

THE ROLE OF STAFF IN ASSISTING AT-RISK STUDENTS

The adjustment to university can cause stress. Students typically encounter stress during their university years as a result of academic, social, family, work or financial pressures. While most students cope successfully with the demands of university life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students may feel alone, isolated, helpless, and even hopeless. These feelings can potentially disrupt academic performance and may result in harmful behaviours such as non-attendance of class, substance abuse, suicide attempts and many others.

Faculty and staff members are in a unique position to identify and help students who are in crisis. This may be particularly true for students who cannot or will not turn to family or friends. Anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in times of trouble.

A staff member's willingness to assist students may be a critical factor in helping students solve problems that are interfering with academic performance.

Consultations

If you have decided to help a student at risk, you may still have questions about how best to handle the situation. SCCDC staff members are available to assist you and the following action plan is suggested:

- Assess the situation, its severity, and the potential for referral;
- Learn about resources (both on and off campus) so you can suggest the most appropriate course of action when talking to the student;
- Find the best way to make the referral, if appropriate;
- Clarify your own feelings about the student and consider ways you can be most effective;
- Discuss follow-up concerns after the initial action or referral.

How to identify a student at risk

The need for assistance may be stated openly by a student to you and then the referral process can be followed. However, if a student does not openly state that they need assistance then you may need to evaluate whether the student is at risk or not in order to refer the student?

The aspects around academic performance, behaviour, psychosomatic symptoms, suicide risk and trauma identify symptoms that, may suggest that a student could benefit from assistance.

Change the World

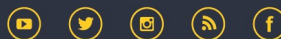
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UNIVERSITY

Enquiries

**Student Counselling Career and Development Centre
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mandela.ac.za

Students at Risk

Changes in academic performance

- ◆ Poor performance and preparation
- ◆ Excessive absences or tardiness
- ◆ Repeated requests for special consideration (especially when this represents a change from previous functioning)
- ◆ Unusual or changed pattern of interaction
- ◆ Avoidance of class participation
- ◆ Domination of class discussions
- ◆ Excessive anxiety when called upon
- ◆ Disruptive behaviour
- ◆ Problems with peers or family members
- ◆ Changes in mood and/or exaggerated emotional response that is obviously inappropriate to the situation

Changes in behaviour or appearance

- ◆ Depressed mood and constant tiredness
- ◆ Hyperactive or rapid speech
- ◆ Swollen or red eyes
- ◆ Change in personal hygiene or dress
- ◆ Dramatic weight loss or gain
- ◆ Strange or bizarre behaviour indicating loss of contact with reality
- ◆ Drug and alcohol abuse
- ◆ Sleeping problems

Psychosomatic symptoms

- ◆ Tension-induced headaches
- ◆ Nausea
- ◆ Loss of appetite or excessive eating
- ◆ Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- ◆ Gastrointestinal distress
- ◆ Gynaecological problems
- ◆ Other physical pains which have no apparent organic cause

Suicide risk

If an individual experiences suicidal thoughts and has a plan for committing suicide then immediate referral is necessary.

Regardless of the circumstances or context any reference to suicide should be treated seriously. In the case of an actual suicide attempt, call the Campus Health Service, an ambulance or the SCCDC.

Trauma

A trauma is an event that is emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, which can result in lasting mental and physical effects.

Some events that could be experienced as trauma are:

- * A change in a personal relationship
- * Rape
- * Robbery
- * Hijacking,
- * Death of a family member or close friend
- * Difficulties in marriage or family relationships
- * Divorce and
- * Change in family responsibilities and problems in other significant relationships

When to refer a student?

The signs and symptoms discussed above are helpful in determining when to refer.

There are also other guidelines which may assist the staff member to define the limits of his or her involvement with a particular student's problem. **The following situations could guide the referral:**

1. A student presents a problem or requests information which is outside your range of knowledge or expertise.
2. You feel that personality differences which cannot be resolved between you and the student will interfere with your helping the student.
3. The problem is personal, and you know the student on a personal basis, as a friend, family, neighbour etc.
4. The student is reluctant to discuss a problem with you.
5. You do not believe your contact with the student has been effective.

How to approach a student about counselling?

- Talk to the student in private
- Express your concern in behavioural, non-judgemental terms
- Give hope
- Avoid judging, evaluating and criticising
- Maintain clear and consistent boundaries and expectations
- Refer by pointing out that help is available and that seeking help is a sign of strength and courage
- Follow-up
- Consult with appropriate persons
- Be prepared for resistance

How to refer a student?

If the student agrees, then she/he may call or visit SCCDC to arrange an appointment. Counselling is always a personal choice. If the student disagrees with your referral and/or refuses to seek assistance, and you still feel uncomfortable with the situation, then call for a consultation appointment to discuss your concerns.

Confidentiality

SCCDC staff cannot provide information about a student's participation in services however the student is free to share that information with others as she/he chooses.

Emergencies

The following numbers can be called:

SCCDC (Office hours 08:00 to 16:30)

South Campus: **041 504 2511**
North Campus: **041 504 3222**
Missionvale Campus: **041 504 1106**
Second Avenue Campus: **041 504 3854**

Campus Health

South Campus: **041 504 2174**
North Campus: **041 504 3364**
Missionvale Campus: **041 504 1374**
Second Avenue Campus: **041 504 3762**

After Hour Emergencies:

Police: **10111**
Ambulance: **10177**
Suicide Emergency Line: **0800 567 567 or SMS 31393 for a call back**
Life Line (24/7 counselling): **0861 322 322**

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