

## Signs of Distress & How to Help

It is important for you to know that you are not alone when working with a person who appears to be in distress. In order to know the best course of action, it may be important to consult with colleagues, supervisors, counselors, or others who might be able to help provide suggestions for working with a person who is expressing distress.

A person may ask you to keep what they tell you “secret” or “confidential.” Please recognize that this may not be prudent in all circumstances. If you are concerned that a person might be at risk (to themselves or others), consultations with another professional might be necessary. You may also consult with the Dean of Student Formation, Director of Human Resources, or a member of the counseling staff without providing the name of the person.

### Academic Signs

- Deterioration in quality of work
- Missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absence from class or lab
- Continual requests for unusual accommodations (i.e., late papers, extensions, postponed exams, etc.)
- Essays or papers that have themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented classes or with lab mates
- Inappropriate disruptions or monopolizing classroom time

### Physical and Psychological Signs

- Depression. Clinically depressed individuals will exhibit multiple symptoms beyond a few days. Some of these symptoms are sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, and preoccupation with death.
- Agitation or Acting out. This would represent a departure from normal or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, restlessness, or hyperactivity, being antagonistic, and increase alcohol and/or drug abuse.
- Disorientation. You may witness a diminishment in awareness of what is going on around them, forgetting or losing things, misperception of facts or reality, rambling or disconnected speech, and behavior that seems out of context.
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse. Signs of intoxication during class or interaction with University officials are indicative of a problem that requires attention.
- Suicidal Thoughts. Early messages of distress can range from “I don’t want to be here,” to a series of vague “good-byes,” to “I’m going to kill myself.” Non-verbal messages could include

giving away valued items, and putting legal financial, and University affairs in order. All of the above messages should be taken seriously.

- Violence and Aggression. You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. This may be manifested by physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material.

## **How to Help a Person in Distress**

### Listen

- Stop what you are doing and genuinely listen to what the person is saying
- If appropriate, speak to the person privately to minimize embarrassment

### Acknowledge

- Be sure the person is aware that you cannot keep expressions of harm to self or others confidential
- Express concern and interest and let the person know you are listening
- Avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental
- Remember, although it may not seem like a crisis to you, it still feels like one to the person

### Assess

- Ask open-ended questions to help you better understand and clarify the problem
- Consider questions like, “What have you thought about doing?” or “Have you had thoughts about suicide?”
- Explore options with the person, but don’t expect to have all the answers

### Refer

- Don’t ignore comments about suicide, violence, or harm to self or others
- Clarify the limits of your ability to help
- Offer to accompany the person to the appropriate support office
- Do not agree to keep the problem a secret

Academic Alert: <http://www.dbq.edu/Academics/AcademicAlertForm/>

Student Life Incident Report: [https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?UnivofDubuque&layout\\_id=1](https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?UnivofDubuque&layout_id=1)

**Counseling & Life Services, 563.589.3911**

**Dubuque Crisis Line, 855.800.1239**

**Emergency, dial ‘911’**