

Starting Out Right...

**Knowing, Recognizing &
Supporting Students with
Daily Stressors in the
Classroom**

Common Causes of Stress in College Students

- Not enough money
- Academic achievement
- Learning Disability (diagnosed/undiagnosed)
- Unrealistic expectations
- Parental expectations
- Time urgency
- Social pressures
- Change in or poor eating and sleeping habits
- Stress prone diet (i.e. coffee, cola, chocolate)
- Extra-curricular activities
- Trauma or Life Changing Event has Occurred
- Alcohol or Drug Misuse
- A break-up with a significant other
- Changing to a new environment
- Changes in responsibilities
- A part-time/full-time job
- A bad roommate or not enough privacy
- Loneliness
- Mental Health Diagnosis
- Too much studying and not enough physical activity
- Lack of Time Management, Organization, or Study Skills

Student Development is a Process!

It is difficult to prepare for the predictable disruptions in one's sense of self that come with the territory of real growth, change, and development. It is important for Faculty and Staff to be patient with the students.

- The college experience is extremely challenging even under the best of circumstances.
- Many students do not realize that college is a major time and financial commitment.
- The current generation of students expect immediate results and the delayed reinforcement can add to stress levels.
- Many of our students are functioning at “maximum capacity” and do not know where to seek out academic help or are too insecure to ask for help.
- Academic demands + work responsibilities + family commitments + financial stressors + first generation issues + new learning can lead to emotional instability and maladaptive coping strategies.
- Learning to balance life and academics is a skill. Added logistical stressors can put students “over the top.”

College Students: Mental Health Concerns

Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2015)- Top 5 presenting concerns:

1. Anxiety
2. Depression
3. Relationship problems
4. Stress due to various issues
5. Academic performance

National Statistics for College Students...

- 1 in 3 students reported prolonged periods of depression and feeling so depressed that they have trouble functioning.
- 30% reported problems with school work due to a mental health issue.
- 50% received no education on mental health issues prior to college.
- 50% of students rated their mental health below average or poor.
- 1 in 2 college students have had suicidal thoughts.
- 1 in 10 college students have seriously considered suicide.
- 1 in 2 never seek treatment.
- Only 7% of parents reported their college students as experiencing mental health issues.
- Mental health issues in college student population, such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, are associated with lower GPA and higher probability of dropping out of college.

(American Psychological Association, 2014; NAMI, 2012; Active Minds, 2015)

Recognizing when a Student Needs Assistance

- ❖ Types of Behaviors
- ❖ Levels of Distress 1-3 (Mild, Moderate, and Severe).
- ❖ Recognizing the level will help determine your next step.
- ❖ Same situation may cause a different level of distress for different students.

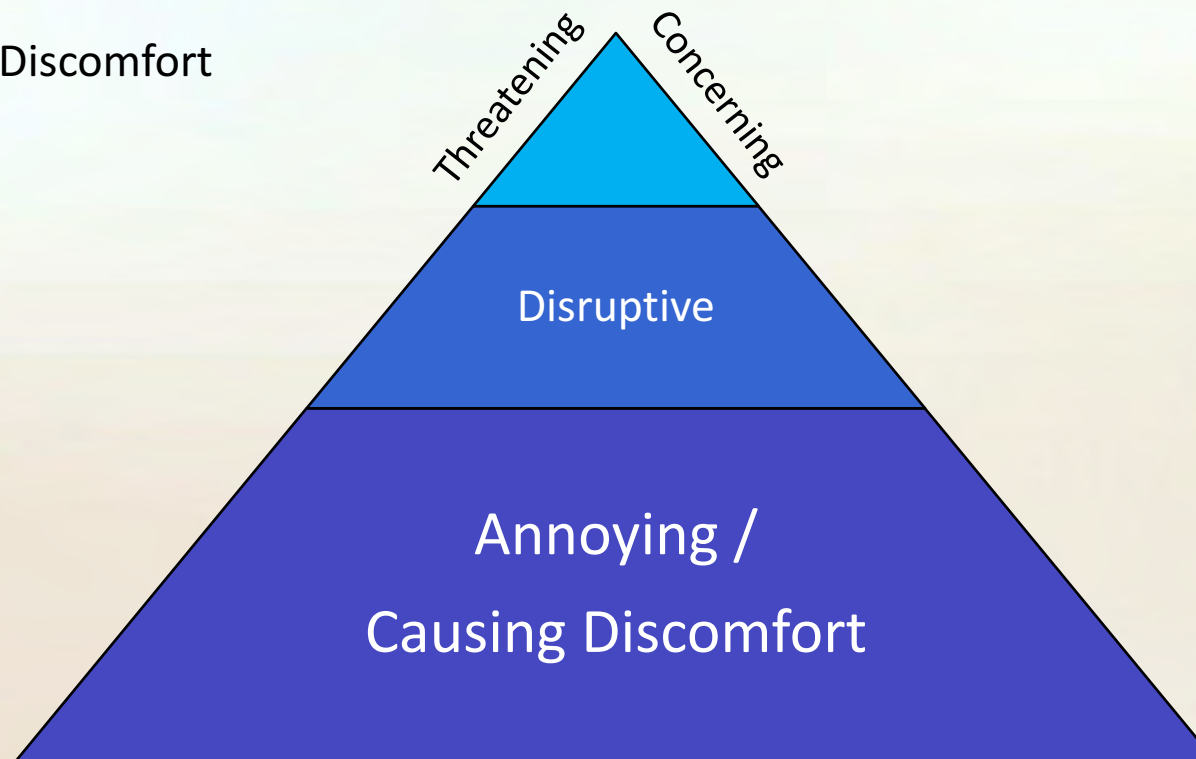
Reasons to Act

- ❖ Get the behavior to stop
- ❖ Serve as supportive educators to maintain the quality of UAH's educational environment
- ❖ Uphold the class boundaries for the benefit of ALL students in the course
- ❖ Role model life skills for students – provide feedback
- ❖ Prevent escalation or additional behaviors

Types of Behaviors Observed

Types of Behaviors:

- Threatening/Concerning
- Disruptive
- Annoying/Causing Discomfort



Behaviors that May Cause Feelings of Discomfort or Annoyance

- Staring, appearing bored, rolling eyes, sleeping
- Not picking up on social cues
- Interrupting you repeatedly, whether on or off subject
- Talking loudly, odd phrasing, illogical or irrelevant statements
- Asking a lot of questions, attention seeking
- Talking about things that don't relate to class
- Standing within personal space boundaries
- Wanting to speak to your supervisor/chair
- Disrespectful/rude behavior
- Criticizing your syllabus, presentation style, tests, scoring system
- Monopolizing your time
- Crying, unfiltered sharing of personal problems
- Not engaging in class
- Answering phone, talking, texting, on computer in class

Examples of Behaviors

Annoying Behaviors

Over the past few weeks, a student comes in a few minutes late to class a few times and makes a production out of unpacking his notebook. During class, he talks to others often about random and unrelated topics. He gets up and leaves randomly. He has begun visiting the professor during her office hours and wants to review every question on the daily quiz.

Disruptive Behaviors

A student posts sexually harassing comments on the course electronic bulletin board. A week later in class, he laughs out loud while a guest speaker is speaking, making it obvious that he is watching a video on his computer instead of listening. When the instructor asks him to be quiet, he says, “F-you, b*tch”, puts his headphones on, and taps his foot to the music, ignoring the instructor.

Threatening Behaviors

A student waits until all others have left class. She speaks loudly saying, “I’m pissed that you gave me a D on that paper. You need to let me rewrite it, or else!” She blocks the doorway and has clenched fists.

Concerning Behavior

A student always looks like they haven’t slept well, hair is not combed or brushed, clothes are wrinkled, eyes may be blood shot, verbal comments are often tangential and off topic and other students roll their eyes or move away when the student comes in to class. The student has shared very personal information at odd times including a history of “cutting” and a past suicide attempt. You sometimes hear them commenting to other students about how they “partied hard” the night before.

When does stress become distress?

- Criteria is deterioration in daily functioning
- Impairment in one of several areas, including:
 - Social
 - Occupational
 - Academic
 - Emotional

Level 1

Mildly troubled students may exhibit behaviors which do not disrupt others but may indicate something is wrong and that assistance is needed.

- Serious grade problems or a change from consistently passing grades to unaccountably poor performance.
- Excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated consistent attendance.
- Unusual or markedly changed patterns of interaction, i.e., avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions, etc.
- Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully e.g., a depressed, lethargic mood; very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; falling asleep during class.

Level 2

Moderately troubled students may exhibit behaviors that indicate significant emotional distress. They may also be reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for personal help.

Behaviors may include:

- Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional while disclosing the circumstances prompting the request
- New or repeated behavior which pushes the limits and interferes with effective management of the immediate environment
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses which are obviously inappropriate to the situation

Tips on Handling Levels 1 and 2

- Deal directly with the behavior/problem according to classroom protocol. (what boundaries did you implement in your classroom)?
- Address the situation on a more personal level.
- Consult with colleagues and/or a member from the counseling center staff to get suggestions on how to handle, refer, etc.
- Refer the student to one of the University resources available.

Level 3

Severely troubled/disruptive students exhibit behaviors that signify an obvious crisis that necessitate emergency care. These problems are the easiest to identify.

- Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things which others cannot see or hear; beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability)
- Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, e-mail messages, harassment)
- Overtly suicidal thoughts (including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment)
- Class comments, written assignments or statements to you privately about personal problems-anxiety/depression/abuse
- Repeated requests for private meetings, long detailed emails, any related boundary violations between teacher and student
- Threats or Acts of violence to you, a specific individual, the class, society and/or physical aggression and intimidation-verbal, written or non-verbal
- Threats of Articulation of depression, hopelessness, or self-harm-cutting, current suicidal thoughts, past suicide attempts
- Expressions of anger/agitation/inability to cope with stress and apparent mood lability – “what mood will they be in today?”
- Reports of abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault either to them or towards another/Stalking behaviors

Tips on Handling Level 3

- Remain calm and know who to call for help, if necessary.
- If you feel unsafe or uncomfortable with the student involved contact campus safety and security.
- Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate resources are made. **DO NOT LEAVE STUDENT UNATTENDED**
- Remember that it is **NOT** your responsibility to provide the professional help needed for a severely troubled/disruptive student. You need only to make the necessary call and request assistance.
- When a student expresses a direct threat to themselves or others, or acts in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way call for immediate assistance!
- **DOCUMENT,DOCUMENT,DOCUMENT!**

How Can I Help as a Faculty/Staff Member?

Faculty/Staff can mitigate some of these stresses that directly affect students' academic work in the forms of illness, requests for extensions, hypervigilance, underperformance, cheating, reductions in studying or valuing course tasks, and altered professional goals. While faculty aren't therapists, and can only have a limited impact, they can minimize some of these class-based anxieties by doing the following:

- Think about the amount of stress or difficulty in your courses. Whether looking to sports psychology (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908; Easterbrook, 1959), developmental psychology (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development), or the psychology of curiosity (Day's Zone of Curiosity), we know there's a "*sweet spot*" in which peak performance is motivated by encountering just enough and not too much difficulty, stress, or anxiety.
- Think about the timing of the most difficult components of your courses. Scaffolding activities to build toward the greatest challenges—rather than situating them too early and/or all at once—helps guide students through the most challenging tasks. The former is a gateway model; the latter is gatekeeping.
- Be willing to consider or offer flexible arrangements (e.g., extension on a paper or exam), if appropriate, as a way to alleviate stress and instill hope.
- Think about the way you frame or talk about difficult tasks, critical concepts or skills, your discipline, your own learning, and your students' well-being. There's much to say here, but ultimately, consider whether your students hear that you believe that
 - a) they can all do well by putting effort in the right places
 - b) they can handle the challenges of your course, your field, and learning in general.
- Then brainstorm how you might put the above principles into practice in your specific courses and contexts. For example, how can you address these anxiety-mitigating principles in your syllabus (the prose part and the schedule)? On the first day of class? The day before or of a major assignment? During office hours? If you'd like help planning the amount, timing, and framing of the challenges in your courses to reach "*the sweet spot*" between high levels of rigor and performance-reducing anxiety, meet with us at the UAH Counseling Center (256-824-6203).

Knowing Your Boundaries as the Faculty/Staff Member

Guidelines For Interaction

- Request to see the student in private. Openly acknowledging to the students that you are aware of their distress, that you are sincerely concerned about their welfare, and that you are willing to help them explore their alternatives can have a profound effect. We encourage you whenever possible to speak directly to a student when you sense that he/she is in academic and/or personal distress.
- Briefly acknowledge your observations and perceptions of their situation and express your concerns directly and honestly. Strange and inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. The student can be informed that such behavior is distracting and inappropriate.
- Listen carefully to what the student is troubled about and try to see the issue from his/her point of view without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing. Your receptivity to an alienated student will allow him/her to respond more effectively to your concerns.
- Let the student know that you are not a professional counselor and that you are limited in your scope of assisting them in their issues; however you can offer them on-campus resources to support either academic or personal distress.
- Involve yourself only as far as you are willing to go. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than time or skill permits. Extending oneself to others always involves some risk but it can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.
- Be open with the student that you are not bound by confidentiality and if there is a concern for their welfare, that you will need to reach out to the appropriate department on campus.
- Do not share your personal phone or email information. If the student does text or email you with concerning information, respond to them that you are open to offering them the referrals for additional support and forward the information to the appropriate department. Remain calm and take the lead. (“Tell me what is bothering you and then let’s decide what solutions there might be.”)
- Set clear limits up front and hold the student to the allotted time for the discussion. (“I have 10 minutes today, and so within that time, what can I try and help you with?”)
- Respond quickly and with clear limits to behavior that disrupts class, study sessions, or consultations.
- Be prepared for manipulative requests and behaviors. (“You came asking for my help and I have offered you several ideas, but they do not seem okay with you. What ideas do you have?”)

Difficult Conversations

Preparing for the conversation:

- Remind yourself the discussion is about the behavior, you still have a relationship with the person.
- Identify and manage your triggers.
- Consider how you might be perceived.
- Determine the best/safest environment.
- Remind yourself that low-level intervention can prevent high-level issues.
- Seek to understand and address, *not* to judge, defend, or excuse.

Develop your relationship with the student & promote success:

- Build rapport with the student – explain why you are meeting.
- Talk to the student in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel comfortable about what to do next.
- Be direct and nonjudgmental. Be direct and specific. Express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example, say something like "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I'm concerned," rather than "Why have you missed so much class lately?"
- Listen sensitively. Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings. For example, "It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things." Remember to let the student talk.
- **Refer.** Point out that help is available, and emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help. Tell the student what you know about the recommended person or service.
- **Follow up.** Following up is an important part of the process. Check with the student later to find out how he or she is doing, and provide support as appropriate.

Dealing with students in distress can be a stressful and taxing experience. Be sure to take care of yourself, too. Seek support from colleagues and supervisors. It may also be helpful to talk with a counselor. Counseling services are available free of charge for faculty and staff members currently covered by UT's health insurance benefits through the Employee Assistance Program. If you're interested in counseling options for yourself or an UAH colleague, please refer to the Employee Assistance Program at <https://www.uah.edu/hr/benefits/work-life/eap>.

Appropriate Referrals

When to refer

- In many cases of student distress, faculty and staff can provide adequate help through
- empathic listening, facilitating open discussion of problems, instilling hope, validating and
- normalizing concerns, conveying acceptance, giving reassurance, and offering basic advice.
- In some cases, however, students need professional help to overcome problems and to
- resume effective functioning. The following signs indicate a student may need counseling:
- The student remains distressed following repeated attempts by you and others to be helpful.
- The student becomes increasingly isolated, unkempt, irritable, or disconnected.
- The student's academic or social performance deteriorates.
- The student's behavior reflects increased hopelessness or helplessness.
- You find yourself doing ongoing counseling rather than consultation or advising and feeling yourself pulled in directions that make you uncomfortable.
- The student shows significant and marked changes in behavior and mood.

Appropriate Referrals Continued...

How to refer

- Speak to the student in a direct, concerned, and caring manner.
- Because students may initially resist the idea of intervention, coaching, or counseling, be caring but firm in your judgment that counseling would be helpful. Also, be clear about the reasons that you are concerned. (“I am worried about your doing okay in school, and I bring this up really because I care about how you are doing.”)
- Be knowledgeable in advance about the services and procedures of Counseling Services and other campus support departments. The best referrals are made to specific people or services. (You can find out about Counseling Services clinicians at our website: <https://www.uah.edu/health-and-wellness/counseling-center>.)
- Suggest that the student call to make an appointment with the appropriate support service on campus, and provide the phone number to that department, as well as the location.
- Sometimes it is useful to actively assist students in scheduling an initial appointment with the support department. You can offer the use of your phone. When calling the Counseling Center the Intake Coordinator will assist in helping the student set up an intake appointment or crisis appointment, if needed. In some situations, you may find it wise to walk the student over to the Counseling Center.
- If you feel overwhelmed, need help in deciding whether it is appropriate to make a referral or unprepared to help a stressed/distressed student, call the Dean of Student Affairs at 256.824.6700 or the Counseling Center at 256.824.6203 for a consultation with either the Intake Coordinator or a Staff Clinician.