

HELPING DIFFERENT TYPES OF DISTRESSED STUDENTS

THE VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE STUDENT

Students usually become verbally abusive when in frustrating situations which they see as being beyond their control; anger and frustration can become displaced from those situations to you. Typically, the anger is not directed at you personally.

DO:

- acknowledge their anger and frustration, e.g., "I can see that you are angry."
- rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion, e.g., "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- If you feel comfortable doing so, allow them to ventilate and tell you what is upsetting them.
- reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or other quiet place if this is comfortable. Speak calmly and quietly.

IF YOU BECOME ALARMED:

- tell them that you are not willing to accept their verbally abusive behavior, e.g., "When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard/impossible to listen."
- If the person is too close, tell him/her to please move back, e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close."
- help the person problem solve and deal with the real issues when he/she becomes calmer.

DON'T :

- get into an argument or shouting match.
- become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way!"
- press for explanation or reasons for their behavior. "Now I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so obnoxious."
- look away and not deal with the situation.
- give away your own rights as a person.

THE VIOLENT OR PHYSICALLY DESTRUCTIVE STUDENT

Violence due to emotional distress is very rare and, typically occurs only when the student is completely frustrated and feels unable to do anything about it. The adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," best applies here.

DO:

- explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable, e.g., "You certainly have the right to be angry, but hitting (breaking things) is not O.K."
- stay in an open area.
- divert attention when all else fails, e.g., "if you hit me, I can't be of help."
- get necessary help (other staff, University Police, Health Center, Counseling and Career Services).

DON'T:

- ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, statements like, "You're leaving me no choice."
- threaten, dare, taunt, or push into a corner.
- touch.

THE ANXIOUS STUDENT

Danger is everywhere even though what makes students anxious is often unknown; not knowing what is expected and conflict are primary causes of anxiety. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise their anxiety; high and unreasonable self-expectations increase anxiety also. These students often have trouble making decisions.

DO:

- let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.
- reassure when appropriate.
- remain calm.
- be clear and explicit.

DON'T:

- make things more complicated.
- take responsibility for their emotional state.
- overwhelm with information or ideas.

THE DEPRESSED STUDENT

Typically, these students get the most sympathy. They show a multitude of symptoms, e.g., guilt, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and inadequacy as well as physical symptoms such as decreased or increased appetite, difficulty staying asleep, early awakening and low interest in daily activities. They show low activity levels because everything is an effort and they have little energy.

DO:

- let the student know you're aware he/she is feeling down and you would like to help.
- reach out more than halfway and encourage the student to express how she/he is feeling, for he/she is often initially reluctant to talk, yet others' attention helps the student feel more worthwhile.

DON'T:

- say, "Don't worry," "Crying won't help," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."
- be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think he/she may be.