

REACH: Tips for Faculty to Support Student in Distress

University of Virginia

Student Health and Wellness

Are you concerned about a student or worried about their mental health? Here are some effective approaches for assisting a student in distress. You can remember these steps using the **REACH** acronym.

Recognize warning signs

Recognizing the warning signs requires awareness of what behaviors to look for. Students may not verbally express their distress, but their behaviors often signify that something might be going on beneath the surface. Some common examples of warning signs include:

- Skipping classes frequently
- Avoiding eye contact
- Withdrawing from peers
- Neglecting personal hygiene, including sudden weight loss or gain
- Sudden change in mood
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances
- Negative or hopeless outlook on life
- Frequent blaming of self or others
- Expressing thoughts of self-harm or harm to others

Express your concern

Students often appreciate when you notice their distress and say something. If you notice something is off:

- Reach out to the student by email or after class to check-in
- Share your concern in a non-judgmental manner. For example: “I noticed that you have missed class a few times lately. Is everything alright?”

Acknowledge the student's distress with non-judgmental listening

- Wait for the student to tell you in their own words what has been going on
- Don't interrupt or overwhelm them with too much information
- Reflect back that you understand what they are communicating and offer to help

Connect with the student by showing you care

Students often want to feel seen and cared for, especially if they lack a sense of belonging at the University

- Directly express that you care about the student's wellbeing
- Ask them what they need from you or others right now
- If possible, set up a follow-up meeting with the student
- If you don't hear from them, follow-up again by email or after class and let them know you are thinking of them

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Help by referring the student to ongoing support

If the student needs help beyond what you can provide, connect them with the right support services.

- Encourage the student to call CAPS (434) 243-5150 or visit HealthyHoos to schedule an initial appointment or use Timely Care's virtual mental health services: timelycare.com/uva

If a student expresses thoughts of suicide, self-harm, or thoughts of hurting others, you can walk them to the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to meet with a crisis counselor Monday- Friday, 8:30 am- 5:00 pm. You can also call CAPS for 24/7 confidential, clinical support: (434) 243-5150. If the student is in immediate danger of harming themselves or others, dial 911.

Things to avoid:

- Avoid minimizing the student's situation.
- Avoid making assumptions about student's situation "Your grades are great. Are you sure you're really feeling anxious?"
- Avoid jumping to conclusion based on your observations about student's behaviors. For example, "I think you are depressed since you look sad in my class."
- Avoid playing the role of a mental health counselor. Instead, be honest about the limitations of what you can offer in terms of emotional support and encourage seeking help and referral to mental health resources.
- Avoid making judgmental comments about student's identity. For example, "You are older than your peers, you should know how to cope with your your distress. "You are a graduate student, you should know how to cope with your academic challenges."

Supporting a student in distress can be stressful and rewarding at the same time. Remember to take care of yourself and practice self-care intentionally. If you notice that the student's distress is impacting your emotional wellbeing and would like to speak with a counselor, reach out to Faculty and Employee Assistance Program (FEAP) at www.uvafeap.com.

Additional crisis support and response resources

Suicide and Crisis Life Line: Dial 988 or visit 988lifeline.org

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741. Students of Color can text STEVE to 741741.

Trevor Lifeline (LGBTQ): (866) 488-7386 or text "Trevor" to 202-304-1200 (7 Days/Week, 3pm-10pm EST).

Sexual Assault Resource Agency (SARA): (434) 977-7273

Region Ten Emergency Services: (434) 972-1800