

Referral Guide for Faculty and Professional Staff

Introduction

We would like to provide faculty and professional staff with information about Counseling Services, referral information and how to assist Wofford College students most effectively. The goal is to help you recognize some of the symptoms of student distress and to provide some specific options for intervention and for referral to campus resources. We are available to assist you with problem situations and to consult with you on whether to intervene with a particular student. This guide will discuss the role of faculty and staff in assisting with student problems. Guidelines are offered and each individual needs to consider what is appropriate in a given situation. Basic topics cover identifying students in distress, ways of dealing with these students and how to refer them for counseling. Dealing with a reluctant student, scheduling an appointment and confidentiality issues are also discussed.

Description of Counseling Services

The following services are provided at Counseling Services:

- Intake evaluation
- Individual Counseling
- Couples Counseling
- Time-Limited Psychotherapy Groups
- Structured Psychoeducational Groups
- Consultation with students, faculty and staff
- Programs and workshops for campus groups
- Counseling Network Referrals

All currently enrolled Wofford students are eligible for services. Emergencies during office hours are handled immediately. In the case of an evening or weekend crisis, call Campus Safety at 597-4911 and they will contact the appropriate staff member.

The Role of Faculty and Staff in Assisting Students with Concerns

Students frequently experience a great deal of stress (e.g., academic, social, financial) during their college careers. Many students successfully cope with these pressures, but some find themselves overwhelmed. Because emotional distress typically interferes with a student's academic performance and/or social interactions as faculty and staff, you are often in a good position to recognize students who are in trouble. You will not be able to spot every student, nor will every student you approach be willing to accept your assistance. Nevertheless, by communicating interest and concern to a distressed student, you may play an important role in helping that student regain the emotional balance needed to cope. Many of the issues that a student experience is related to the developmental tasks of their life phase. Please remember, however, that major mental illnesses often manifest when people are in their 20's. Some of the observable signs may indicate the beginning of serious psychological problems.

Recognizing Students in Distress

People dealing with personal concerns or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. The following indicators may be useful in assessing whether or not a referral should be made:

1. **Changes in mood, appearance or behavior**
Some students do not directly tell you that there is a problem, but their appearance and behavior can be telling indicators. Increased social isolation and withdrawal from others may be an early sign that there is a problem. Deterioration of hygiene or appearance and dress may be visible cues of a problem. A distinct decline in academic performance, poor attendance, an uncharacteristic need for additional attention or repeated requests for extensions of deadlines are examples of behavioral changes you might observe. Outbursts of anger, crying, extreme levels of activity or conversations that do not make sense could indicate psychological difficulties. Threats to classmates and angry, harassing behaviors may require intervention on several levels. These behaviors should not be tolerated and action needs to be taken to stop them. In addition, underlying psychological problems may need to be addressed as well.
2. **Traumatic changes in personal relationships**
Students are often stressed when they experience a traumatic change in their personal lives. The death of a family member or close friend, difficulties in important relationships, a divorce or break-up or changes in family responsibilities might increase stress and overwhelm the individual's usual capacity to cope. If you are aware of such a problem, you might wish to initiate a conversation.
3. **Drug and alcohol abuse**
Coming to class or a meeting while intoxicated or high is a sign of serious abuse of drugs or alcohol. Individuals often use drugs and alcohol to cope with life stresses and psychological difficulties. Unfortunately, the substance abuse itself frequently causes a further decline in social, academic and work functioning. If you see signs of intoxication, do not underestimate their significance. Be aware that abuse of and addiction to alcohol, marijuana, opiates (such as heroin), crack cocaine and hallucinogens are problems in our student-age population nationwide.
4. **Academic difficulties**
Students whose academic performance declines to a noticeable degree may be feeling overwhelmed in other areas of their lives. Some students might exhibit difficulties with concentration in class or performance on exams.
5. **Learning problems**
Some students find the demands of college-level academic work to be greater than they anticipated. While it is expected that students will go through an adjustment period, those who demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between their ability and performance may need further assistance. Poor study habits, test anxiety or an undiagnosed learning disability may be affecting performance.
6. **Eating disorders**
Eating disorders are common among the college-aged population. Eating disorders refers to a variety of disturbed eating behaviors, all associated with using food for emotional reasons. They range along a continuum from chronic dieting to

compulsive overeating to cycles of bingeing and purging to self-starvation. While the frequency and severity of problems may differ, they all have in common turning to food as a way to cope with problems. Often, there is an underlying belief that being thinner would be a solution to troubles and demonstrate proof of control in one's life.

7. References to suicide

If a student talks or writes about suicide, this must be taken seriously. Thoughts of suicide are not necessarily dangerous, but they may indicate that the student is feeling overwhelmed or depressed. To assume that talk of suicide is intended solely to get attention is risky and can be a regrettable mistake. If you become aware of a student who is thinking about suicide, please make contact with Counseling Services immediately. You can call for a consultation if you are unsure of how to intervene with a student.

8. Leaving school

When a student indicates that he or she is considering leaving school or transferring, a referral to Counseling Services may be appropriate. Often a complex number of issues is at play when a student decides to leave an institution. A change of place may not be the answer to a student's problems.

Guidelines for Dealing with Distressed Students

There are no absolutely correct procedures for dealing with a distressed student. Each person has his or her own style of approaching and responding to others. Furthermore, people have differing capacities to deal with others' problems. It is important to know your personal limits as a helper. If you choose to try to help a distressed student, or if a student approaches you to talk about personal problems:

- Request to see the student in private.
- Speak directly and honestly to a student when you sense that he/she is in academic and/or personal distress.
- Ask if the student is talking to anyone, such as family or friends, about the problem. People tend to isolate themselves when in distress, but this is rarely a useful stance.
- If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? You should be more concerned about your grades."
- 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 content and feeling ("It sounds like you're not accustomed to this much work in so short a period of time and you're worried about failing.")
- Avoid judging, evaluating and criticizing even if the student asks your opinion. It is important to respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.
- Behavior that is strange or inappropriate should not be ignored. Comment directly on what you have observed.
- Do not discuss your concerns with other students.

Making a Referral for Counseling

Even though you may be genuinely concerned about students, and interested in helping them, you may find yourself in situations where it would be better to refer them to other resources. Circumstances that might necessitate a referral include:

- The problem is more serious than you feel comfortable handling.
- You are either extremely busy, or are experiencing stress in your own life, and are unable or unwilling to handle other requests for help.
- You have talked to a student and helped as much as you can, but further assistance is needed.
- You think your personal feelings about the student will interfere with your objectivity.
- The student admits that there is a problem, but doesn't want to talk to you about it.
- The student asks for information or assistance that you are unable to provide.

Let a student know your reasons for making a referral (e.g., lack of time, conflict of interest, limited training) and emphasize your concern that he/she does get help from an appropriate source. It may help a student to know that you support his/her desire to seek help.

If a Student is Reluctant to Seek Professional Help

Many people believe that only very disturbed people seek therapy, so your referral might be interpreted as a comment on the severity of the problem. Reassure the student that counselors work with people with a wide range of concerns. Problems need not reach crisis proportions for students to benefit from professional help. In fact, it is much easier to work on problems if they are addressed before they reach crisis level. Normalizing the process of seeking help may be especially helpful for international students whose countries may not have similar views of psychological counseling. Reluctant students might also be relieved to know that they can speak with a therapist on a one-time basis without making a commitment to on-going therapy. Furthermore, any contact and information shared by the student is kept strictly confidential and will not be disclosed to parents, faculty, other College departments, or even you, except with the student's written permission. Finally, it is important to acknowledge, validate and discuss the student's real fears and concerns about seeking help. It takes considerable courage to face oneself and acknowledge one's limitations. In some cases, you may find that the student has already sought counseling services, or elsewhere, and was unsatisfied with the experience. There are many reasons why counseling may not be successful in a given situation. Please encourage the student to consider giving counseling another try, perhaps with a different counselor.

While it is important to care about the emotional well-being of students, we cannot make their decisions for them, and counseling is always a personal choice. Occasionally even your best efforts to encourage a student to seek counseling will be unsuccessful. If the student resists referral and you remain uncomfortable with the situation, contact Counseling Services to discuss your concern.

Scheduling an Appointment

Students should make their own appointments if possible. You can assist this process by offering the student immediate use of your phone. To schedule an appointment call extension 4370, 4371 or 4373 between 8:00 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. We will arrange for the student to see a counselor as soon as possible. If you or the student think the matter is urgent and needs immediate attention, the student can be seen for an emergency appointment that day. Whenever possible, please contact Counseling Services to let us know you are referring the student to us. This will help us prepare for the student when he/she arrives.

Confidentiality

Counseling Services maintains records as regulated by the State of South Carolina Mental Health Code. Maintenance of records is in accordance with professional, legal, and ethical guidelines. Other than authorized staff, no one has access to these unless students release them in writing. They do not become part of academic files, and even the fact that students have come in for counseling is not divulged to anyone without their permission. Conversations with counselors, records, and the results of psychological tests are treated strictly confidential. If a student wants any of this information shared with any person outside of Counseling Services, he/she must sign a release of information.

There are some exceptions to this policy of which you should be aware. Counselors may have to disclose information if there is a danger that a student may harm him/herself or another person. Counselors are also required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect of vulnerable persons, including children and the elderly. Records may have to be released if they are subpoenaed in a court of law. Such occasions are rare. If you or a student has any questions about these policies, they should discuss them with the Director of Counseling Services.

Consultation Services

Counseling Services provide consultations to the Wofford College community. We are glad to answer any questions that you may have about our services, your concerns about a student and referral options.