

Franciscan University Counseling Center

A Guide for Faculty & Staff

College students experience a wide range of stressors during their undergraduate years, including academic, social, family, financial, and work-related pressures. While many students cope effectively with these demands, others may find them overwhelming or unmanageable.

Students who are struggling may feel isolated, helpless, or hopeless. When left unaddressed, these feelings can interfere with academic performance and may increase the risk of harmful behaviors, including substance misuse or thoughts of self-harm.

Faculty and staff are often in a unique position to notice when a student is struggling. For students who may not feel comfortable turning to family or friends—or who are unaware of available resources—a caring and attentive faculty or staff member may serve as a critical point of connection. Your concern and willingness to respond can make a meaningful difference in a student's academic success and overall well-being.

The purpose of this guide is to help faculty and staff recognize signs of student distress and to provide practical guidance for intervention, referral, and consultation with the University Counseling Center.

Tips for Recognizing Distressed Students

Everyone experiences periods of stress or emotional difficulty. The signs listed below may indicate that a student's challenges extend beyond typical stressors—especially when multiple signs are present or persist over time.

Marked Changes in Academic Performance or Behavior	Unusual Behavior or Appearance	References to Suicide, Homicide or Death
Demonstrates poor performance or preparation	Displays a depressed, flat, or lethargic mood	Expresses feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, excessive guilt, or shame
Shows excessive absences or chronic tardiness	Exhibits hyperactivity or very rapid speech	Makes overt references to suicide
Makes repeated requests for special consideration	Appears with swollen or red eyes	Withdraws from friends or family
Exhibits an unusual or changed pattern of interaction	Shows noticeable changes in personal hygiene or dress	Makes homicidal or suicidal threats (verbal or written)
Avoids participation in class or activities	Experiences dramatic weight loss or weight gain	Gives away possessions or makes "goodbye" statements
Dominates discussions inappropriately	Displays strange or bizarre behavior suggestive of a loss of contact with reality	Shows a preoccupation with death, violence, catastrophe, or injustice

Appears excessively anxious when called upon	Shows exaggerated or inappropriate emotional responses	Produces writing, artwork, social media posts, or assignments focused on death or despair
Engages in disruptive behavior	Appears intoxicated or hungover	Makes statements suggesting burdensomeness (e.g., “Everyone would be better off without me”)
Reports ongoing problems with roommates or family	Demonstrates sudden changes in peer group or increasing social isolation	Demonstrates increased fascination with or discussion of means of harm

What Can You Do?

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student reaches out to you for help with personal problems, here are some suggestions that might make the opportunity more comfortable for you and more helpful for the student:

- **TALK** with the student in a private setting when you both have sufficient time and are not rushed or distracted. Offer your full, undivided attention. Even a brief but intentional conversation can help a student feel acknowledged, supported, and understood, and may increase their willingness to seek further assistance. If you initiate the conversation, frame your concern using specific, observable behaviors and a nonjudgmental tone. For example, *“I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and wanted to check in,”* rather than, *“Where have you been? You should be more concerned about your grades.”*
- **LISTEN** in a calm, respectful, and nonthreatening manner. Show understanding by reflecting back the core of what the student shares, attending to both the substance of their concerns and the emotions underlying them. Create space for the student to speak freely, and resist the urge to interrupt or move too quickly into problem-solving.
- **GIVE HOPE** by reassuring the student that change is possible and that they are not facing their situation alone. Help them identify available options and sources of support, even when circumstances feel overwhelming. Gently suggest appropriate resources—such as trusted friends or family members, friars, campus counselors, or other campus staff—while remembering that your role is not to fix the problem, but to offer enough encouragement and guidance to help the student take the next step toward appropriate professional care or support.
- **AVOID** judging, evaluating, or criticizing the student, even if they ask for your opinion. Judgmental responses can unintentionally distance a student from both you and the support they need. Strive to respect the student’s values and perspective, even when they differ from your own.
- **MAINTAIN** clear, consistent boundaries and expectations. Preserve the professional nature of the faculty–student or staff–student relationship and uphold established academic policies, deadlines, and standards. It is also important to avoid being “sworn to secrecy,” particularly in situations where safety concerns arise or consultation with appropriate campus resources is necessary.

- **REFER:** When making a referral, emphasize that help is available and that seeking support is a sign of strength, self-awareness, and good judgment—not weakness or failure. It can be helpful to normalize this process by drawing parallels to other types of professional support (e.g., medical, legal, or mechanical concerns). For example, *“If you had a broken arm, you would see a doctor rather than try to treat it yourself.”* When possible, prepare the student for what to expect by sharing what you know about the recommended person or service and how to access it.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** When appropriate, arrange a time to check in with the student to reinforce their decision to seek help and to demonstrate your continued support. Follow up to see whether the referral appointment was kept and to ask how the experience went. Continue to encourage next steps as needed, including alternative options such as off-campus counseling. Keep in mind that, except in emergency situations where there is an imminent risk to the student or others, students are adults and may choose to decline a referral. In these cases, provide space for the student to reconsider by addressing any concerns they may have and gently revisiting available options.
- **CONSULT:** When you are unsure about the appropriate response or next step, contact the University Counseling Center at **740-284-7217** for consultation. If an urgent concern arises outside of regular office hours, contact **Campus Security at 740-283-6333**, who can connect you with an on-call Student Life staff member. Students whose behavior is threatening, violent, or significantly disruptive may require a different or more immediate intervention, and consultation can help determine the most appropriate course of action.

What Happens to a Student at the Counseling Center?

Individual Counseling

Students may meet one-on-one with a counselor in a confidential setting to discuss concerns such as stress, anxiety, relationships, mood, or adjustment to college life. Most students participate in short-term counseling (approximately seven sessions). When longer-term or specialized care is recommended, counselors assist students with referrals to trusted providers in the local community.

Group Counseling

Group counseling opportunities are offered throughout the year based on student needs and interests. Groups provide a supportive environment where students can share experiences, build skills, and connect with others facing similar challenges.

Faculty and staff can support this process by encouraging students to contact the Counseling Center directly at 740-284-7217 or by sharing the office hours listed below.

Monday: 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Tuesday: 8:30 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.
Wednesday: 8:30 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.
Thursday: 8:30 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Friday: 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Saturday: 9:00 a.m. – Noon

In urgent situations, students are seen as soon as possible. All Counseling Center services are free for all students.

Counseling services are confidential, in accordance with legal and ethical standards. As a result, Counseling Center staff are unable to confirm a student's attendance or share mental health information without the student's written permission.

What to Expect at the First Appointment

During an initial visit, students complete brief intake forms before meeting with a counselor. The first session focuses on understanding the student's concerns, assessing their needs, and determining how the Counseling Center can best support them.

Depending on the outcome of this meeting, students may:

- Begin short-term individual counseling (including telemental health services when appropriate),
- Be referred to other campus resources or community providers for specialized or ongoing care, or
- Leave the session feeling better equipped to manage concerns independently.

Students are always welcome to return to the Counseling Center if additional support is needed.

Consultation is Available for Faculty and Staff

If you are assisting a student of concern and would like guidance, Counseling Center staff are available to consult with you. Consultation may include help with:

- Assessing the situation and its level of concern
- Identifying appropriate campus or community resources
- Determining the most effective way to make a referral
- Clarifying your role and boundaries
- Discussing follow-up after an initial intervention or referral

Points to Remember:

- Counseling is free and confidential for all students.
- Consultation is available for faculty & staff.
- Services are offered virtually for Austria students.
- In an emergency, contact Campus Security at 740-283-6333
- For appointments or more information, visit the Counseling Center in the basement of the Fieldhouse or sign up through the student portal