

Warning Signs of Stress in Students

As an academic advisor, you should be aware of certain signals that may indicate the possibility of more serious problems. Recognizing these signals can greatly assist your ability to judge whether a student should be referred to Counseling Services or another appropriate resource. The list of the following behaviors may indicate that a student could benefit from a referral.

Academic Problems

- Dramatic drop in grades
- Repeated absences from class
- Poor study habits/past study habits no longer working
- Sudden changes in academic performance
- Test anxiety
- Changes in major
- Failure in a key course(s)
- Withdrawing from classes

Career Choice Problems

- Confusion with regard to interests, abilities, or values
- Chronic indecisiveness or choice conflict
- Uncertainty about career alternatives
- Unrealistic career aspirations
- Outside pressure to pursue a particular major

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

- Indications of excessive drinking, binge drinking, or drug use (ex. binges, neglects eating and/or physical appearance, impaired thinking)
- Severe drug reaction (ex. bizarre behaviors, unexplained “blackouts” of memory)
- Being a child of an alcoholic or drug dependent parent

Changes in Personal Relationships

- Death of a family member or close friend
- Difficulties in marriage or family relationships
- Divorce between parents
- Sexual abuse (ex. rape, incest, harassment, assault)
- Major personal injury or illness
- Terminal/chronic illness of a family member
- Dating and courtship difficulties
- Pregnancy

Unusual Behaviors

- Inability to sleep or excessive sleeping
- Irrational worrying or expressions of fear
- Lack of social skills or deteriorating personal hygiene
- Loss of appetite or excessive appetite (starving or binging behavior)
- Marked seclusion and unwillingness to communicate
- Persistent antisocial behavior such as lying, stealing, or other grossly deviant acts
- Repeated absences from class
- Unusual irritability
- Unexplained crying or outburst of anger
- Withdrawal from usual social interactions

Any of these signals taken alone may be insufficient to warrant intervention. However, duration of behavior, a combination of various signals, and the degree of intensity of indicators will determine the type of intervention necessary. Do not hesitate to take action if you suspect that the student is experiencing a serious problem that may inhibit academic performance or personal wellness. Contact the Office of Counseling Services, (843) 349-2305, if you have questions regarding any of these behaviors or wish to make a referral.

Knowing When and How to Make Referrals

To ensure success at Coastal Carolina University, students need to receive information regarding university policies, procedures, departmental requirements, and professional and student organizations. Students can make use of self-help materials and workshops, get work experience, become involved in student organizations, and gain other necessary marketable skills if they choose to take action. These types of experiences and knowledge will assist students in making informed and educated decisions about their academic goals and career paths.

Referring Students to Campus Resources

Whether students are having problems or just simply have questions, it is helpful to be aware of what resources are available on campus. By referring students to the appropriate resources, advisors can provide them with more effective assistance. Advisors should feel comfortable referring students whenever they feel that another campus resource could better address specific needs. Assisting students in making appointments is helpful and recommended.

While there are specific signs that do indicate potential problems for students, there also are other guidelines that may assist advisors in dealing with these problems. If you believe that a student might benefit from a referral to another campus resource, speak directly to the student while showing genuine concern. Make it clear that the recommendation represents your best judgment based on your observation of the student's behavior.

Remember that it is not unusual for students to feel anxious about being referred, especially if it is for counseling. Except in life-threatening cases, the option must always be left open for the student to refuse the referral. Leave room for the student to consider alternatives by suggesting

that perhaps you can talk about it later after the student has had some time to think. If a student emphatically says “No,” then respect that decision, but leave the situation open should the student reconsider. If the student agrees to the referral, offer to go with them, so that they feel more comfortable with the situation. You also should follow up with the student at a later date to show your continued interest, even if that student may have rejected your referral. **You should always refer the student to someone else:**

- **When the student asks for a referral.**
You always need some information from the student to best know where to refer them. It may be a good idea to explore with the student the urgency of their need for referral. This is especially true if the student is very upset, because some exploration may help the individual feel more comfortable about being referred.
- **When the student presents a problem or requests information which is outside of your range of knowledge.**
Never try to deal with a problem that you know you are not prepared to handle. Academic advisors may feel it is their job to handle every problem of the student, but realize that you are not a professional counselor, and know when you need to refer the student to someone who has professional training in a particular situation.
- **When the student is contemplating suicide.**
Any time a student is contemplating suicide they must be referred to a professional. While it is important for you to discuss immediate feelings, realize that this sort of threat to self or others requires immediate intervention by counseling services. Remember that it is possible to save a life by taking immediate and effective action. Do not be afraid to ask a student if they are thinking about harming themselves.
- **When you feel you have not helped the student.**
Realize that you cannot help everyone needing assistance. If you have the feeling that you have not been helpful, be honest with the student and suggest a specific person or office that would better meet the student’s needs.
- **When a lack of objectivity exists on your part.**
It is possible that you may know a student from a prior experience, may know a particular person the student is discussing, or may identify too closely with the problem being discussed to effectively help the student. This may impair your ability to be nonjudgmental and helpful, and referring the student to someone else may ensure objectivity while effectively dealing with the problem.
- **If the student is reluctant to discuss a problem with you for some reason.**
At times, you may sense that a student may not feel comfortable talking to you. In that case, you should always respect the student’s wish and refer the student to an appropriate individual that the student will be able to trust.

- **If the student has physical symptoms that may indicate a problem.**
Headaches, dizziness, stomach pains, and insomnia are just some examples of physical manifestations of psychological states. If the student complains about symptoms they suspect (or you suspect) may be connected to their problem, it would be in their best interest to refer them to a professional, possibly someone in Student Health Services (843-349-6543) or Counseling Services (843-349-2305).

Referral Skills Summary: How to Refer Students

- I. Referral decision – determine whether a referral needs to be made.**
 - A. Determine the problem(s).
 - B. Determine whether or not you can help and/or are qualified to offer the assistance needed.
 - C. Determine campus resources or persons to whom the student may be referred.

- II. Referral process – professionally refer students to the proper persons or resources for help.**
 - A. Explain in a clear and open manner why you feel it desirable or necessary to refer.
 1. Take into account the student’s emotional and psychological reaction to the referral
 2. Get the student to discuss problems, consider reasons for referral, evaluate possible sources of help, and assist in the selection of the specific person or resource.
 - B. Explain fully the services that can be obtained from the person or resource you are recommending.
 - C. Reassure the student about capability and qualifications of the person or resource to help meet the particular need expressed.
 - D. Attempt to personalize the experience by giving the student the name of a contact person to request, or call and make an appointment for the student. Always give directions to the office where you are referring the student.
 - E. Walk the student to the appropriate resource; stay with them if necessary based on the circumstances.

- III. Follow up – evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the referral**
 - A. Determine if the student kept the appointment.
 - B. Discuss with the student their evaluation of the help received by the referral.
 - C. Determine whether you selected the appropriate source of help for the student.