Working with distressed and distressing students: An overview

Katherine Zilmer, MA, Sr. Assistant Dean of Students/BIT Case Manager
Tom Miebach, LCSW, Clinical Counselor/Crisis Triage Case Manager
College is a stressful time!

- Increased responsibility and independence
- Academic and personal stress
- Complex interpersonal relationships
- Drugs and alcohol
- Pre-existing mental health history
- Emerging psychological problems
Mental Health Issues on Campus

An American College Health Associate (ACHA) study in 2016 reported that students endorsed the following within the last 12 months:

- 37% of students felt so depressed that it was difficult to function
- 58% felt overwhelming anxiety
- 50% felt things were hopeless
- 59% felt very lonely
- 10% were seriously considering suicide
- 25% were actually seeking treatment/counseling
Trends at Illinois

• In recent years, experienced significant increases in demand for services and urgent appointments.

• Compared to national averages:
  – Higher Level of Generalized Anxiety
  – Higher Level of Social Anxiety
  – Higher Level of Depression
  – Higher Level of Academic Distress

• Sadly, five (5) Illinois students died by suicide during the 2016-2017 academic year.
What is your role?

- Learn to recognize the signs of distress
- Learn how to effectively respond to distressing situations and how to reach out to students in distress
- Express concern and compassion
- Provide guidance and support
- Learn to establish clear and healthy boundaries
- Become familiar with campus resources and how to refer students
- Know the policies relevant for your professional role
What is beyond your role?

- Providing mental health treatment
- Diagnosing a mental disorder
- Accompanying students to counseling sessions
- Making decisions for students
- Getting into arguments or power struggles
- Judging or invalidating the student’s problems
- Always being available for the student in case of future distress/crisis
- Pushing your own limits or causing yourself in your attempt to help others
Behaviors that put students on university radar

Academic
• Irregular attendance or increased tardiness
• Missing exams or assignment deadlines
• Disproportionate anxiety about performance/grades

Physical
• Deteriorating or poor hygiene
• Appearing disconnected or ‘out of it’
• Slowed, rapid or pressured speech

Behavioral
• Incoherent communication
• Expression of odd thoughts/beliefs
• Suicidal statements, gestures, attempts
• Self-Harming behaviors
• Intimidating, harassing or threatening behavior
# Signs of Distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Physical</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missed, late, or incomplete assignments</td>
<td>Exhibits high levels of emotionality, tearfulness, crying</td>
<td>Deteriorating or poor hygiene, disheveled appearance, soiled clothes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inconsistent or deteriorating quality of work</td>
<td>Excessively demanding or dependent behavior</td>
<td>Comes to class smelling of alcohol or appearing high</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased tardiness or absences</td>
<td>Nonsensical, incoherent speech</td>
<td>Noticeably slowed or rapid speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorganized work and/or presentation of ideas</td>
<td>Expression of suicidal thoughts</td>
<td>Appears consistently fatigued and/or falling asleep in class</td>
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<td>Repeated requests for extensions</td>
<td>Angry outbursts, intimidating or aggressive behavior. Impulsivity</td>
<td>Significant weight gain or loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written or verbal expression of morbid, dark, or violent thoughts</td>
<td>Expressions of worthlessness, hopelessness, despair</td>
<td>Appears confused, disoriented or out of touch with reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disproportionate anxiety about coursework and/or in response to grades</td>
<td>Unusually animated or withdrawn</td>
<td>Unpredictable and/or rapid shifts in mood. Inability to regulate mood/behavior.</td>
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Practical tips for intervening

- **Hear the Problem:** Stay calm, listen carefully, and be non-judgmental about the problems – try to understand the problem from the student’s perspective
- **Keep it Simple:** Be clear and direct in your communication
- **Be Honest:** Do not be afraid to express your concerns – try to connect with the person in distress
- **Ask to Help:** Offer to help the person, provide referral information, take a collaborative approach but allow the person to make his/her own decisions
- **Follow Up:** If appropriate, offer to remain in communication with the person as they seek help from a professional (be aware of healthy boundaries)
Practical tips for intervening

To Do
- Talk with the student in a **safe/private** setting
- Remain calm and in control
- Be supportive
- Listen effectively
- Refer and/or consult

Avoid
- Assuming too much responsibility
- Invalidating or arguing
- Embarrassing the student
- Ignoring negative behavior that has an impact on others
Appropriate follow-up

• Check in with the student after your conversation and ask how the student is doing
• Ask if they followed-through with your referral
• Continue to expect the student to fulfill class requirements unless there are extenuating circumstances that prevent them from doing so (hospitalization).
# Pathways to Support at Illinois

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<th>Case management</th>
<th>Academic support</th>
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<td>Student Assistance Center in ODOS</td>
<td>College Assistant Deans</td>
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<td>McKinley Health Center</td>
<td>Housing/Residence Life Staff</td>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRES</td>
<td>Student of Concern Committee</td>
<td>Student Assistance Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>UIPD (Crisis Intervention Team)</td>
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<td>DRES</td>
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<td>Office for Minority Student Affairs</td>
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## Pathways to Support at Illinois

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<th>Community Standards &amp; Violence Prevention</th>
<th>Support for Special Populations</th>
<th>Crises</th>
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<td><strong>UIPD</strong></td>
<td><strong>WRC</strong></td>
<td><strong>UIPD</strong></td>
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<td>Suicide Prevention Team</td>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
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<td>Behavioral Intervention Team</td>
<td>Cultural Houses</td>
<td>Housing/Residence Life Staff</td>
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<td>Threat Assessment</td>
<td>Department of Intercollegiate Athletics</td>
<td>Counseling Center</td>
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<td>Student Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>Title IX</td>
<td>Emergency Dean Program (after hours)</td>
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<td>Emergency Call Center</td>
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Suicide Prevention

A policy that requires any student who threatens, attempts, or engages in a gesture of suicide to attend four sessions of professional assessment to assess safety in a campus environment.

A SIRF (or suicide incident referral form) is completed by a concerned third party. The SIRF is received and reviewed by the Counseling Center Suicide Prevention Team. The SIRF may be found on the Counseling Center website.

These sessions are completely confidential and not part of a student’s academic record. They may be completed by licensed therapists on campus or in the community.

These professional assessment sessions are required and if not completed there will be steps taken by the Suicide Prevention Team that range from a hold on academic accounts to withdrawal from the University.
Counseling Center resources for faculty and staff

- Phone triage and consultation
- Workshops on request
- Kognito training
- Liaison program
- Tuesday @7 Workshops
- Treatment teams
  - Eating disorder
  - Alcohol and other drug (AOD)
  - Suicide intervention
  - Cognitive and psychiatric disabilities
Office of the Dean of Students

- Student centered
- Respect students
- Privacy
- Respect student’s right to make independent decisions
- Treat students as adults

Supporting the Whole Student, One Concern at a Time.

Attending college is an exciting time for students and families; ideally, it is a period of experimentation and exploration, an advancement of one’s education, and a step forward toward a career and independence. We also recognize it can be a stressful period. Many students are balancing family, work, financial, and other obligations, which can lead to physical and emotional distress. As members of the Illinois community, students and staff have an obligation and responsibility to care for each other and be concerned for the well-being of others.

If you know someone in distress, you may be in a position to offer support or guide the person to an appropriate resource. You are not alone, and the resources discussed on these pages — the Office of the Dean of Students, Student Assistance Center, Emergency Dean Program, and Behavioral Intervention Team — are here to help.

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Ways we intervene

Mild
- Meetings with students
- Absence letters/email notifications
- Case management
- Consultations with college
- Consultations with Housing

Moderate
- Withdrawal
- Medical withdrawal
- Students of Concern Team

Elevated
- Welfare check requests
- Suicide Incident Reporting
- Title IX Reporting
- Trauma Response Team
- Student discipline

Severe
- Behavioral Intervention Team
- Parental notification
- Involuntary withdrawal
- Interim suspension or dismissal
Campus Teams

Student of Concern Team
- Student focused
- Lower level concerns

Special Situations Team
- Students, faculty, & staff
- Situations which may come to the attention of multiple offices on campus

Behavioral Intervention Team
- Student focused
- Intended to prevent targeted violence

Threat Assessment Team
- Faculty and staff focused
- Intended to prevent targeted violence
Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT)

About the team
• Multidisciplinary team meets weekly
• Primary mission is to enhance campus safety and to prevent acts of targeted violence
• BIT provides a centralized place to receive, manage, and coordinate a response to students who pose a threat to the campus community; focus is on students
• Approach is to intervene early and provide support to students of concern before more significant problems arise.

Goals
• Violence prevention
• Address behavioral issues that interfere with University living learning environment &/or put safety of student/others at risk
• Create communication across campus/decrease silos
• Intervene at earliest and lowest level possible with focus on supporting success
## BIT MEMBERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title and Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ken Ballom</td>
<td>Dean of Students &amp; Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bob Woodward</td>
<td>Director of McKinley Health Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Brown</td>
<td>Associate Dean of Students/Director of Student Conflict Resolution (CHAIR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loren Israel</td>
<td>University Counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine Zilmer</td>
<td>Sr. Assistant Dean of Students &amp; BIT Case Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla McCowan</td>
<td>Director, Counseling Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tom Geis</td>
<td>Police Lieutenant, UIPD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill Roberts</td>
<td>Associate Director, Counseling Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Wilczynski</td>
<td>Assistant Director for Residential Life &amp; Assistant Dean of Students, Student Conflict Resolution</td>
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Student of Concern Committee

Goals
• Facilitate early intervention with students who appear to be struggling socially, academically, or personally
• Facilitate more effective wrap around support
• Prevent students from rising to the level of BIT

Members
• Tom Miebach: Counseling Center
• Katherine Zilmer: Student Assistance Center/Office of the Dean of Students
• Ann Marie Morgan: Student Assistance Center/Office of the Dean of Students
• Trish Anton: University Housing
• Jonathan Thomas-Stagg: Disability Resources and Educational Services
• Nick Dunn: International Student and Scholar Services
• Melissa McDonald: University Housing
• Tom Geis: UIPD
Consulting/Reporting Tips

• Don’t make a diagnosis or use clinical terms
• Describe observed physical and verbal behavior
• Describe behavior objectively without inferences
• Try to establish a timeline
• Avoid assumptions or judgments
• Describe the impact on you or whomever reported the behavior
• Describe the 5 W’s- Who, What, When, Where, Why
What can you do?

• Contribute to a campus community of care
• Take the Kognito At-Risk Suicide Prevention Training
• Offer support
• Refer to or consult: SAC, Counseling Center, campus teams, campus resources
• Call police
• Suicide Incident Reporting
• Title IX Reporting
• Contact E-Dean for after hours emergencies
Cultivating a Community of Care

- Accept role in keeping campus community safe
- Educate yourself & pay attention
- Encourage help-seeking
- Report concerns
Questions?

Contact information:
Counseling Center: 333-3704
Tom Miebach: miebach2@Illinois.edu

Student Assistance Center: 333-0050
Katherine Zilmer: kzilmer@Illinois.edu