California Community Colleges



Beyond the Breaking Point: Supporting Students Through Distress and Crisis

Partnership and Acknowledgment

California Community Colleges

CARS | Center for Applied Research Solutions

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Beyond the Breaking Point: Supporting Students Through Distress and Crisis

was developed through a collaborative partnership to support California Community Colleges in strengthening their response to student mental health needs.

This toolkit was created in partnership with the Health & Wellness Program of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS).

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To learn more about the Health & Wellness Program at the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS), visit:

- https://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org/
- https://www.cars-rp.org/

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Introduction to The Toolkit

As the largest higher education system in the nation, the California Community Colleges are uniquely positioned to serve as a vital support network for students navigating mental health challenges and significant distress. Community college staff, faculty, and administrators are often the first point of contact for students in distress. While you are not expected to diagnose or treat mental health conditions, your role is to notice distress, respond with care, and connect students to appropriate resources.

Many staff and faculty share that they feel unsure what to say, how to respond, or whether they are "doing the right thing" in these moments, especially when situations fall into gray areas rather than clear emergencies. This toolkit is designed to help you navigate those moments with greater clarity and confidence.

Grounded in a **trauma-informed approach**, this toolkit recognizes that students may be navigating a range of visible and invisible challenges. It emphasizes safety, trust, empowerment, and connection in every interaction.

This toolkit is designed for flexible use. You do not need to read it from start to finish. Instead, scan for what you need based on the situation and use the quick-reference tools, communication scripts, and worksheets to guide your next steps.

Worksheets are included in **Section 10: Professional Development Worksheets** and can be used individually or in team settings to practice and strengthen your response skills.

This Toolkit Supports You To:

- Recognize escalating distress.
- Respond using effective, trauma-informed communication strategies.
- Make warm, informed referrals.
- Maintain your own well-being.



For campus teams seeking more advanced coordination strategies, additional resources are included in Section 9 to support Behavioral Intervention Teams (BIT) and other specialized roles.

This toolkit is part of a broader learning series designed to support campuses in responding to student distress. If you're looking to go deeper, you can explore the following recorded sessions:

- **Beyond the Breaking Point: Supporting Students Through Distress and Crisis**
- **Enhancing Behavioral Intervention Teams for a Safer, More Supportive Campus**

SECTION 1:
Fundamentals



SECTION 1: Fundamentals

What We Know About Student Well-Being

Across college campuses, students are navigating a wide range of challenges that impact their well-being and ability to succeed academically.

National data (American College Health Association, National College Health Assessment) shows that:

- A significant number of students report that stress negatively impacts their academic performance.
- Students frequently experience challenges related to mental health, finances, sleep, relationships, and overall well-being that affect their ability to stay engaged in school.

These experiences are not isolated. They are widespread and increasingly complex.

While these challenges are significant, campuses are uniquely positioned to support students in meaningful ways.

Every interaction, whether in a classroom, office, or virtual space, can contribute to students feeling supported, seen, and connected.

Colleges and Universities Play a Critical Role in Supporting Student Well-Being by:

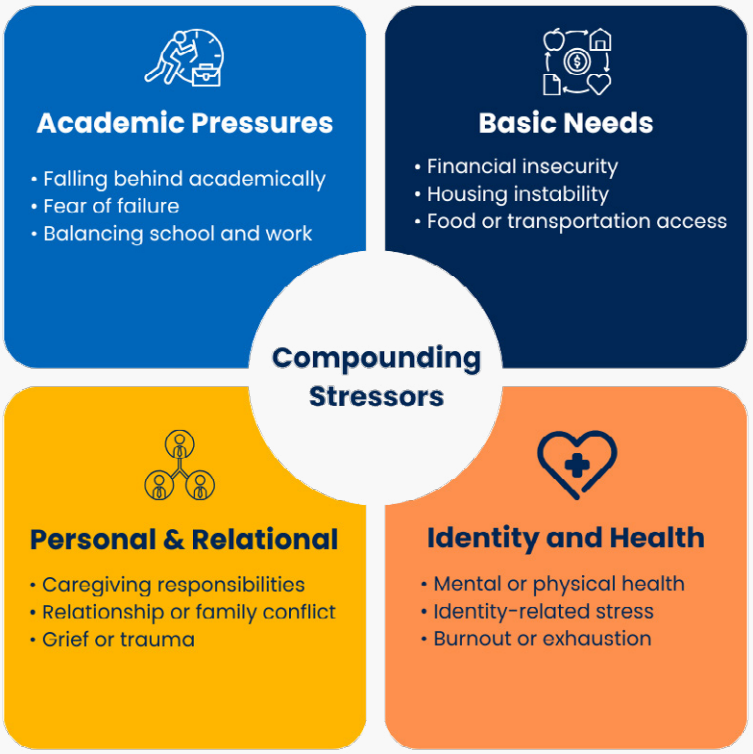
- Providing access to resources.
- Creating opportunities for connection and belonging.
- Identifying and responding to concerns early.

Common Factors That Can Contribute to Student Distress

Students often navigate multiple, overlapping challenges simultaneously, which can intensify their level of distress and impact how they show up academically and personally.

This is often referred to as **compounding stressors**, when different areas of a student's life (such as academic pressures and basic needs) intersect and build on one another, making it more difficult to cope.

While these experiences are not always visible, they can significantly shape a student's ability to cope, communicate, and seek support.



Key Terms for Shared Understanding

The following terms are meant to create a shared understanding and make it easier to respond to students with clarity and care.

As you move through the toolkit, these terms will help anchor your understanding and support more consistent, informed responses across different situations.



Distress

Distress refers to emotional, psychological, or situational challenges that impact a student's ability to function or cope. This can include stress, anxiety, grief, overwhelm, or life challenges such as financial strain or relationship issues. Distress exists on a spectrum and does not always indicate a crisis.



Crisis

A crisis occurs when a student's ability to cope is overwhelmed, and there may be an immediate risk of harm to themselves or others. Crises often require urgent intervention and connection to professional or emergency support.



Trauma-Informed Approach

A trauma-informed approach recognizes that many students have experienced trauma and that these experiences may influence how they think, feel, and respond.

This approach emphasizes:

- **Safety:** Creating environments where students feel physically and emotionally safe.
- **Trust:** Building transparency and consistency.
- **Empowerment:** Supporting student choice and voice.
- **Connection:** Fostering supportive relationships.

You do not need to know a student's history to take a trauma-informed approach. Small and respectful interactions can make a meaningful difference.



Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance refers to a person's ability to manage and cope with difficult emotions or situations.

Students may have varying levels of distress tolerance depending on:

- Life experiences
- Current stressors
- Available support systems

When distress tolerance is low, students may become overwhelmed more quickly and need additional support to navigate situations.



Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about wanting to die or harm oneself. These thoughts can range from passive (e.g., wishing to not wake up the next morning) to active (e.g., thinking about a plan to harm oneself).

Not all students who experience suicidal thoughts will act on them. However, all expressions of suicidal ideation should be taken seriously and responded to with care and connection to support.



Help-Seeking Behavior

Help-seeking behavior refers to a student's willingness and ability to reach out for support when experiencing distress.

Students may not seek help for many reasons, including:

- Stigma or fear of judgment
- Lack of awareness of available resources
- Past negative experiences with systems
- Cultural or personal beliefs about self-reliance

Creating environments where help-seeking is **normalized, encouraged, and met with compassion** can increase the likelihood that students access the support they need.



Basic Needs

Basic needs refer to essential resources required for a student's well-being and ability to succeed, including:

- Food
- Housing
- Financial stability
- Transportation
- Access to healthcare

When basic needs are unmet, students may experience increased stress and reduced capacity to focus on academics. In some cases, what may appear as emotional distress may be directly connected to unmet basic needs.



Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT)

BIT is a campus-based team that brings together professionals with expertise in threat assessment and violence prevention to proactively address behavioral concerns before they escalate.



Community, Advocacy, Response, and Engagement (CARE) Team

A CARE Team is a campus-based group that focuses on providing early support and coordinated care for students experiencing distress or challenges.

Note: The structure, roles, and names of these teams may vary by campus. In some institutions, these functions may be combined.

These terms will be used throughout the toolkit. They are intended to serve as a foundation across each section. Please return to this section as a reference point to help guide your understanding.

SECTION 2:
Understanding Student Distress Along A Continuum



SECTION 2: Understanding Student Distress Along A Continuum

Student distress does not look the same in every situation. Students may present a range of experiences, from manageable stress to more significant challenges that impact their ability to function.

Understanding how to recognize and respond to these differences is an important part of supporting students effectively.

This section introduces a framework to help you identify varying levels of distress and consider appropriate responses.

Understanding the Continuum

Student experiences exist along a continuum, from everyday stress to more significant distress and, in some cases, crisis.

- **Stress** is a normal part of life and can often be managed with existing coping strategies.
- **Distress** occurs when stress begins to interfere with a student's ability to function.
- **Crisis** involves immediate risk and requires urgent intervention.

Students may move along this continuum depending on their circumstances, support systems, and experiences. Understanding where a student may fall on this continuum can help guide how you respond. Not every situation requires immediate intervention. However, every situation benefits from thoughtful and supportive engagement.

Understanding the Difference: Stress, Distress, and Crisis

The distress continuum outlines how student experiences can range from moderate to severe distress, including feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal, and passive thoughts such as "I wish I wasn't here," to crisis situations involving active suicidal thoughts, plans, or access to means.

See the full distress continuum table on the following page for detailed indicators, response guidance, and referral considerations across each level of student distress.

To build confidence in using this framework, **Worksheet 1: Distress Continuum Assessment** provides an opportunity to practice identifying levels of distress and determining appropriate responses.

Distress Continuum

Continuum Level	Indicators and Patterns to Notice	What You Might Hear or See	Staff Response in the Moment	Referral and Escalation
Stress	Temporary stress that does not significantly impair functioning; student remains engaged; and concerns are specific and situational.	Missed class due to work; asks for notes; requests a deadline adjustment; and expresses feeling stressed but continues problem-solving.	Acknowledge and normalize stress; clarify the immediate need; offer one or two concrete next steps; and encourage the use of academic and/or student supports.	Academic support, tutoring, and advising and basic needs resources if a specific barrier is identified.
Distress	Noticeable change from baseline; stress interfering with functioning; increased absences; declining performance; difficulty concentrating; withdrawal from peers or class; persistent impairment; and expressions of anxiety, irritability, tearfulness, emotional numbness, hopelessness, or worthlessness.	Statements such as "I feel like I'm drowning" or similar sentiments; frequent missed deadlines; visible distress; Statements such as "Everything feels pointless" and "Nothing matters" or similar sentiments; increased isolation; and disengagement from coursework or activities.	Open the conversation; use open-ended questions and reflective listening; validate without minimizing; ask permission before offering resources; offer a warm referral; collaborate on one or two next steps; and arrange a simple follow-up plan; remain attentive to any escalation in risk.	Counseling or mental health services; student support services; basic needs support; and consult with CARE/BIT as appropriate based on campus protocol.
Crisis	Immediate risk of harm to self or others; inability to maintain safety; inability to regulate emotions; disorientation, panic, agitation, or loss of control; and inability to engage or respond meaningfully.	Statements such as "I don't want to be here anymore," "I'm thinking about hurting myself," or similar sentiments; expressions of hopelessness with safety concerns; statements indicating intent and/or plan; feeling like a burden; and visible panic, agitation, or inability to engage.	Stay with the student (if safe to do so); speak calmly and clearly; focus on immediate safety; be transparent about limits of confidentiality; connect to immediate support; and do not manage the situation alone.	Contact campus emergency services or follow campus crisis protocols; connect to immediate crisis resources (e.g., 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline); involve CARE/BIT per protocol; and do not leave the student alone if there is imminent risk (if safe to do so).

Help-Seeking Reality: When Students Don't Reach Out

Not all students will seek help, even when they need it.

Students may hesitate to reach out due to:

- Stigma of seeking help
- Fear of judgment
- Uncertainty about available resources
- Past negative experiences
- Cultural or personal beliefs about self-reliance

Some students may minimize their experiences, delay seeking support, or decline services altogether.

This means distress may not always be clearly communicated.

In many cases, small shifts in behavior, tone, or engagement may be the only indicators that a student is struggling.

Your role is not to force help, but to create opportunities for connection, support, and trust. Practical strategies for how to do this are explored in **Section 3: Recognizing Signs of Distress in Everyday Interactions**.

Peer Navigators: Bridging Students to Help

Students are more likely to reach out when support feels accessible, relatable, and safe. Peer navigators help by serving as trusted guides who normalize help-seeking and make campus resources easier to understand and use.

Peer navigators are not counselors or case managers. They provide connection, clarity, and encouragement. Through shared experience and culturally responsive engagement, they help reduce stigma, build trust, and support students in taking the next step toward care.

Alameda County Mental Health Navigator Program

The Alameda County Mental Health Navigator Program is a peer-to-peer model implemented across several California community colleges to address barriers in accessing mental health and basic needs services.

Peer navigators support students by:

- Explaining campus processes and resources in plain language
- Helping students identify services they are eligible for
- Assisting with applications for food, housing, healthcare, and financial support
- Providing warm hand-offs to services when needed
- Normalizing help-seeking through compassionate, peer-based support

This model is grounded in trust and relatability. Navigators draw from shared lived experience to reduce stigma and help students feel more comfortable seeking support. Peer navigators meet students where they are, making help-seeking feel more manageable and achievable.

▶ **Learn more:** https://www.ohlone.edu/stepup/MentalHealthNavigators

Putting It All Together: Interpreting Student Distress in Practice

By this point, you've explored key concepts including the distress continuum, compounding stressors, and the realities of help-seeking behavior.

The example below brings these ideas together to help you consider how student distress may show up in real-world interactions, and how you might respond.

As you read, consider what stands out and how you would interpret this student's experience.

Email from Student to Mr. Garcia:

As you know, I've been trying to complete my project this semester. I also didn't turn in the analysis paper that was due yesterday. I've been trying to work on it, but I just can't focus on anything right now. Everything feels pointless. I keep thinking about how I'm probably going to fail this class anyway, and maybe I'm not cut out for college at all. I just can't stay on track. When will this all end? Now I'm worried about final exams starting next week. Do you really think the 30 minutes of office hours is even for someone like me? I'm buried in work and I'll probably be the most helpless student there. Thanks though.

- What indicators of stress or distress do you notice?
- What compounding stressors might be present?
- Where might this student fall along the distress continuum?
- How would you respond in this moment?



SECTION 3:
Recognizing Signs of Distress in Everyday Interactions



SECTION 3: Recognizing Signs of Distress in Everyday Interactions

Students do not always directly express that they are struggling. In many cases, distress shows up through changes in behavior, communication, or engagement.

This section focuses on how distress may show up in everyday interactions and how to notice it.

Recognizing these signs early can create opportunities to offer support before situations escalate.

When to Pay Closer Attention

Consider taking a closer look when:

- Behaviors are repeated or increasing over time.
- Multiple changes are happening at once (e.g., attendance, mood, communication).
- Something is noticeably different from the student's usual behavior.

You do not need to be certain that something is wrong to check in or offer support.

Noticing Patterns, Not Isolated Incidents

Distress manifests in various ways among students. It may show up through changes in behavior, communication, engagement, or emotional expression, though these signs are not always obvious or consistent.

Multiple signs observed over time are more significant than a single incident. While one missed class or moment of frustration may not be cause for concern, repeated or escalating changes, especially across different areas, can signal that a student may be struggling and could benefit from support.

Students may express distress differently due to cultural background, gender, or personal communication styles. Some students may be direct about their needs, while others may communicate distress more subtly or indirectly. Being mindful of these differences can help you avoid misinterpreting behavior and respond in a way that is respectful and supportive.

Taken together, these patterns can provide important insight into a student's experience, even when distress is not directly stated.

You Don't Have to Get it Exactly Right

You may not always be able to clearly place a student on the distress continuum, and that's okay.

The goal is not to classify the situation perfectly. Instead, focus on what you are noticing.

Noticing early, and taking a small, supportive step, can make a significant difference in preventing situations from escalating.

The patterns below highlight common ways distress may show up across key areas, with examples to help you notice patterns over time and guide your next steps.

Patterns	Signs of Distress
Academic and Behavioral Patterns	**Common Indicators:** Declining performance or engagement; increased absences or late arrivals; missed deadlines; disorganized or incoherent work compared to baseline. **What You Might Notice** • A student who was previously engaged stops participating in class or discussions. • Assignments are turned in late, incomplete, or not at all.
Emotional and Cognitive Patterns	**Common Indicators:** Tearfulness or emotional numbness; intense anxiety or panic; irritability or flat affect; statements of hopelessness or worthlessness. **What You Might Notice** • A student becomes tearful during a conversation or appears emotionally shut down. • They make comments like "Nothing is going right" or "I don't see the point anymore."
Physical Patterns	**Common Indicators:** Noticeable fatigue or agitation; unusually slowed movement; sleep disruption affecting functioning; and physical symptoms without a clear cause. **What You Might Notice** • A student appears consistently exhausted or mentions not sleeping. • They frequently mention having headaches or stomach issues, or say they are not feeling well without a clear cause.
Social Patterns	**Common Indicators:** Withdrawal or isolation; disengagement from peers or class activities; reduced participation or responsiveness; and statements about being a burden. **What You Might Notice** • A student who was previously social begins isolating or avoiding peers. • They make comments like "I don't want to bother anyone" or "I feel like I'm just in the way."
Changes in Communication Patterns	**Common Indicators:** References to self-harm or suicide methods; references to death or dying; saying goodbye in ways that feel final; and language of entrapment or unbearable pain. **What You Might Notice** • A student makes comments about wanting to disappear, not wake up, or being tired of everything. • They reference death, dying, or self-harm directly or indirectly.

The examples above are meant to reflect what you might notice in real interactions, rather than a checklist to match exactly.

The scenario below invites you to consider how distress may show up in more subtle or nonverbal ways and how you might begin to interpret and respond.

Student Visit During Office Hours:

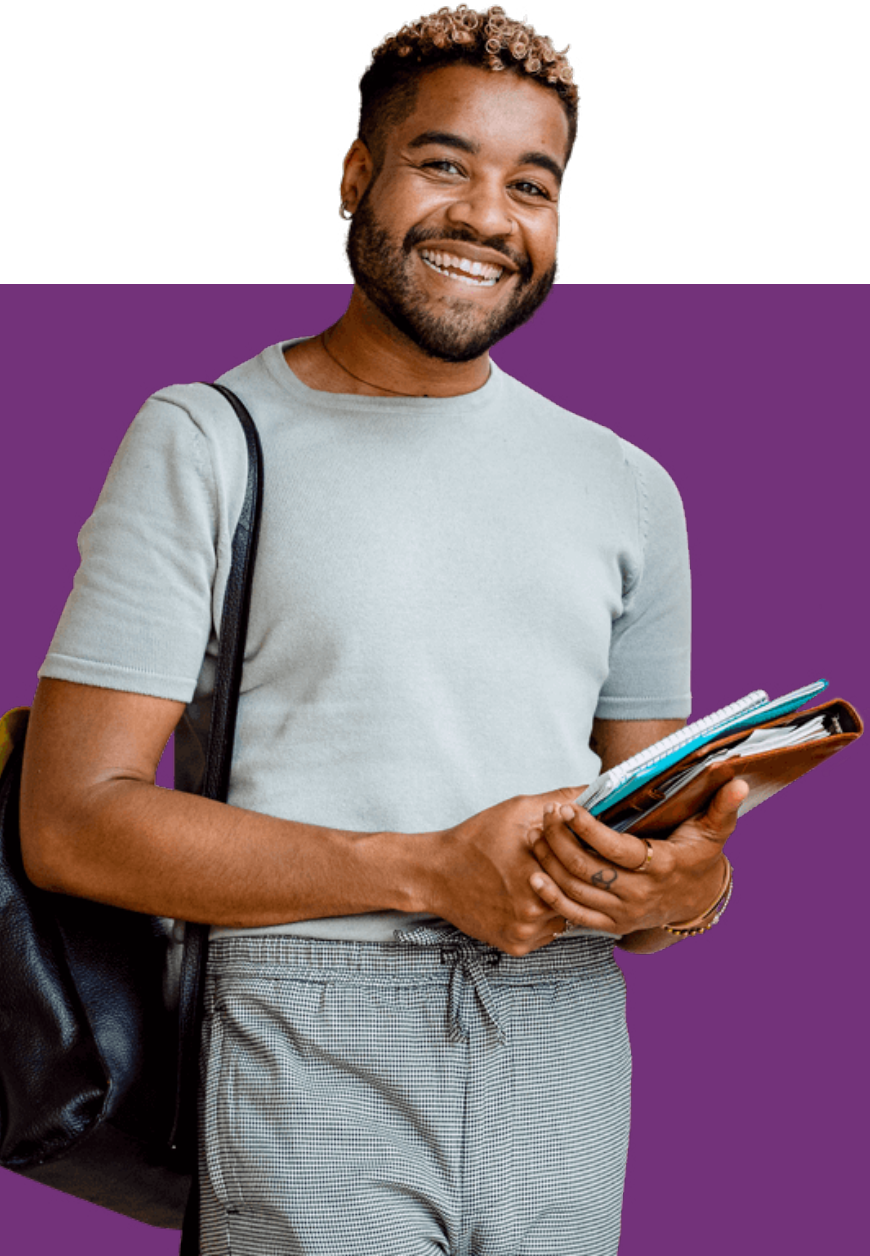
During office hours, Amari sits outside your door for 20 minutes before entering. When she comes in, she avoids eye contact, her hands are shaking, and she appears to have been crying. You mention her paper, which refers to a young man who has experienced significant loss and is considering his time on earth.

- What do you notice about this student's presentation (e.g., behavior, body language, timing)?
- Where might this student fall along the distress continuum? What signs lead you to think that?
- What might be preventing her from verbalizing her experience or asking for help?
- How might you open this conversation in a way that builds trust and encourages connection?

In Section 5: Communicating Effectively with Distressed Students, we'll explore practical response strategies and revisit this scenario in Worksheet 4: Scenario-Based Skill Integration.



SECTION 4:
Proactive Support Preventing Crisis Before it Happens



SECTION 4: Proactive Support Preventing Crisis Before It Happens

While responding effectively in moments of distress is critical, many opportunities exist to support students **before challenges escalate**. Proactive support is not about having all the answers. It's about creating conditions where students feel seen, supported, and more likely to seek help early.

Proactive Support Quick Guide

The proactive support actions below offer simple and practical ways to support students.

Small Moments Matter

Prevention often happens in small, everyday interactions.

- Check in briefly ("What's affecting your energy today?").
- Acknowledge what you're noticing.
- Create space for conversation without pressure.

These moments may seem minor, but they can play a meaningful role.

Supporting Students Beyond the Initial Interaction and Follow-up

Support does not end after a single conversation. Students may need time, space, or multiple points of connection before they are ready to fully engage with resources. Even a brief following-up communication can make a meaningful difference.

- Send a quick message or check-in.
- Reinforce that support is ongoing and available when they're ready.
- Let the student know they're not alone.

Normalizing Help-Seeking

When help-seeking is normalized, students may be more likely to reach out before situations become more severe.

- Share resources proactively (not only during crisis).
- Use language that reduces stigma.
- Reinforce that asking for help is okay.

When Resources Are Limited or Unavailable

At times, campus resources may be limited, have long wait times, or may not fully meet a student's needs.

- Offer support and presence.
- Help explore options.
- Stay connected while additional support is identi fied.

Basic
needs and mental health are deeply connected.

Challenges such as food insecurity, housing instability, and financial stress can significantly impact a student's well-being and ability to cope. Connecting students to basic needs resources is not separate from mental health support. It is a critical part of it. Visit your campus basic needs center or website to learn more about available resources.

Student Services Spotlight

A student visits the financial aid office asking about emergency funding. While discussing their situation, they mention feeling overwhelmed managing work, school, and housing instability.

Consider:

- What small, proactive steps could you take to support this student?
- How might you create a pathway to additional support without waiting for a crisis?



SECTION 5:
Communicating Effectively with Distressed Students



SECTION 5: Communicating Effectively with Distressed Students

Most of us default to reassurance when students are struggling: “It will be okay,” “Things will get better,” and “Just hang in there.” But to a student in distress, these words may feel dismissive, as if we’re skipping over their current experience and fast-forwarding to a resolution they can’t yet see.

Effective responses meet students where they are, validate their present reality, and create space for them to find their own path forward with your support. These conversations may happen in classrooms, advising offices, financial aid, or other student service settings.

Core Communication Techniques

The strategies in this section are grounded in a few key communication techniques that help build trust and support student engagement.

- **Open Invitation**
  Encourage the student to share without leading them towards a specific response.
  Example: “How can I help you with…” or “How would you like things to be different?”
- **Reflection**
  Paraphrase or summarize what the student shared to show understanding.
  Example: “It sounds like you’ve been feeling really overwhelmed trying to balance everything.”
- **Affirmation**
  Acknowledging the student’s effort, courage, or willingness to share.
  Example: “I’m really glad you reached out. That takes a lot.”
- **Validation**
  Recognize and normalize the student’s feelings without agreeing or disagreeing.
  Example: “That makes sense given everything you’re dealing with.”

These techniques can be combined to create supportive, student-centered conversations. **Worksheet 2: Communication Strategy Practice** offers an opportunity to apply these techniques to real-world scenarios.



To make these strategies easier to apply in the moment, the table below offers common communication missteps and clear alternatives you can use with distressed students.

Avoid This	Try This Instead
Minimizing the student's experience: • "It'll be fine." • "You're overthinking it."	**Acknowledge and validate what you're hearing:** • "That sounds really hard right now."
Reassuring without listening: • "Don't worry. It will get better."	**Listen first, then respond:** • "Tell me more about what's been going on."
Jumping to solutions too quickly before fully understanding: • "Here's what you need to do..."	**Slow down and gather context before offering options:** • "What feels most urgent today?"
Challenging or debating feelings: • "That's not true." • "You shouldn't feel the way."	**Validate feelings without agreeing with conclusions:** • "I can understand why you'd feel that way."
Overpromising or taking on responsibility: • "I'll fix this." • "I'll make sure everything works out."	**Be clear about your role and offer support in steps:** • "I can help you connect to resources."
Asking rapid-fire questions that feel like an interrogation: • "Where were you yesterday?"	**Ask a few focused questions and allow space:** • "What's been hardest lately? (then pause)
Promising confidentiality (especially where safety may be a concern): • "You can tell me and I won't tell anyone else."	**Be transparent about limits and next steps:** • "I can't promise confidentiality if safety is at risk."
Trying to handle the situation alone when you need support: • "I'll just figure this out on my own and fix it myself."	**Consult or involve appropriate supports:** • Counseling • CARE/BIT • Crisis services
Acting shocked, alarmed, or emotionally escalated: • "No way! Wow, that is bad!"	**Stay calm and steady. Use direct grounded language, especially if safety is a concern.**
Over-including details or oversharing your own experience: • "I've been through something like that. What happened was...	**Keep the focus on the student, sharing only what's necessary to support them:** • "I'm here with you, and I'm glad you told me."

Communication in Practice: Navigating Common Scenarios

When Students Decline Help

Students may not always accept referrals or support. This does not mean the interaction was unsuccessful.

You Can:

- Encourage the students to share without leading them towards a specific response.
- Keep the door open ("I'm still here if you change your mind or if things get harder").
- Offer alternative or lower-barrier supports (e.g., sharing a 24/7 text line, or offering to check in again later).

Explaining Reporting Responsibilities While Maintaining Trust

Some students may hesitate to share information due to uncertainty about what you may need to share with others or reporting requirements.

When Possible:

- Be transparent about your role and any limits to keeping the conversation private.
- Explain what will happen next in clear, simple language.
- Emphasize that your goal is to support their safety and well-being.

Remember: Clarity builds trust, even in difficult moments.

Culturally Responsive Communication

Students' experiences, identities, and backgrounds can shape how they express distress and how they engage with support.

Key Considerations:

- Use language that is respectful and inclusive.
- Be mindful of cultural stigma or past experiences with systems.
- Avoid assumptions about a student's experience or needs.

Communication Doesn't End After the Conversation

Support does not end after a single conversation. Follow-up is an important part of the communication process.

Quick Actions:

- Send a brief check-in email.
- Reinforce that support is ongoing.
- Maintain connection over time.

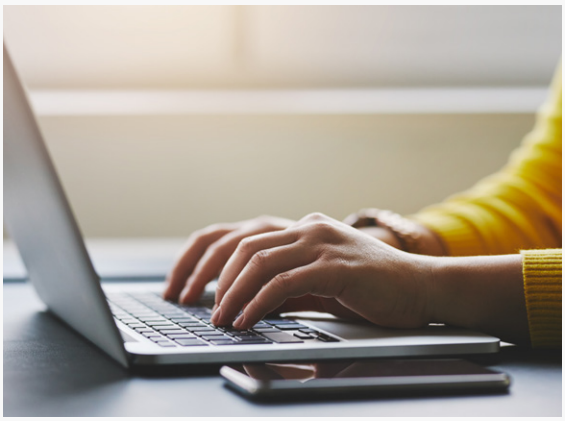
Effective
Communication Takeaways:

- As a faculty or staff member, your role is to notice, respond with care, and connect students to support. You are a bridge, not the final solution.
- Connection, not compliance, is the goal.
- Center the student's experience, not your assumptions.
- A small follow-up can make a lasting impact.

To continue building your communication skills, **Worksheet 2: Communication Strategy Practice** offers an opportunity to apply these approaches to real-world scenarios.







SECTION 6:
Connecting Students to Support



SECTION 6: Connecting Students to Support

Connecting a student to support is not always as simple as providing a phone number or referral. Students may face barriers such as limited availability, complex systems, or uncertainty about where to start. Your role is to help bridge that gap by making support more accessible, reducing barriers, and guiding students through the process.

Helping Students Successfully Connect to Support

Warm Hand-Offs Matter

A warm hand-off means actively helping connect a student to a specific person or resource rather than simply providing information, making it more likely they will follow through and receive support.

Ways to Offer Warm Hand-Offs:

- Name a specific person or office.
- Help make the introduction.
- Provide clear next steps.

Having access to resources available around the clock, such as 24/7 crisis lines (e.g., 988), after-hours campus support, or text-based services, can also help ensure students have support when they need it.

Navigating Real-World Barriers to Support

Even when resources are available, students may still face barriers that make it difficult to access support. What may seem like a small barrier can feel overwhelming to a student already in distress.

These barriers may include:

- Complicated systems or unclear processes
- Scheduling challenges or limited availability
- Eligibility requirements
- Long wait times

These challenges are common and can impact whether a student follows through with a referral.

How You can Help

- **Simplify the next step** (e.g., "Here's where to start" or "Let's look at this together").
- **Be specific about what to expect (**location, timing, process).
- **Offer to help connect the student directly when possible.**
- **Stay connected if access is delayed or uncertain.**

Reducing even one barrier can make it more likely that a student receives the support they need.

Supporting Students in Online or Virtual Spaces

The same principles of supportive communication apply in both in-person and virtual settings. However, students engaging online may experience additional barriers to connection and support.

In virtual spaces:

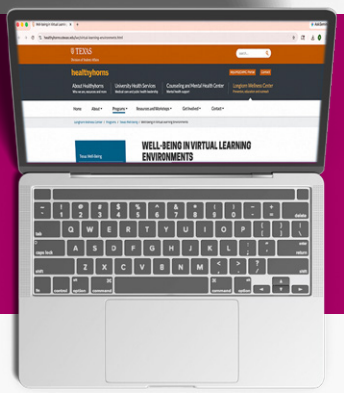
- Signs of distress may be less visible or harder to interpret
- Students may be more likely to disengage or go silent after disclosing distress
- Connecting to support may require more intentional follow-through

To support students online:

- Name a specific person or resource and provide direct links
- Offer clear, simple next steps
- Follow up with a message or email to maintain connection

In virtual settings, consistent follow-up and clear pathways to support are especially important.

For additional guidance on supporting students in virtual learning environments, including strategies for engagement and connection, explore **University of Texas at Austin's "Well-Being In Virtual Learning Environments" guide**. This example can be adapted to fit your campus context.



It's Okay Not to Have All the Answers

You may not always know the right next step, and that's okay. What matters most is staying present and responding with honesty and care.

You might say:

- "I'm not sure, but we can figure this out together."
- "Let's take a look at this together and see what options we have."
- "I don't have the answer right now, but I want to help you find it."

You don't need to have all the answers to be helpful. Being present, transparent, and willing to support the next step can make a meaningful difference.

Student Services Spotlight

A student comes to the front desk asking for help with registration but appears overwhelmed and tearful, sharing that they are struggling to manage responsibilities outside of school.

Consider:

- What immediate supports could you offer in this moment?
- How might you move beyond providing information to actively connecting the student to appropriate supports?
- What would a "warm-hand-off" look like in this situation?

Organizing and Sharing Campus Resources

Connecting students to support is easier when you have a clear understanding of what resources are available and how to access them.

Many campuses already have resource maps or referral guides in place. These tools help organize available services and make it easier to connect students to the right support at the right time.

When considering available resources, it's also important to think about accessibility for students with varying schedules and needs, including those attending evening classes or participating in online learning. Resources that offer flexible hours, virtual options, or after-hours support can make it easier for students to connect to care.

What Is a Resource Map and What's Your Role?

A resource map (or referral guide) is a simple way to organize and understand the support services available on your campus.

- You are not expected to create this on your own.
- Many campuses already have tools or teams that maintain this information.

If you're unsure where to start:

- Check with student support services (e.g., counseling, basic needs, etc.).
- Ask if a resource guide or referral process already exists.
- Connect with relevant departments to understand how their services work, how students access them, and who to contact for referrals.

Your role is to be familiar enough with available resources to help guide students, not to be an expert on every service.

Resource Maps Can Take Different Forms

A resource map or referral guide does not have to exist as a static list.

The worksheet included in this toolkit can serve as a starting point for organizing key information. From there, it can remain a personal reference tool or evolve into a more accessible format, such as a shared document, campus webpage, or centralized resource hub.

More structured formats can make it easier for students and staff to quickly find and navigate available supports.

Some campuses, such as the **Bakersfield College** and the **University of California, Irvine**, are examples of how resource maps can be organized and presented.

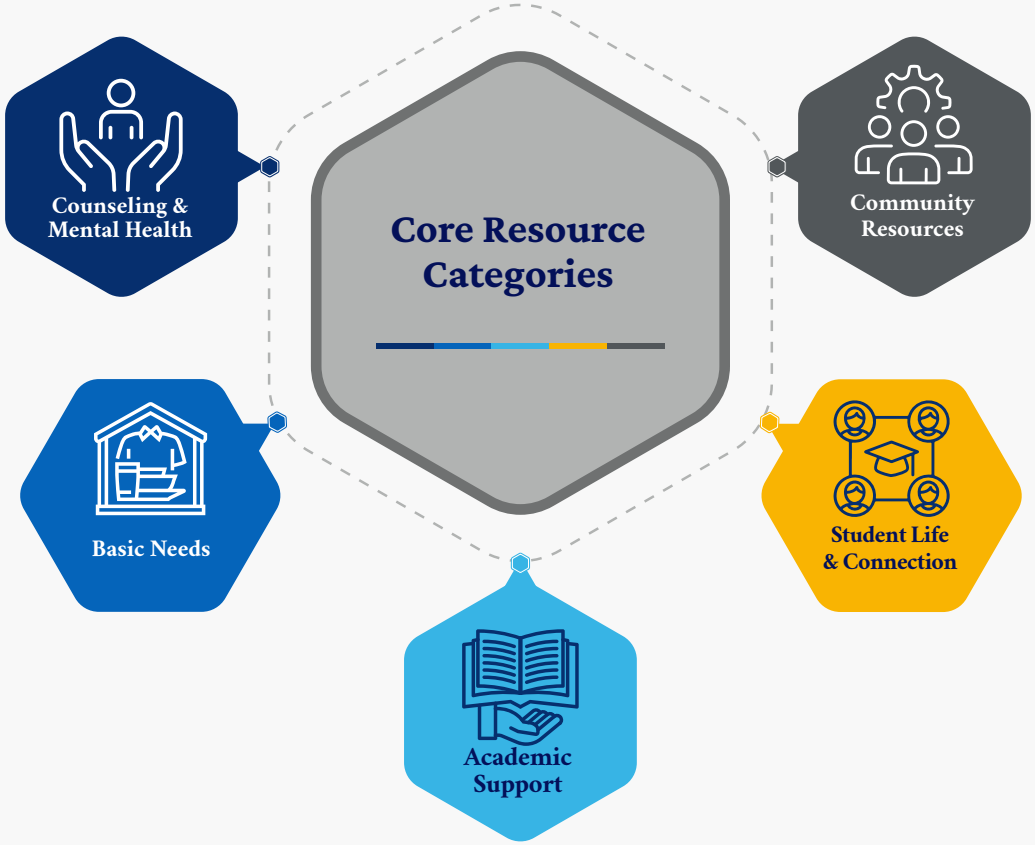
If a resource guide already exists on your campus,

consider using **Worksheet 3: Campus Resource Mapping** to review, update, or personalize that information for your role.

Otherwise, Worksheet 3 can help you begin organizing key information in collaboration with relevant departments (e.g., counseling, basic needs, student services).



The categories below highlight common areas of support that may be available on campus:



Putting Referrals into Practice

1. **Explain why the resource helps.**
   Help the student understand how the resource connects to what they're experiencing.
   Example: "This might be helpful because…"

2. **Offer a Warm Hand-Off**
   When possible, help connect the student directly rather than simply providing information.
   Example: "I can help you get connected…"

3. **Provide Specific Details**
   Reduce barriers by sharing clear, practical information.
   Include location, hours, how to schedule, and what to expect.

4. **Follow-Up**
   Check in after t he referral to maintain connection and support follow-through.
   A brief message can make a meaningful difference.

Remember: Specific, supported referrals increase student follow-through.

Promote Awareness of Resources

Promoting awareness of resources is a shared, campus-wide effort. Students are more likely to access support when they are aware of it before a crisis occurs. Proactively sharing resources can help normalize help-seeking and reduce barriers to access.

Ways to Share Resources Proactively

- Include support resources in course syllabi.
- Invite campus programs or services to briefly speak with students.
- Share resources during live interactions (e.g., class, meetings, advising).
- Reinforce resources through written communication (e.g., syllabi, emails, announcements).
- Ensure resources are clearly listed and easy to find on college websites.
- Share resources through student services and campus social media channels.
- Engage peer support programs or student ambassadors to help promote available resources.
- Normalize resource use as part of student success, not just crisis response.

Remember: Students are more likely to use resources they have heard about more than once.



SECTION 7:
When Distress Becomes Crisis



SECTION 7: When Distress Becomes Crisis

Recognizing When to Escalate and How to Respond to Suicidal Ideation

Most students experiencing distress do not require emergency intervention. However, it is important to recognize when a situation has moved beyond distress and requires immediate action.

This section builds on the **distress continuum** introduced in Section 2. When a student's experience moves into severe distress or crisis, your role shifts from support to ensuring safety and connecting to immediate help.

When Immediate Action May Be Needed

Take immediate action if a student:

- Expresses intent, a plan, or access to means to harm themselves or others.
- Is unable to ensure their own safety.
- Shows signs of severe disorganization, psychosis, or disconnection from reality.

In some situations, factors such as intoxication may increase risk or impair a student's ability to stay safe. If you suspect this, it may be important to act more quickly and involve additional support.

What This May Look Like

Signs of severe disorganization, psychosis, or disconnection from reality may include:

- Confused or incoherent speech that is difficult to follow.
- Talking about things that are not based in reality (e.g., hearing or seeing things others do not).
- Expressing beliefs that seem clearly disconnected from reality.
- Extreme difficulty focusing, responding, or staying oriented to the conversation.



Talking About Suicide: What to Know

Some people worry that asking about suicide might "put the idea in someone's head." According to the **National Institute of Mental Health**, asking directly about suicide does not increase risk. In fact, it can help students feel seen, supported, and more willing to share what they are experiencing.

When Asking:

- Use clear, direct language.
- Stay calm and non-judgmental.
- Allow space for the student to respond.

Examples:

- "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
- "Are you having thoughts of suicide?"

If you're unsure how to navigate these conversations, consider additional training and resources:

- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** (Talk Saves Lives)
- **QPR Institute** (Question, Persuade, Refer)
- **The JED Foundation** (How to Ask Someone if They Are Thinking About Suicide)



If There Is Imminent Risk

Do

- Stay calm and present.
- Contact emergency services or campus crisis response teams.
- Be transparent about what you are doing and why.
- Stay with the student (or ensure they are not alone) until help arrives.

You might say:

- "We're going to connect you with someone who can help. I'll stay with you while we do that."
- "You don't have to go through this alone—I'm here with you."

Don't

- Leave the student alone.
- Promise confidentiality if safety is at risk.
- Minimize, argue, or dismiss what they are sharing.
- Try to handle the situation entirely on your own.

For additional examples of supportive language—and what to avoid—refer to Section 5: Communicating Effectively with Distressed Students.

After Calling for Help

While waiting for additional support, continue offering a calm, supportive presence.

You might say:

- "I'm really glad you told me what's going on."
- "I'm here with you while we figure out next steps."

Stay with the student (or ensure they are supported) until professional help arrives.

Remember: When safety is a concern, it's important to act, even if it feels uncomfortable.

SECTION 8:
Supporting Students Without Carrying It Alone



SECTION 8: Supporting Students Without Carrying It Alone

Staying Grounded While Supporting Students

Supporting students in distress can be meaningful, but it can also be emotionally heavy. You may hear things that are difficult or activating.

This section focuses on how to stay present, respond with care, set healthy boundaries, and release what isn't yours to carry.

In the Moment: When You Feel Overwhelmed

It's normal to feel a strong emotional response when a student shares distress, especially in moments of urgency or crisis.

If you begin to feel overwhelmed:

- Pause and take a slow breath before responding.
- Focus on listening rather than solving.
- Remind yourself: "I don't have to fix this—I just need to stay present."

The key is to notice your reactions and respond to yourself with the same compassion that you would offer a student.

When the Conversation Feels Personal

A student's experience may connect to your own experiences or emotions.

In these moments:

- Notice what you're feeling without judging it.
- Gently refocus on the student's needs.
- Seek appropriate support outside of the interaction if needed (e.g., supervisor, mental health support).

Be present for the student, then give yourself space to process later.

When You Feel Responsible for the Outcome

You may feel pressure to respond the "right" way or worry about whether you handled the situation correctly.

It may help to remember:

- Your role is to notice, respond with care, and connect to support.
- You are not responsible for solving everything.
- Support often happens across multiple people and interactions.

You can provide meaningful support without needing to get everything "right."

Healthy Boundaries

Clear boundaries protect both you and the students you support. They allow you to respond with care without taking on more than is sustainable.

- You are not expected to be available at all times.
- You are allowed to refer and involve others.
- You do not need all the answers to be helpful.
- You control your response, not the outcome.

Pause and Reflect: Supporting Students While Honoring Your Limits

Consider:

- What are my limits around response time?
  Example: "I respond to student emails within 24 hours during the work week, but not on weekends"
- What topics or situations are particularly difficult for me?
- When do I need to involve someone else or pass a situation along?
- What are signs that I may be taking on too much?

It's Okay To:

- Refer a student to someone else when the situation is beyond your role or capacity.
- Take a break after a difficult conversation.
- Not have all the answers.
- Ask for support from colleagues or supervisors.
- Set boundaries around when and how students can contact you.





Grounding Practices for Before and After

In the Moment: Anchor Phrase and Breath

When emotions feel heightened, this quick practice can help you stay steady and present:

- Take a slow breath in through your nose.
- Exhale slowly.
- Silently repeat: “Stay present. One step at a time.”

After the Interaction: Release and Reset

After a difficult conversation, it’s important to give your body and mind a chance to reset.

Try this brief practice:

- Take a few slow, steady breaths.
- Gently name what you’re feeling (e.g., “That was heavy,” “I feel tense,” “I’m still thinking about that”).
- Remind yourself: “I showed up and did what I could in this moment.”
- Physically shift your body. Stand up, stretch, step outside, or take a short walk.

After the Interaction: Recognizing Your Own Needs

After supporting a student in distress, it’s normal to continue thinking about the interaction or feel a lingering emotional response.

Over time, repeated exposure to difficult situations can contribute to **compassion fatigue**, especially when support needs are ongoing or resources are limited.

Understanding

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue refers to emotional exhaustion from repeated exposure to others’ distress.

You May Notice:

- Difficulty “turning off” or persistent rumination
- Emotional exhaustion, numbness, or irritability
- Trouble focusing or decreased capacity at work
- Carrying student concerns beyond work hours

Self-Care as an Ongoing Practice

Taking care of yourself is not just something to do after a difficult moment, it is an ongoing practice that helps you stay grounded and maintain your capacity to support others over time.

Self-care in this context may include:

- Setting and maintaining clear boundaries
- Building in regular moments to pause and reset
- Accessing support when needed (i.e. employee assistance resources)
- Engaging in activities that help you recharge outside of work

Consistent self-care can help prevent or buffer against compassion fatigue.

Workplace Support Matters

Experiences of compassion fatigue are not only individual. While individual strategies can help you stay grounded, your work environment also plays an important role in supporting your well-being over time.

Supportive workplaces can make it easier for staff to respond to students without becoming overwhelmed.

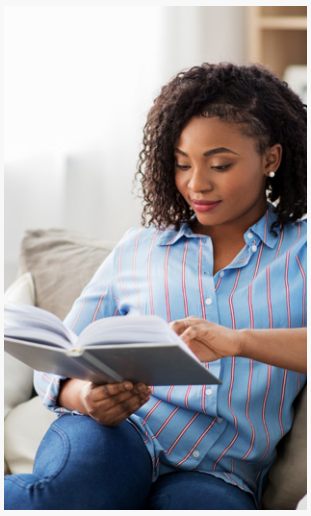
This may look like:

- Establishing clear protocols so staff are not navigating situations alone.
- Access to supervision, consultation, or spaces to process challenging interactions.
- A shared understanding of roles and responsibilities.
- Ongoing training and resources to support this work.

If these supports are not in place, it may be helpful to identify where additional support is needed or to start conversations within your team or department.

Remember: Taking care of yourself is not separate from your role. It supports your ability to show up with presence and care.









SECTION 9:
Considerations for Behavioral Intervention Teams (BIT) and Community, Advocacy, Response, and Engagement (CARE) Teams



SECTION 9: Considerations for Behavioral Intervention Teams (BIT) and Community, Advocacy, Response, and Engagement (CARE) Teams

If you are part of a BIT or CARE team, much of what is outlined in this toolkit may already be familiar.

The distress continuum, communication approaches, and referral strategies presented here reflect practices that are often part of your day-to-day work, particularly in recognizing patterns, coordinating responses, and supporting students across systems.

This toolkit is designed to reinforce those foundations and provide a shared framework that can support broader campus engagement.

Using This Toolkit with Your Team

Consider using sections of this toolkit to:

- Support onboarding or cross-training with campus partners.
- Create shared language across departments.
- Strengthen collaboration beyond the BIT/CARE team.

Deepening Practice for BIT/CARE Teams

For more in-depth exploration of team-based approaches, case review, and coordinated response strategies, we encourage you to explore the full webinar series designed specifically for BIT and CARE team members:

Enhancing Behavioral Intervention Teams for a Safer, More Supportive Campus (4-Part Series)

These sessions offer deeper insight to:

- Applying structured approaches to complex situations
- Strengthening team coordination and decision-making
- Navigating nuanced or high-risk scenarios

SECTION 10:
Skill Building, Team Discussion and Professional Development Worksheets



SECTION 10: Skill Building, Team Discussion and Professional Development Worksheets

Worksheet Overview

Worksheet 1: Distress Continuum Assessment

Purpose: Calibrate Level of Concern

Use:

- Practice distinguishing stress, distress, and crisis.
- Identify indicators that inform your assessment and determine an appropriate next step.
- Use during onboarding, team trainings, or case consultation practice to build shared language.

Worksheet 2: Communication Strategy Practice

Purpose: Strengthen Practical Communication Skills

Use:

- Replace common responses with more effective alternatives.
- Practice drafting responses to realistic student statements and emails.
- Incorporate in staff meetings or trainings for short role-plays, coaching, or debriefs after difficult interactions.

Worksheet 3: Campus Resource Mapping

Purpose: Strengthen Referral Readiness and Warm Hand-Offs

Use:

- Create a campus-specific map of core support resources.
- Document contact details, hours, and preferred referral pathways to reduce uncertainty in the moment.
- Use during onboarding, refresh annually, and keep accessible as a quick-reference guide.

Worksheet 4: Scenario-Based Skill Integration

Purpose: Apply Skills in Realistic Campus Situations

Use:

- Practice integrating distress assessment, communication, referrals, and self-care in realistic scenarios.
- Use it for team discussion or role-play to align responses and escalation decisions.
- Revisit to reflect on challenges, what worked, and what staff support is needed moving forward.

WORKSHEET 1: Distress Continuum Assessment

This worksheet helps you practice assessing student distress levels and determining appropriate responses. By reviewing scenarios and student statements, you will build confidence in distinguishing between different levels of distress and calibrating your response accordingly.

Recommended Use

- During team meetings as a group discussion exercise
- In one-on-one supervision or mentoring conversations
- For self-study and reflection
- Throughout onboarding of new staff

Instructions

1. Read each student scenario or statement.
2. Identify where on the continuum you believe the student falls (stress, distress, or crisis).
3. Describe what indicators led you to that conclusion.
4. Identify what response would be most appropriate.
5. Discuss with colleagues or reflect individually.

Scenarios

Scenario A: Student email: "Hi, Professor. I'm sorry I missed class yesterday. I had to work a double shift and I'm exhausted. I'm worried about keeping up with everything. Can I get the notes from class? Thanks."

- Stress
- Distress
- Crisis

Indicators that led to this assessment: _____

Your next step: _____

Scenario B: A student approaches you after their shift as the front desk staff in your office. They are tearful and say: "I don't know what to do. I failed the last two quizzes, I'm working 35 hours a week, and my car broke down so I don't know how I'm getting to campus next week. I feel like I'm drowning and I can't keep doing this."

- Stress
- Distress
- Crisis

Indicators that led to this assessment: _____

Your next step: _____

Scenario C: You notice a student who was previously engaged has missed the last three study sessions in the library. When they return, they look disheveled and exhausted. During a check-in, they say: "I'm fine. Just tired. Everything is pointless anyway. I'm probably going to drop out."

- Stress
- Distress
- Crisis

Indicators that led to this assessment: _____

Your next step: _____

Scenario D: A student comes to your office and says: "I need to tell you something. Everything around me feels like it's too much to handle. I have pills at home, and I've been thinking about taking all of them. I don't want to feel like this anymore."

- Stress
- Distress
- Crisis

Indicators that led to this assessment: _____

Your next step: _____

Scenario E: Student text message: "Hey, I know I'm supposed to present today, but I'm feeling really anxious. Can I present next week instead? Sorry."

- Distress level: _____
- Indicators that led to this assessment: _____
- Appropriate response: _____

Scenario F: A classmate approaches you and says: "I'm worried about Jordan. They've been posting really dark stuff on social media about not wanting to be here anymore and saying goodbye. I tried to call them but they're not answering."

- Stress
- Distress
- Crisis

Indicators that led to this assessment: _____

Your next step: _____

Reflection

Questions

1. Which scenarios were most challenging to assess? Why?
2. What additional information would have helped you feel more confident in your assessment?
3. How comfortable do you feel distinguishing between distress and a crisis?
4. What patterns do you notice in how students communicate distress?

WORKSHEET 2: Communication Strategy Practice

This worksheet provides practice in using evidence-based communication techniques and replacing common responses with effective alternatives. The goal is to build your confidence and fluency with trust-building techniques that support the student's problem-solving.

Recommended Use

- Role-play practice with colleagues
- As a reference guide during actual student conversations
- For self-reflection after difficult conversations ("How could I have responded differently?")
- Team training sessions

Instructions

1. Review each student statement.
2. Note the "common response" (what many people might say instinctively).
3. Craft an improved response using communication techniques.
4. Label which technique(s) you used (open invitation, reflection, affirmation, validation).
5. Practice saying your response out loud (this builds muscle memory).

Part A: Effective Communication Techniques

Example Completed Row

Student Statement	Typical Response	Improved Response	Technique(s) Used
"I'm so overwhelmed I can't even think straight."	"Just take it one day at a time!"	"It sounds like you're feeling completely overloaded right now, like your brain can't process everything that's happening. What's contributing most to that feeling of overwhelm?"	Reflection, Open invitation

Student Statement	Typical Response (Less Effective)	Your Response Communication Techniques	Technique(s) Used
"I can't do this anymore. Everything is falling apart."	"Don't worry. It will get better. Everyone feels this way sometimes."		
"I'm failing all my classes. I'm such a failure."	"You're not a failure! You just need to try harder."		
"Nobody understands what I'm going through."	"I'm sure that's not true. You're not alone."		
"I'm thinking about just dropping out. What's the point?"	"Don't drop out! You've come so far. Don't give up now."		

Part B: Email Response Practice

Return to the original email from the student to Mr. Garcia. Draft your own response using the communication techniques described above.

The Email (reminder): As you know, I've been trying to complete my project this semester. I also didn't turn in the analysis paper that was due yesterday. I've been trying to work on it, but I just can't focus on anything right now. Everything feels pointless. I keep thinking about how I'm probably going to fail this class anyway, and maybe I'm not cut out for college at all.

I just can't stay on track. When will this all end?

Now I'm worried about final exams starting next week. Do you really think the 30 minutes of office hours is even for someone like me? I'm buried in work and I'll probably be the most helpless student there. Thanks though.

Your Response

_____

_____

_____

_____

After Drafting, Identify

- Where did you use open invitations? _____
- Where did you use affirmations? _____
- Where did you use reflective listening? _____
- What level of concern did you communicate? _____
- What next steps did you suggest? _____

Part C: Responding to Resistance

Practice responses when students resist help.

Scenario: Student says: "I appreciate you trying to help, but I really don't think counseling is for me. I can handle this on my own."

Unhelpful response: "You really should go to counseling. You can't handle this alone."

Your response using communication principles:

Techniques to Consider:

- Affirming autonomy ("It's your choice to...")
- Expressing concern collaboratively ("I'm worried about you and...")
- Asking permission ("Would you be open to...")

Reflection

Questions

1. Which communication technique feels most natural to you? Which feels most challenging?
2. How does it feel to respond without immediately problem-solving?
3. How might students respond differently to these approaches?

WORKSHEET 3: Campus Resource Mapping

This worksheet helps you identify and organize available support resources so you can make informed, effective referrals. Before completing it, check with other departments, including counseling, mental health, and basic needs teams, to determine whether a current resource map or referral guide already exists on your campus. If one is available, this worksheet can be used to review, update, or personalize that information as your own support network directory to reference when a student needs help.

As you build or review your resource map, consider how accessible each resource is for students with varying schedules, including evening, weekend, and online learners.

Recommended Use

- Complete during onboarding or professional development.
- Update annually, as resources can change.
- Keep in an accessible location (desk, computer, phone).
- Share and review with colleagues to build collective knowledge.

Instructions

1. Fill in as much information as you currently know.
2. Research and fill in gaps (call offices, visit websites, talk to colleagues).
3. Test your referrals (make sure phone numbers work, hours are current).
4. Add notes about your experience with each resource (helpful for warm hand-offs).

Mental Health and Counseling Services

▶ Click here to download this resource

Information	Details
Office Name	
Location (Building and Room)	
Phone	
Email	
Website	
Hours (Drop-In If Available)	
and	
Services Offered	
Session Limits / Waitlist Info	
Crisis / After-Hours Contact	
Your Point of Contact for Questions	
Your Notes / Experience	

Basic Needs Support

- Click here to download this resource

Food Resources

Resource	Details
Food Pantry Location and Hours	
Meal Assistance Program	
Emergency Food Vouchers	
CalFresh Enrollment Support	

Housing Resources

Resource	Details
Housing Insecurity Support	
Emergency Housing Contact	
Temporary Shelter Information	

Financial Resources

- Click here to download this resource

Resource	Details
Emergency Grants	
Book Vouchers / Lending	
Technology Lending	
Financial Aid Emergency Contact	

Transportation

Resource	Details
Bus Pass Program	
Parking Support	
Rideshare Programs	

Academic Support Services

▶ Click here to download this resource

Service	Location	Hours	Contact	Notes
Tutoring Center				
Writing Center				
Academic Advising				
Disability Services				
Library Research Help				

Student Life and Connection

Resource	Details
Student Clubs / Organizations	
Peer Mentoring Programs	
NextUp or Specialized Programs	
Campus Ministry / Spiritual Life	
Recreation / Wellness Programs	
College or District Foundation	

Crisis and External Resources

▶ Click here to download this resource

Resource	Phone / Contact	Available	Purpose
Soluna App (for young adults under 26)	http://solunaapp.com/	Self-guided tools available anytime and coaching available during set hours.	Mental health support through self-guided tools and one-on-one coaching focused on coping skills, goal setting, and everyday challenges (not a crisis service).
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	988	24/7	Suicide Crisis Support
Crisis Text Line (CCC-Specific)	Text COURAGE to 741741	24/7	Text-Based Crisis Support (CCC specific resource)
Trevor Project	1-866-488-7386	24/7	LGBTQ+ Youth Crisis
Campus Police / Security		24/7	Immediate Safety Concerns
Local Mental Health Crisis Line			
Domestic Violence Hotline			
Sexual Assault Hotline			
Substance Use Treatment			

Write Your Personal Process for Making Referrals:

For non-urgent support (counseling, academic, advising, student support services, etc.):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

For urgent support (same-day behavioral health):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

For crisis (immediate safety concerns):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Reflection

and planning

1. Which resources were you already familiar with?
2. Which resources did you learn about through this exercise?
3. Which resources offer evening hours, virtual options, or after-hours support? Where are there gaps?
4. What gaps in resources did you identify?
5. Who can you contact to learn more about specific resources?
6. Continued Commitment: When will you update this map? Set a date and reminder on your calendar.

WORKSHEET 4: Scenario-Based Skill Integration

This worksheet presents three realistic scenarios that require you to integrate everything from the toolkit: distress assessment, communication skills, resource connection, and self-care. Use this for team discussions, role-play practice, or individual reflection.

Recommended Use

- Team meetings or professional development sessions.
- Role-play with colleagues (one person plays student and one plays the responder).
- Case study discussion groups.
- Supervision or mentoring conversations.
- Return to these scenarios after using the toolkit for several weeks to see how your responses evolve.

Instructions

1. Read each scenario completely.
2. Answer the reflection questions.
3. Draft your response and action plan.
4. If possible, discuss with colleagues or role-play the conversation.
5. What went well? What would you do differently?

SCENARIO 1: The Email (Revisited with Full Analysis)

Context: You receive this email from a student on a Wednesday evening:

"Hi, Mr. Garcia. As you know, I've been trying to complete my capstone project this semester. I also didn't turn in the analysis paper that was due yesterday. I've been trying to work on it, but I just can't focus on anything right now. Everything feels pointless. I keep thinking about how I'm probably going to fail this class anyway, and maybe I'm not cut out for college at all. I just can't stay on track. When will this all end? Now I'm worried about final exams starting next week. Do you really think the 30 minutes of office hours is even for someone like me? I'm buried in work and I'll probably be the most helpless student there. Thanks though."

Reflection Questions

1. **Distress Assessment:** Where does this student fall on the continuum?

   - ☐ Stress
   - ☐ Distress
   - ☐ Crisis

2. What specific indicators led you to this assessment?

   _____

3. What phrases or words are most concerning to you?

   _____

4. Do you need more information before determining your response? If so, what?

   _____

5. Is this urgent (requiring same-day response) or can it wait until the next business day?

   _____

Your Action Plan

Immediate response (within 24 hours):

_____

Your email response (using open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, and summarizing):

_____

Resources you would mention or connect them to:

_____

Follow-up plan:

_____

If the student does not respond to your email, what is your next step?

_____

SCENARIO 2: The Silent Student

Context: During office hours, Amari sits outside your door for 20 minutes before entering. When she comes in, she avoids eye contact, her hands are shaking, and she appears to have been crying. You mention her paper, which refers to a young man who has experienced significant loss and is considering his time on this earth.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you observe about this student's presentation (physical, emotional, behavioral)?

2. What might be preventing her from verbalizing their distress?

3. How do you feel in this moment? What is your instinctive reaction?

4. What are your options for opening this conversation?

Your Response

How would you open this conversation? Write your exact words:

If the student still does not respond verbally, what would you do next?

At what point would you assess whether this is a crisis?

What questions would you ask to determine the level of distress?



Role-Play Prompt: If practicing with a colleague, have them play the silent, tearful student. Practice sitting with the discomfort of silence, then opening the conversation gently.

Debrief: What was challenging? What worked?

SCENARIO 3: The Worried Friend

Context: During a resource center lunch gathering, a student named Maya approaches you nervously. She says, "David, I'm really worried about the student worker, Marcus. He's in my 10 a.m. class. He's been missing a lot of classes lately, and when I text him, he either doesn't respond or says things like 'it doesn't matter anyway' and 'I'm just done with everything.' Last night he posted something on social media about how he's a burden to everyone and people would be better off without him. I called him but he didn't answer. I don't know if I'm overreacting, but I'm scared something is seriously wrong. What should I do?"

Reflection Questions

1. How seriously should you take this second-hand report?

_____

2. What are the warning signs Maya is describing?

_____

3. What is your responsibility in this situation?

_____

4. How do you balance supporting Maya while also addressing concern for Marcus?

_____

Your Response

What do you say to Maya? Write your response:

_____

What actions do you take regarding Marcus?

- ☐ Email Marcus
- ☐ Call Marcus
- ☐ Contact counseling center
- ☐ Ask Maya to check on him in person
- ☐ Wait and see if he comes to next class
- ☐ Other: _____

Your email/message to Marcus (if you choose to contact him):

_____

What do you tell Maya about sharing information and your next steps?

If Marcus doesn't respond within 24 hours, what do you do?

What support or guidance do you offer Maya, who is clearly worried?

Follow-up plan:

Integration and Self-Care Reflection

After working through all three scenarios:

1. Which scenario felt the most challenging? Why?

2. Which communication techniques felt the most intuitive?

3. Which techniques felt uncomfortable or awkward?

4. What resources would you need to feel more confident in these situations?

5. How are you feeling after working through these scenarios? Notice your emotional and physical responses.

6. Which self-care strategy would you use after a day with multiple difficult conversations like these?

SECTION 11:
Helpful Resources



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The organizations below offer a range of resources related to student well-being and support.

- **Active Minds**
  Resources and tools to reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking among students, and much more.
- **The Jed Foundation**
  Guidance on building campus cultures that support student mental health and early intervention.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
  Call or text 988, or chat via 988lifeline.org for free, confidential support 24/7.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**
  Frameworks and resources for trauma-informed, prevention-focused support.
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network**
  Resources on trauma-informed care, including practical tools for supporting individuals impacted by trauma.
- **QPR Institute**
  Training and tools to help individuals recognize warning signs and respond to someone in crisis.
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**
  Offers many programs, such as *Talk Saves Lives*, and educational resources to support suicide prevention efforts.
- **University of Texas at Austin's "Well-Being In Virtual Learning Environments" Guide**
  Practical guidance for supporting student well-being in virtual and hybrid learning spaces, including strategies to foster connection, engagement, and mental health in online environments.
- **Soluna App**
  Mental health support through self-guided tools and one-on-one coaching focused on coping skills, goal setting, and everyday challenges (not a crisis service).