difficulties in and out of the classroom.

Examples of troubling behavior may include:

- A student who jokes about killing himself or herself.
- A student who perspires profusely when giving a presentation in front of the class.
- A student who discloses that his or her loved one was diagnosed with a terminal or serious illness.
- A student who seems to work harder than most students but can't pass an exam.
- A student who appears to be losing significant weight yet speaks with pride about how little he or she eats.
- A student whose writing appears disjointed and fragmented as though he or she cannot maintain a logical sequence of thought.
- A student who reports that FBI agents are following him or her around.

## Interventions for Troubling Behavior

**Faculty and staff have options for responding to student behavior that they find troubling.**

- Seek advice and counsel from the College Dean, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Assistant Director for Academic Support and Counseling, Campus Safety, or WSU Spokane counselors.
- Initiate a discussion with the student about the behavior that is of concern.
- Refer the student to campus departments or offices that have the necessary expertise and personnel to help.
- If you believe the situation deserves college attention or follow-up, contact your AWARE Network members by using the following link <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

## Students with Disruptive Behavior

**Disruptive behavior is student behavior that interferes with or interrupts the educational process of other students or the normal operations of the university.**

A disruptive student typically resists interventions or corrective action.

Specific examples of disruptive behavior include:

- A student who verbally abuses or intimidates another
- A student who interrupts the educational process in the class by:
  - Making hostile remarks out of turn
  - Aggressively taking over the lecture
- A student who notably disrupts the environment outside the classroom

## Interventions for Disruptive Behavior

The following procedures may be helpful when dealing with disruptive behavior:

- Verbally request that the student stop the disruptive behavior.
- If the problem persists, ask the student to leave the class or the area.
- Initiate a discussion with the student about the behavior that is of concern.
- Inform the student of the behavior that needs to change, define a timeline for when the change needs to be made, and explain the consequences if the change does not occur.
- After meeting with the student, document the content of the meeting in writing. It is sometimes helpful and/or necessary to provide the student with a written copy of the requirements and the consequences discussed.
- File an AWARE Network report by using the link <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

***If the situation is serious and requires immediate assistance, call 911.***

## Students with Threatening Behavior

Threatening behavior from a student typically leaves us feeling frightened and in fear for our personal safety. These behaviors should be taken very seriously.

Examples of threatening behavior include:

- A student who implies or makes a direct threat to harm him or herself or others.
- A student who displays a firearm or weapon.
- A student who physically confronts or attacks another person.
- A student who stalks or harasses another person.
- A student who sends threatening e-mails, letters or other correspondence to another person.

### Interventions for Threatening Behavior

**The safety and well-being of the campus community is the top priority when a student exhibits threatening or potentially violent behavior.**

Specific interventions include:

- Immediately contact the police at 911. Contact WSU Spokane Safety at (509) 358-7995.
- Contact the College Dean, Assistant Director for Academic Support and Counseling, Counselors, or the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs for advice and support.
- File a complaint at <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

***If the situation is serious and requires immediate assistance, call 911.***

## The Student who is Suicidal

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among college students. Suicidal persons are intensely ambivalent about killing themselves and typically respond to help; suicidal states are definitely time-limited and most who commit suicide are neither crazy nor psychotic.

**High-risk indicators include: feelings of hopelessness and futility; a severe loss or threat of loss; a detailed suicide plan; history of a previous attempt; history of alcohol or drug abuse; and feelings of alienation and isolation. Suicidal students usually want to communicate their feelings; any opportunity to do so should be encouraged.**

### Do:

- Be available to listen, to talk, to be concerned.
- Acknowledge that a threat or attempt at suicide is a plea for help.
- Take the student seriously. Eighty percent of those attempting suicide give warning of their intent.
- Refer the student to:

**24-hour Crisis Line: 509-838-4428**

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 800-273-TALK (8255)**

**WSU Spokane Counseling Services during normal business hours (M-F): 509-358-7740**

- Care for yourself. Helping someone who is suicidal is hard, demanding and draining work.

### Don't:

- Minimize the situation or depth of feeling, e.g., “Oh, it will be much better tomorrow.”
- Be afraid to ask the person if they are so depressed or sad that they want to hurt themselves (“You seem so upset and discouraged that I’m wondering if you are considering suicide.”).
- Overcommit yourself and, therefore, not be able to deliver on what you promise.
- Ignore your limitations.

## The Student who is Depressed

These students show a multitude of symptoms, which may include guilt, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. Physical symptoms include decreased or increased appetite, difficulty sleeping and low interest in daily activities. Depressed students often show low activity levels and have little energy.

### Do:

- Let the student know you're aware they are feeling down and you would like to help.
- Reach out and encourage the student to express how they are feeling. The student is often reluctant to talk initially, yet attention from others helps the student feel more worthwhile and comfortable opening up.
- Tell the student of your concern.

### Don't:

- Say "Don't worry," "Crying won't help," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."
- Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think that is a possibility.

## The Student with Anxiety

Dealing with unexpected events and conflicts are primary causes of anxiety. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise anxiety; high and unreasonable self-expectations also increase anxiety. These students often have trouble making decisions.

### Do:

- Let them discuss their feelings. Often, this alone relieves pressure.
- Remain calm and reassure students when appropriate.
- Be clear and explicit.

### Don't:

- Take responsibility for the student's emotional state.
- Make things more complicated.
- Overwhelm them with information or ideas.

## The Student who is Abusing Substances

A variety of substances are available that provide escape from pressing demands. The most abused substance is alcohol. Alcohol and other drug-related accidents remain the single greatest cause of preventable death among college students.

### Do:

- Share your honest concern and encourage the student to seek help.
- Be alert for signs of alcohol and drug abuse: preoccupation with drugs, periods of memory loss, or deteriorating performance in class.
- Get necessary help from WSU Spokane Safety and Security staff in instances of intoxication.

### Don't:

- Ignore the problem.
- Chastise or lecture.
- Encourage the behavior in any manner.



## The Student with an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders are believed to impact 20 percent of college students. Eating disorders include anorexia and bulimia. Anorexia involves restricting one's eating, often leading to malnourishment. Bulimia usually entails binge eating followed by excessive exercise, vomiting or the use of the medication such as diet pills. Eating disorders are widely considered to be the most dangerous mental health issues due to a high mortality rate.

The presence of an eating disorder in a student's life not only impacts their body image and food intake but can also affect a student's social and academic functioning. Students may struggle with attention and concentration issues, depressive symptoms, physical pain, low energy, social isolation and low self-esteem.

### Do:

- Recognize the danger associated with eating disorder behaviors rather than viewing them as a choice, lifestyle, or an attempt to obtain attention.
- Encourage the student to seek out formal help including counseling and a thorough medical assessment.
- Support the student even if they are not currently motivated to obtain help.

### Don't

- Assume that all thin students have an eating disorder by remembering that these issues impact students of all shapes and sizes.
- Confront a student by stating "I think that you have an eating disorder." Instead share your concerns with the student by naming the behaviors you've witnessed.
- Encourage the student to "just eat" or "stop throwing up." Recovery from an eating disorder often requires mental health treatment to alter behaviors.

## The Student who was Sexually Assaulted

Conservative estimates put the rate of attempted and/or completed sexual assaults for college students at 1 in 6. Moreover, these assaults are overwhelmingly committed by someone the student knows. These incidents of sexual assault are very traumatic. The nature of sexual assault makes it an inherently humiliating crime, which often makes it very difficult for students to talk about. These students may have difficulties with concentration or motivation, suffer sleep disturbances, have trouble trusting others, and may feel highly anxious and/or afraid.

### Do:

- Listen to what they are telling you and believe them.
- Help students to understand and consider their options regarding medical and psychological care, as well as legal or judicial proceedings.
- Inform the student that you are not a confidential source and will have to report the situation if they continue to speak with you about it.
- **Refer students to the WSU Title IX Coordinator in Pullman at 509—335-8288, WSUS Title IX Liaison at 509-358-7526, or for a confidential source, WSUS Counseling at 509-358-7740.**
- Encourage them to seek support. Provide the students with information for off-campus resources:

24-Hour Crisis Line: 509-838-4428

Spokane Crime Victim Services: 866-751-7119

Sexual Assault and Family Trauma: 509-624-7273

YWCA Alternatives to Domestic Violence: 509-326-2255

Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-562-6025 (voice/TTY)

National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

**Don't:**

- Ask a lot of prying questions, as you may inadvertently send the message that you don't believe them or that you are questioning how they handled themselves in that situation.
- Blame them for what happened.
- Be skeptical or show that you don't believe them. The vast majority of students do **NOT** make up stories about being assaulted.
- Try to be this person's only support, recovery takes a long time and often involves the need for professional services.

## **The Student who is Academically Underachieving**

While it is easy to conclude that the academically underachieving student is simply unmotivated, the real situation is often more complicated. Students may be preoccupied with situational and family problems, or have emotional problems that are distracting and disabling. They may have learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder or substance abuse problems. Previous failures for any reason can engender a hopeless outlook and a defensive attitude of "I don't care."

**Do:**

- Inquire compassionately as to what the problems are.
- Provide enough time for the student to open up. Their initial defensiveness might be off-putting to an instructor who values involvement and dedication in students.
- Help the student assess the source of underachievement, e.g., distractions, preoccupations, emotional problems, depression, difficulties with underlying academic and study skills.
- Empathically address the difficulty of dealing with a failure mentality.
- Submit an AWARE Network Report.

**Don't:**

- Take the student's problem personally or be insulted that they do not find the class engaging.
- Assume too quickly the problem is mere laziness.
- Punish the student for lack of involvement.
- Dismiss the student and problem as unworkable in one meeting.

## **Resources**

Presenting yourself as knowledgeable about campus resources can ease a student's discomfort about seeking help. Let the student know you are concerned about them and their well-being. Assist the student in understanding that a referral is not a rejection of them. Here are some suggestions:

### **Emergency Referrals** (when the student is in imminent danger of hurting self or others)

- Take the student seriously; show concern.
- Acknowledge the student's call for help.
- Ask the student if he or she is so depressed or sad that he or she wants to hurt self or others.
- Refer the student to:
  - 24-hour Crisis Line: 509-838-4428**
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 800-273-TALK (8255)**
  - WSU Spokane Counseling Services during normal business hours (M-F): 509-358-7740**
  - WSU Spokane 24-hour campus Safety and Security at 509-358-7995**
- If a student has already left your class, office, or location, and you are concerned, you may call 911 and ask for a mental health check to be done for the student.

## Non-Emergency Referrals:

- Encourage the student to contact the appropriate department directly to schedule an initial interview.
- Offer to let the student call from your office if you believe your extra support and encouragement will help the student make the contact.
- Discuss confidentiality of services that are outlined on the next pages of this brochure.
- Provide information on other appropriate campus resources using the phone numbers in this brochure.

## WSU Spokane Counseling

Our staff provides comprehensive counseling services for WSUS students and assists students in overcoming barriers to their personal and educational success.

Counseling Services appointments are made by calling 509-358-7740

## Disability Support Services

WSU Spokane complies with Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Washington Administrative Code (WAC), which prohibit discrimination solely on the basis of an individual's disability from any program or service offered by WSU. We offer a number of services for students who face physical or developmental challenges related to going to school. If the student has a documented disability, contact Disability Support Services to request services or accommodations.

### **Associate Director for Student Affairs**

Liz West  
509-358-7534

## AWARE Network

The AWARE Network is designed to assist faculty and staff when students display behavior that may be of concern. Please make reports at <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

## Medical Emergencies

If you have a true medical emergency while on campus, call 9-911 and call the WSUS 24-hour campus Safety and Security Line at 509-358-7995 and they will guide the ambulance to your location.

All WSU Spokane students enrolled for seven or more credit hours are required to pay a student health and wellness fee. This fee provides them access to primary outpatient health care by Rockwood Clinic.

Information about Clinic Services can be found at <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/health-and-wellness/clinic-services/>.

## Rockwood Urgent Care Facilities:

### **Downtown Urgent Care**

400 E. 5<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
Spokane, WA 99202  
509-838-2531

### **Valley Urgent Care**

14408 E. Sprague Ave.  
Spokane Valley, WA 99216  
509-755-5712

### **North Spokane Urgent Care**

9001 Country Homes Blvd  
Spokane, WA 99218  
509-755-5400

### **Argonne Urgent Care**

2713 N. Argonne Road  
Spokane, WA 99212  
(509) 342-3980

**South Hill Urgent Care**  
3016 E 57th Ave, Suite 24  
Spokane, WA 99223  
(509) 342-3971

**Liberty Lake Urgent Care**  
1326, N. Stanford Ln  
Liberty Lake, WA 99019  
(509) 342-3990

Information about Rockwood Clinic Primary Care to which students have access, visit <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/health-and-wellness/clinic-locations/>.

## **Standards of Conduct for Students**

Admission to WSU Spokane carries with it the expectation that students will conduct themselves as responsible members of the University community, that they will comply with established rules and regulations of the University, maintain high standards of honesty and integrity, and respect the rights, privileges, and property of other members of the community.

WSU Spokane expects that students will conform to the laws of the greater society and regulations established to assure the orderly conduct of the affairs of the University. The student is at once a member of the community at large and the University community. As such, the student is subject to the rights, responsibilities, laws, and regulations of each community and accountable to both. To accomplish these purposes the University is governed by rules, regulations, and procedures designed to safeguard its functions and protect the rights and freedoms of all members of the University community.

You can find the Standards of Conduct at <http://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=504-26>

You can submit reports for the following:

**Standards of Conduct:** [https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?WashingtonStateUniv&layout\\_id=7](https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?WashingtonStateUniv&layout_id=7)

**Academic Integrity:** [https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?WashingtonStateUniv&layout\\_id=8](https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?WashingtonStateUniv&layout_id=8)

**Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct:** <https://conduct.wsu.edu/file-complaint/report-discrimination-discriminatory-sexual-harassment-sexual-misconduct/>

**AWARE Network:** <https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/>.

### **Assistant Director for Academic Support and Counseling Services**

Jane Summers  
509-358-7537  
[Jane.summers@wsu.edu](mailto:Jane.summers@wsu.edu)

### **Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs**

Dr. Jim Mohr  
509-358-7526  
[James.mohr@wsu.edu](mailto:James.mohr@wsu.edu)

## Other Resources

<b>Campus Resources</b>	<b>Community Resources</b>
<b>Academic Support and Counseling</b> <a href="http://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/academic-support">http://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/academic-support</a> 509-358-7740	<b>WA State 211</b> Call for health and human services information 2-1-1 <a href="http://www.win211.org">www.win211.org</a>
<b>AWARE (early alert notification)</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/counseling-services/aware-network/</a>	<b>Catholic Charities of Spokane</b> 509-358-4250 <a href="http://www.catholiccharitiesspokane.org">http://www.catholiccharitiesspokane.org</a>
<b>Campus Safety WSU Spokane</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/campus-security/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/campus-security/</a> 509-358-7995	<b>Frontier Behavioral Health</b> 509-838-4428 <a href="http://fbhwa.org">http://fbhwa.org</a>
<b>Faculty and Staff Counseling Resources</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/welcome-to-the-wsu-web/counseling-services-for-staff-and-faculty/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/welcome-to-the-wsu-web/counseling-services-for-staff-and-faculty/</a>	<b>National Suicide Prevention Hotline</b> 1-800-273-TALK (8255) 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)
<b>Financial Services</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/financial-services/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/financial-services/</a> 509-358-7905	<b>Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence 24-Hour Hotline</b> 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) <a href="http://www.thehotline.org/">http://www.thehotline.org/</a>
<b>Health Services Overview</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/health-and-wellness/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/health-and-wellness/</a> 509-358-7963	<b>Spokane Treatment and Recovery Services</b> 509-477-4631 <a href="http://www.spokanerecovery.org/">http://www.spokanerecovery.org/</a>
<b>Registrar</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/registrar-enrollment-services/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/registrar-enrollment-services/</a> 509-358-7530	<b>Washington State Youth Suicide Prevention</b> 1-800-273-talk <a href="http://www.vspp.org">www.vspp.org</a>
<b>Student Conduct and Concerns</b> <a href="https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/student-conduct-concerns/">https://spokane.wsu.edu/studentaffairs/student-conduct-concerns/</a> 509-358-7537	<b>Washington State Mental Health Organizations</b> <a href="http://www.usrecovery.info/Mental-Health-Organizations/Washington">www.usrecovery.info/Mental-Health-Organizations/Washington</a>
<b>Student Diversity Center</b> 509-358-7514	<b>WA State Domestic Violence Helpline</b> 1-800-562-6025 (8:00am – 5:00 pm) <a href="http://www.wadvhotline.org/">http://www.wadvhotline.org/</a>
<b>Veterans Support</b> 509-358-7963	<b>YWCA Alternatives to Domestic Violence 24-hour hotline</b> 509-326-2255 <a href="https://www.domesticshelters.org/wa/spokane/9920/1/ywca-alternatives-to-domestic-violence-program#.V_waQY-cGuk">https://www.domesticshelters.org/wa/spokane/9920/1/ywca-alternatives-to-domestic-violence-program#.V_waQY-cGuk</a>