How to Help Distressed Students: Guidance for Northwestern Law Faculty
(Recommendations and resources provided by Dean of Students Cliff Zimmerman and Northwestern University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS))

IMPORTANT CONTACTS
Consultation and Referrals for Distressed Students:
- Cliff Zimmerman, Dean of Students: W 312-503-7043; Mobile 847-651-7879
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): 847-491-2151 (M-F, 8:30-5); 847-491-2151 (after hours)

Emergencies:
- University Police (they will also contact Cliff): 312-503-3456
- CAPS emergency number: 847-491-2151 (M-F, 8:30-5, ask for crisis counselor); 847-491-2151 (after hours)
- Cliff Zimmerman, Dean of Students: W 312-503-7043; Mobile 847-651-7879

WHY FACULTY ARE SO IMPORTANT
Faculty members are in an important position to identify and help students who are in distress. You are often the first to witness early signs of concern, whether in the classroom or in your office. This may be particularly true for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends. Many of these students have not sought counseling and may be unaware of the many services available to them on and off campus. Because you are seen as respected, caring, and trustworthy, students are apt to turn to you, especially if they perceive you as available and willing to listen. Your ability to guide the student to professional resources and assistance can be a critical factor in saving a student’s academic career or even his or her life.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS OF A STUDENT IN DISTRESS
(1-2 alone is not necessarily indicative of trouble or distress, but a cumulative set of them may be concerning)

Academic
- Repeated missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absences from, or tardiness in attending, class
- Continual requests for unusual accommodations
- Writing or comments with themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, despair, or death
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented segments of class
- Inappropriate disruptions in class, or incoherent or rambling comments unrelated to the matter under discussion
- Marked deterioration in quality of work

Physical
- Marked changes in personal behavior, hygiene, or appearance
- Repeated fatigue, falling asleep in class, or sleep difficulties
- Visible increase or decrease in weight
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion)
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Mood swings, such as irritability, excessive anxiety, tearfulness, sadness, or reports a history of depression
- Marked changes in concentration or motivation
- Expression of suicidal thoughts, or of other self-injury or injury to others

Other Signs
- Isolation
- Dependency or seeking a lot of your attention
- Direct statements of family problems, personal losses, relationship break up, history of mental illness, or the like
- Expressions of concern for the student from his/her peers
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss

EMERGENCIES
If you are concerned that a student is in extreme crisis or may be at risk of imminent harm to self or others, or you feel unsafe given a student’s statements or behaviors, immediately call the following who can arrange to accompany the student to the hospital or the counseling center:
1. University Police: 312-503-3456 (they will contact Cliff);
2. CAPS emergency number: 847-491-2151 (ask for crisis counselor; if after hours follow message system); or
3. Cliff Zimmerman, Dean of Students: W 312-503-7043; Mobile 847-651-7879.

The situation may be urgent if the student is exhibiting:
- Suicidal statements or attempts
• Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
• Severe obsessive thinking
• Inability to communicate (garbled speech, disjointed thoughts), confusion, hallucinations, or delusions
• Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence or threats of violence)
• Inability to care for self or loss of functioning (e.g., lack of sleep, diminished appetite, etc.).
• Signs of intoxication by alcohol or drugs

Also be aware of the **potential for violence**, particularly if you notice:
• Alcohol or drug intoxication
• Homicidal threats (written or verbal) or attempted assault
• Paranoia, agitation, hostility, aggression, recent acts of violence or property damage
• Destruction of property or other criminal acts
• Preoccupation with weapons or known access to firearms or other weapons

**NON-EMERGENCIES: A RECOMMENDED FIRST STEP IS CONSULTING WITH THE DEAN OF STUDENTS**

If you are concerned about a student’s well-being, before meeting with the student please contact Cliff Zimmerman to discuss various options for handling the situation. You also should feel free to refer the student to Cliff, who will take the lead in coordinating resources and facilitating counseling if appropriate. The concerns need not rise to the level of urgency for consultation to be useful. When you refer a student to Cliff, please emphasize that the student is not in trouble. This is a common misconception students might have from their undergraduate years. You also should feel free to call CAPS for support and consultation during business hours or after hours and weekends at (847) 491-2151.

**IF YOU TALK WITH THE STUDENT (AS OPPOSED TO AN IMMEDIATE REFERRAL TO CLIFF):**

**SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH TROUBLED STUDENTS -- TALK, LISTEN, ASK, REFER**

**Talk** with the student in private, when both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.
- **Know your limits:** Avoid offering advice outside your area of expertise or engaging in a pseudo-therapeutic relationship. Never agree to keep suicidal thoughts, threats, or other troubling communications in confidence. If you suspect potential for violence: do not provoke it. Be non-threatening and non-confrontational; speak in a calm and reassuring manner; avoid touching the student. And do not deal with the situation alone.
- **Be direct, specific, and non-judgmental,** especially when expressing your concern.
- **Avoid judging, evaluating, criticizing,** even if the student asks for your opinion.

**Listen** sensitively to the student’s thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening manner.
- Give the student your undivided attention.
- Let the student talk; do not minimize or immediately provide reassurance. Telling the student that things are not that bad could discourage further disclosure, and may increase the student’s sense of guilt or hopelessness.
- Emphasize that help is available.

**Ask** specifically about the student’s level of risk if you have reason to be concerned.
- Ask if he has thoughts about suicide. This does not increase the risk, and most students are relieved to have someone to talk with. You can ask, "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" or “Do you ever feel so badly that you have thoughts of suicide?”
- **IF YES →** the student may be in immediate danger, consult UP, CAPS, or Cliff; avoid any promise to keep it confidential; get others involved; and get the student to professional help by asking, “Will you go with me to get help?”
  1. The best referral involves taking the person directly to someone who can help (walk them to Cliff, CAPS, UP).
  2. The next best is to get a commitment from the student to accept help, and make arrangements for that help.
  3. The third best referral is to give referral information. Any willingness to accept help at some time, even if in the future, is a good outcome.
- **IF NO →** acknowledge the pain as legitimate and offer to work together to get help. Make sure to follow through. Refer the student to the Dean of Students and/or CAPS:
  • Indicate that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage rather than a sign of weakness or failure, and is also a sign of good judgment and the appropriate use of resources.
  • Let them know that help is available: give the student the Dean of Students and CAPS contact numbers.
  • Normalize help seeking by stating that each year a significant number of students use these support services.
  • Follow up with the student to see if they sought help on their own (but know that confidentiality standards will limit what they may tell you and what CAPS can tell you absent a signed release).

*This document was originally constructed by Mitch Bailin, Dean of Students, Georgetown University Law Center, and is used and has been adapted with his permission.*