



American Philosophical Association

Good Practices Guide

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Section 8

Mental and Emotional Health and Safety

Student mental and emotional health and safety

Students at all levels are today under exceptionally high levels of stress, and incidence of anxiety, depression, and other disorders is on the rise. Such problems of mental and emotional health are often the cause of academic failure, even in highly talented students. More seriously still, suicide is now the second leading cause of death for students at college or university, and the number of incidents is increasing. The chief cause of suicide in this age group is *untreated* depression. That should be a special concern for us as educators, especially since colleges and universities often have very good facilities for the treatment of psychological distress and disorder. Twenty percent of college students say their depression level is higher than it should be, but only six percent say that they would seek help, and still fewer actually do seek help. Even students who are not depressed can find the stress and isolation encountered at colleges or universities difficult to bear, leading to behavior that can be dangerous to others as well as themselves.

One obstacle to seeking assistance, for faculty and students alike, is absence of awareness of what forms of consultation and treatment are available at the college or university, and of which services will be covered by student or faculty health plans. Providing instructors and staff with up-to-date information of this kind at the beginning of academic terms, and posting such information in a conspicuous place, not only helps students and faculty to find their way to help, but makes it clear that the institution and department are positively engaged on behalf of mental health, and this can lessen the sense of stigma or isolation.

Stigma and isolation are, however, not easily overcome. This places faculty, graduate student teaching assistants, and departmental staff in an important position, for they are often the first members of the college or university community to see signs of student distress or of unmanageable behavior, or to be approached by students seeking advice or help. Many faculty, graduate instructors, and staff are concerned that they will be violating student privacy if, when they see signs that a student is in distress or disruptive, they raise with the student the question of counseling. But the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is *not* a barrier to taking steps to provide necessary support for individual students in crisis, or to protecting the health and safety of others in the campus community.

Should a student seem to you to be in distress, or at risk of behavior dangerous to others, you are not violating privacy rights to seek to raise the issue with the student. You can encourage the student to discuss his or her situation, feelings, and concerns, and suggest college or university resources available to the student. While you should use discretion with any information the student might communicate to you, *you should not promise confidentiality*—when students discuss suicide, threaten the safety of others, or if they give you information that suggests that they or other students might be involved in sexual misconduct covered under Title IX or might pose a threat to safety inside or outside the classroom, you are under a professional (and perhaps legal) obligation to report this information to the relevant campus offices. You should therefore make clear to the student that certain actions, threats, or threatening behavior must be reported, though you should also indicate that you will share this information only with appropriate

campus offices. If the situation is not one of emergent risk, you should maintain as fully as possible privacy about whatever information the student shares.

Other good practices in such situations include the following:

- Try to help the student focus on specific aspects of the problem.
- Avoid over-easy reassurance such as, “I’m sure you’ll be all right.”
- Be accepting and respectful of what is said, allowing the student to state his or her concerns without yourself becoming defensive or combative. Respect for the student’s experience and value system does not require you to validate these, but to take them seriously.
- *Always keep in mind that your advice is not a substitute for professional counseling, and you should make this clear to the student and encourage him or her to seek additional help as needed.* To that end, help the student identify available sources of professional help.
- Work with the student to recall constructive methods he or she has used in the past to cope.
- Additionally, attempt to get the student to agree to take manageable, concrete steps to help overcome whatever academic difficulties might have arisen from his or her distress—uncompleted work, inability to study, failure to attend classes or exams, and so on—and to agree to keep you informed as these steps are taken.
- Trust your insight and reactions, but try not to rely entirely upon your own judgment. Within the limits of confidentiality, seek the opinion of those at your college or university who are in positions of responsibility for student well-being.
- Recall that part of your responsibility is the safety of students, and be sure to familiarize yourself with recommended procedures when issues of safety arise. Your college or university may have specific guidelines for conduct in such cases and for reporting, which normally can be found on the website of campus security services. You can also find a general discussion, and an example of the guidelines developed at the University of North Carolina, at the following links:
 - [Campus Security Guidelines](#)
 - [Questions and Answers about Campus Safety](#)

One important sign of psychological distress is that a student drops out of contact with a class or an advisor. When this happens, it is not a violation of student privacy to attempt to contact the student and initiate a discussion of what might explain the loss of contact. Most colleges and universities have offices of student academic affairs (such as a Dean of Students) and counseling offices able to help students who have lost contact, and it is appropriate for you to inform such offices of a student in academic difficulty or who has missed a number of classes without explanation.

Be aware that the sources of student distress are varied and often arise from concerns outside the classroom. Most colleges and universities also have offices that provide counseling and help for students who are victims of assault or harassment, or who are struggling with substance abuse, or whose family life is in crisis or disarray. Once again, the faculty, graduate instructor, or staff member might be the one individual who is able to detect signs of such problems, or to whom the student feels able to come to with his or her problem. Faculty should receive a full packet of materials on mental health resources available to

students as well as university or college guidelines on public safety and reporting. Departments are encouraged to schedule a session with relevant mental health professionals and legal staff at the college or university to provide guidance in dealing with student difficulties.

Here are some guidelines for dealing with some of the most frequent issues about student mental or emotional health:

- [Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student \(CSU Long Beach\)](#)
- [Responding to Distressed Students \(UC Santa Cruz\)](#)

Faculty and staff mental and emotional health and safety

Problems with mental health and substance abuse are by no means confined to students. However, while many of the same good practices discussed above apply when one encounters potential mental health problems among colleagues or staff, special considerations arise from the fact that faculty and staff are employees of the college or university and hold positions within an academic hierarchy in which they will be subject to performance reviews. Personal advice that would be acceptable in an informal setting, between peers, can be inappropriate if combined with a variety of institutional relationships. It therefore is often appropriate, when approached by a colleague or staff member in psychological distress or with a substance abuse problem, to encourage the individual to contact the college or university counseling services, rather than provide further advice or guidance on one's own. Most colleges and universities maintain service providers specifically trained in meeting staff needs, who will maintain confidentiality and share information only in accord with strict guidelines. Such services often provide a contact that is available even in off-hours. As before, however, if a colleague or staff member expresses imminent suicidal tendencies, or appears to pose a danger to others, or discusses behavior that constitutes sexual harassment or other forms of unlawful behavior, it is your professional responsibility to determine which authorities should receive this information and to share it with them—and to be clear with the colleague that you will be doing so. Be aware that not all mental health crises take the form of dangerous behavior toward the self or others (for a discussion of the incidence of mental health crises, and how to contend with them, see the [guide prepared by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)).

Obviously, the present guidelines are not meant to exclude attempting to provide advice and support for colleagues or staff in distress, and discretion must be used in deciding whether the seriousness of the distress warrants taking any further action.

All faculty and staff should receive full and current information about the following:

- the services available to them, including confidential ways of contacting counseling services
- what their employment insurance will support by way of counseling or treatment for themselves or their families
- what are considered good practices and professional responsibilities in contending with a colleague or staff member who is, or appears to be, in psychological distress or a threat to others

Faculty and staff should also be aware of how to find such information on the college or university website. A generic presentation of information about available services for faculty and staff, and of some relevant guidelines, should be posted in the department. This increases the chance that faculty or staff will have

recent awareness of the services available, and manifest the commitment of the university, college, and department to providing the support needed for maintaining mental health.

Merely providing information and making services available is still not an adequate approach to the question of mental health for faculty and staff. In federal law, the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996, the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, and the Affordable Care Act of 2010 all mandate some form of equity in the treatment of mental and physical health. But social stigma and fear that seeking mental health treatment will harm employment prospects or social standing still inhibit many from seeking the mental health care they need, or requesting medical leave for reasons of mental health. If this situation is to change, it is necessary that open discussion of mental health issues take place within departments. Inviting a college or university health professional to make a presentation at a regular departmental or staff meeting, discussing questions that might arise about physical and mental health and available services, will enhance awareness and also help communicate that the department is concerned with the mental as well as physical health of its members and does not consider such questions “unmentionable.” Similarly, making faculty and staff aware of workshops for stress management and other daily mental health challenges will help promote use of these workshops and also help make it evident that such challenges can occur in anyone’s life.

Above all, faculty and staff should be provided a robust environment of available support and protection so that they do not feel they must face psychological difficulties alone, or that it will be destructive to their career to approach a colleague, the department chair, or university counseling services about mental health or substance abuse problems.

Traumatic events on campus

Sadly, incidents of violence and hate speech continue to occur on college and university campuses. For example, while it is difficult to assemble reliable statistics, various indicators suggest that there has been “an epidemic of racist incidents at campuses across the country” in recent years (Jaschik 2016). While the causes of this increase are not clear, it is clear that such incidents can be harmful to individual students, to groups, and to the climate for inclusiveness and mutual trust and respect. Similarly, acts of campus violence can leave a long wake of student distress behind them.

Typically, it will fall to larger units—the college, the university, the faculty senate, the governing board—to take the lead publicly in responding as an institution to these incidents. However, contending with them should not be left entirely to these entities. Such incidents directly affect our students and our colleagues and alter the educational environment inside as well as outside the classroom. They create special challenges, and perhaps also responsibilities, for us as philosophers who teach—philosophy should equip us to help our students in thinking about such episodes. If so, what kinds of constructive contribution can we make?

The experience most of us have had as students and teachers seldom provides us with direct experience in contending with episodes of this kind, and the body of relevant research is still fairly small. However, as instructors we are often the face of the college or university that students encounter most regularly, and we have the privilege of doing so in a context centered on knowledge and learning. And as philosophers in particular we are trained to explore controversial questions with students in a manner that promotes analytic clarity, appreciation of other viewpoints, and the investigation of fundamental normative dimensions. We do not step out of our professional or pedagogical roles if we *acknowledge* the occurrence

of such episodes, and research conducted in the aftermath of various kinds of traumatic public events, such as September 11, campus violence, and Hurricane Katrina, suggests that simple acknowledgement by instructors of these events can be helpful for students and create an opening for further discussion or for students to approach faculty outside class with their concerns (Huston and DiPietro 2007).

Classroom discussion of these traumatic matters, like classroom discussion in philosophy generally, is likely to be more constructive if the instructor provides structures and conceptual resources to keep the dialogue in focus and help it move ahead intellectually. It is important for instructors to prepare for such discussions by informing themselves about relevant issues and facts, and getting some idea of the concerns students are likely to have, but it is not the point of these discussions to decide “what actually happened” or “who was responsible.” Rather, discussions should help students achieve deeper understanding of the many dimensions of such incidents—epistemic, expressive, cognitive, social, and moral. Providing such opportunities for thinking together in a structured setting may also help counter student distress—for example, a study of post-September 11 anxiety in college students found that mental disengagement and emotional venting alike led to reduced ability to cope (Liverant et al. 2004).

- For further discussion of guidelines for discussing incidents involving hate speech or bias, see [Responding to Bias \(University of Michigan\)](#)
- For discussion of faculty responses to traumatic events on campus or beyond, see [Eye of the Storm \(Seattle University\)](#)

Resources

Huston, T. A., and M. DiPietro. “In the Eye of the Storm: Students’ Perceptions of Helpful Faculty Actions Following a Collective Tragedy.” *To Improve the Academy* 25 (2007): 207–24.

Jaschik, Scott. “Epidemic of Racist Incidents.” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 26, 2016.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/09/26/campuses-see-flurry-racist-incidents-and-protests-against-racism>

Liverant, G.I., S.G. Hofmann, and B.T. Litz. “Coping and Anxiety in College Students after the September 11th Terrorist Attacks.” *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping* 17 (2004): 127–39.