

**COMMON PROBLEMS  
THAT STUDENTS MAY PRESENT  
WHEN TALKING WITH AN ADVISOR/FACULTY**

The following pages contain descriptions and practical guidelines for responding to specific distressed & distressing students.

**The Student Who Asks for Academic Leniency Due to Psychological Issues**

There may be times when a student comes to you to request your leniency with grades or due dates because they report struggling with emotional or psychological interference. Psychological issues can impede an individual's cognitive functioning, and occasionally leniency is warranted. A student with a documented and diagnosed mental health condition can seek accommodations through the Student Access Center. On occasion, a student will experience a crisis that impairs their functioning temporarily or that is newly diagnosed. In this case, it can feel as though an additional burden is placed on you as University staff/faculty member to determine how much academic assistance a student needs, if a leniency is warranted and how serious their psychological issue might be.

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer the student to the Student Access Center to determine eligibility for academic accommodations</li> <li>• Listen to the student's request and consider leniency, if warranted</li> <li>• Consider referring the student to Counseling Services (CS) to evaluate the seriousness of the psychological issue. Ask the student to sign a release of information at CS so that the counselor can communicate with you about the student and provide consultation on the student's request for leniency.</li> <li>• Encourage the student to meet with their academic advisor to explore possible course withdrawal, if necessary</li> <li>• Contact CS to provide information that may be helpful and/or important for the counselor to know if the student is being seen at CS currently or seeks treatment in the future. When in doubt, if any personal information the student tells you raises red flags, it should be passed on to CS and/or Office of Student Life(OSL) regardless or whether the student is in counseling.</li> <li>• Call the campus or local police if you have immediate concerns and believe a welfare check is needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shame or belittle the student for requesting leniency</li> <li>• Question the validity of their psychological concerns. When you are concerned about the validity of their concerns, referring the student to CS and requesting that the student sign a release for you to communicate with the counselor can be helpful in decision-making around the student's request.</li> <li>• Avoid the student as an alternative to addressing their request</li> </ul>

**The Dependent/Passive Student**

You may find yourself feeling increasingly drained and responsible for this student in a way that is beyond your normal involvement. It may seem that even the utmost time and energy given to these students is not enough. They often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe the amount of time received is a reflection of their worth. It is helpful if the student can be connected with proper sources of support on-campus and in the community in general.

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let students make their own decisions</li> <li>• Set firm and clear limits on your personal time and involvement</li> <li>• Offer referrals to other resources on- and off-campus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get trapped into giving continual advice, special conditions/treatment, etc.</li> <li>• Avoid the student as an alternative to setting and enforcing limits</li> <li>• Over commit</li> </ul>

## The Student Who Discloses Distress

Students have many interactions with faculty and staff in multiple settings. Given the number of interactions, a student who is experiencing emotional difficulties might disclose personal information. The following guidelines may be useful in determining how to respond to a student disclosure.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of your department and university responsibilities. Your department might have a policy for how to respond to student distress. This is important to know in advance. The University also has a set of guidelines for responding to potentially dangerous students. That information can be accessed at <a href="http://www.k-state.edu/studentlife/">http://www.k-state.edu/studentlife/</a></li> <li>• Include support services (Office of Student Life, Counseling Services, Academic Assistance Center, Student Access Center, Lafene Health Center, SafeZone, etc.) in your syllabus.</li> <li>• If you're concerned about a student, it may be helpful to inform the Office of Student Life about your concerns.</li> <li>• Be prepared to provide an alternative assignment or way of responding. Should a particular assignment emotionally trigger a student, it might be important to provide an alternative assignment. In this case, it will be useful to consult with the Student Access Center.</li> <li>• Ask questions before responding. Asking questions can help to clarify the situation and ensure effective communication.</li> <li>• Consult with a professional or co-worker. There are many ways to respond to a situation, it can be helpful to receive consultation from another individual to receive support and explore possible avenues of responding. The Counseling Services or Office of Student Life staff is available to consult with you.</li> <li>• Set appropriate limits. It may be necessary to set limits with students regarding appropriate conduct and/or disclosure.</li> <li>• Use reflective statements. Responding reflectively assists in the communication process by allowing the individual to feel understood.</li> <li>• Provide a referral for counseling and follow-up. It is important to provide a space for students to talk with a professional who can provide support and intervention. It may be helpful to follow-up with the student.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore the situation. Taking no action reinforces the student's already shaky perception that s/he has been wronged. Ignoring the student may also have legal implications</li> <li>• Overreact. Instead, listen, support, and guide the student to appropriate resources</li> </ul>

## The Anxious Student

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one's well-being. For some students, the cause of their anxiety will be clear; but for others, it is difficult to pinpoint the source. Regardless of the cause, the resulting symptoms may include rapid heart palpitations; chest pain or discomfort; dizziness; sweating; trembling or shaking; and cold, clammy hands. The student may also complain of difficulty concentrating, obsessive thinking, feeling continually "on the edge," having difficulty making decisions, or being too fearful/unable to take action. In rare cases, a student may experience a panic attack in which the physical symptoms occur so spontaneously and intensely that the student may fear s/he is dying. The following guidelines are appropriate in most situations.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage the student to discuss his/her feelings and thoughts, as this alone often relieves some pressure</li> <li>• Provide reassurance without being unrealistic</li> <li>• Be clear and direct</li> <li>• Provide a safe and quiet environment until the symptoms subside</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting</li> <li>• Take responsibility for the student's emotional state</li> <li>• Overwhelm the student with information or ideas to "fix" his/ her condition</li> </ul>

## The Depressed Student

Depression, and the variety of ways it manifests itself, is part of a natural emotional and physical response to life's ups and downs. With the busy and demanding life of a college student, it is safe to assume that most students will experience periods of reactive depression during their college careers. It is when the depressive symptoms become so extreme or are so enduring that they begin to interfere with the student's ability to function in school, work, or social environments, that the student will come to your attention and be in need of assistance. Due to the opportunities that faculty, staff, and RAs have to observe and interact with students, you are often the first to recognize that a student is in distress. Look for a pattern of these indicators:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tearfulness, general emotionality, or a marked lack of emotion</li> <li>• Dependency (a student who makes excessive requests for your time)</li> <li>• Markedly diminished performance</li> <li>• Lack of energy / motivation</li> <li>• Infrequent or sporadic class attendance</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased anxiety, test anxiety, performance anxiety</li> <li>• Irritability</li> <li>• Deterioration in personal hygiene</li> <li>• Alcohol or drug use</li> <li>• Problems eating (loss of weight)</li> <li>• Problems Sleeping</li> </ul> |
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Students experiencing depression often respond well to a small amount of attention for a short period of time. Early intervention increases the chances of the student's rapid return to optimal performance.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let the student know you've noticed that s/he appears to be feeling down and you would like to help</li> <li>• Reach out and encourage the student to discuss how s/he is feeling</li> <li>• Offer options to further examine and manage the symptoms of depression (e.g. referral to Counseling Services)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize the student's feelings, e.g. "Don't worry. Everything will be better tomorrow." Bombard the student with "fix it" solutions or advice</li> <li>• Chastise the student for poor or incomplete work</li> <li>• Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you suspect s/he may be (e.g. "Have you had thoughts of harming yourself?") See below "The Suicidal Student" for further information).</li> </ul>

## The Suicidal Student

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. It is important to take all suicidal comments or behavior seriously and respond appropriately. Overall high risk indicators include: feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and futility; a significant loss or threat of loss; a suicide plan; a history of a previous attempt or knowledge of someone who has attempted suicide; history of alcohol or drug abuse; feelings of alienation and isolation; and preoccupation with death. Suicidal behavior can be classified as either imminent or ambiguous. In the case of imminent threat (i.e. student tells you he or she has taken pills) stay calm, get the student's name, location, what s/he has taken and call 911. In the case of an ambiguous situation, inform your supervisor or department chair and contact CS for a consultation. In addition:

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the student seriously — 80% of individuals who attempt suicide give warning of their intent</li> <li>• Be direct — ask if the student is suicidal, if s/he has a plan and if s/he has the means to carry out that plan. This exploration may actually decrease the impulse to commit suicide.</li> <li>• Be available to listen but refer the student to Counseling Services for additional help. Do your best to make sure the student actually gets help.</li> <li>• Take care of yourself, know your limitations. Allow yourself to receive support from those close to you or those trained to provide it. Responding to suicidal students is emotionally draining.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize the situation</li> <li>• Leave the student alone if s/he has a plan</li> <li>• Be afraid of planting the idea of suicide in an already depressed mind by inquiring about it (the person will very likely feel relieved that someone has noticed and cared enough to discuss it with him/her)</li> <li>• Over commit yourself. Doing so may leave you eventually feeling overwhelmed or unable to deliver on what you promised</li> </ul>

## The Student Who Is Being Disruptive In Class

Disruptive behavior can be defined as any behavior that interferes with, disrupts or prevents instruction or learning activities. However, what is considered to be “disruptive” may vary depending on the expectations you have set for your students and the impact that the behavior has on others. Disruption may range from mild distractions to serious threats, violence, or dangerous (see the sections on how to respond to a violent or verbally aggressive student). The course instructor has the authority to determine what behavior is considered disruptive in their course.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set and communicate expectations about what is considered appropriate conduct in the classroom orally and in your syllabus (e.g., arriving on time, asking permission to leave the room during exams, waiting until class is over to pull out backpacks, turning off cell phones, not talking out of turn, no food or drink allowed, etc.).</li> <li>• Provide the class (rather than the individual student) with a word of caution and allow an opportunity for the behavior to stop</li> <li>• Exercise authority with compassion, respect, and self-restraint</li> <li>• Talk to the student after class</li> <li>• Communicate kindly the consequences for continued disruption</li> <li>• Ask a student to leave class if their behavior impedes the instructor's ability to teach effectively and they have been provided with a warning.</li> <li>• The Office of the Provost has guidelines for the classroom management of disruptive students at <a href="http://k-state.edu/provost/resources/teaching/studentconduc.html">k-state.edu/provost/resources/teaching/studentconduc.html</a> or refer or walk the student to the Office of Student Life for consultation about appropriate classroom behavior or consideration for violation of the K-State Student Code of Conduct, which includes “disruption of the academic environment.”</li> <li>• If the student refuses to leave, you may contact campus police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ridicule the student and his/her behavior</li> <li>• Don't discipline a student in front of the class, unless absolutely necessary</li> <li>• Assume that you can permanently remove a registered student from a class without formal review through the Provosts' policy for disruptive students or the Student Code of Conduct.</li> <li>• Get into an argument or shouting match</li> <li>• Become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., “You can't talk to me that way”</li> <li>• Press for explanations for their behavior</li> </ul>

## The Student Suspected of Substance Abuse/Addiction

Alcohol is the preferred drug on college campuses and is the most widely used psychoactive drug. Alcohol abusers in college populations may also abuse other drugs, both prescription and illicit. Patterns of use are affected by fads and peer pressure. The effects of alcohol on the user are well known. Student alcohol abuse is most often identified by faculty, staff, or RAs when irresponsible, unpredictable behavior affects the learning, work, or living environment (e.g., drunk and disorderly in class, office or residence halls), or when a combination of the health and social impairments associated with alcohol abuse sabotages student performance. Because of the denial that exists in most substance abusers, it is important to express your concern about the student not in terms of suspicions about alcohol and other drugs, but in terms of specific changes in behavior or performance.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confront the student with his/her behavior that is of concern</li> <li>• Address the substance abuse issue if the student is open and willing</li> <li>• Offer support and concern for the student's overall well-being</li> <li>• Make a referral to an appropriate helping department or agency (e.g., Counseling Services, Alcohol &amp; Other Drug Education (AODES))</li> <li>• Maintain contact with the student after a referral is made</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convey judgment or criticism about the student's substance abuse</li> <li>• Make allowances for the student's irresponsible behavior</li> <li>• Ignore signs of intoxication in the classroom, workplace, or residence hall</li> </ul>

## The Verbally Aggressive Student

Students may become verbally abusive when they encounter frustrating situations which they believe are beyond their control. They can displace anger and frustration from those situations onto the nearest target. Explosive outbursts or ongoing belligerent, hostile behavior become this student's way of gaining power and control in an otherwise out-of-control experience. It is important to remember that the student is generally not angry at you personally, but is angry at his/her world. You may have become a convenient object for his/her pent-up frustrations. This behavior is often associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge their anger and frustration, e.g., "I hear how angry you are"</li> <li>• Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion, e.g., "It appears you are upset because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen"</li> <li>• Reduce stimulation; invite the person to a quiet place if this is comfortable. However, do not invite the person to a quiet place if you fear for your safety. In all instances, ensure that another person is easily accessible to you in the event that the student's behavior escalates</li> <li>• Allow them to tell you what is upsetting them</li> <li>• Be directive and firm about the behaviors you will accept, e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close," and/or "I cannot listen to you when you are yelling"</li> <li>• Help the student problem-solve and deal with the real issues when they become calm, e.g., "I'm sorry you are so upset; I'd like to help if I can"</li> <li>• Be honest and genuine; do not placate aggression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get into an argument or shouting match</li> <li>• Become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way"</li> <li>• Press for explanations for their behavior</li> <li>• Ignore the situation</li> <li>• Touch the student, as this may be perceived as aggression or otherwise unwanted attention</li> </ul>

## The Violent Student

Violence due to emotional distress is rare and typically occurs when the student's level of frustration has been so intense or of such an enduring nature as to erode all of the student's emotional controls. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" best applies here. Violent behavior is often associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation, e.g., "I can see you're really upset and may be tempted to lash out"</li> <li>• Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable without denying his/her feelings, e.g., "You certainly have the right to be angry, but breaking things is not OK"</li> <li>• Get necessary help – Call 911. (send someone for other staff, public safety, etc.)</li> <li>• Stay safe: have easy access to a door; keep furniture between you and the student; keep door open if possible &amp; appropriate; make certain that a staff, faculty, or another person is nearby and accessible; in some instances, you may wish to see the student only with another person present if you fear for your safety.</li> <li>• The K-State Police Department responds to all threatening campus situations. When students are involved, the Critical Incident Response Team, or CIRT, promptly convenes, gathers information, plans and coordinates the response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore warning signs that the student is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, threats</li> <li>• Threaten or corner the student</li> <li>• Touch the student</li> <li>• See the student alone if you fear for your safety</li> </ul>

