

Although many students seek counseling on their own, faculty are often the first to recognize that a student may be struggling emotionally. Students may turn to you because you are familiar and because they know you and respect you. Because faculty are on the “front lines” of prevention, you may find it helpful to have some basic information about how to help in these situations. Benton, Benton and Perl (2006) propose that an effective response to someone in distress will include “**The Three R’s**”: **RECOGNIZE, RESPOND, REFER.**

LEVELS OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS (AND WHAT TO DO)

LEVEL 1: Uncomfortable Emotions

Recognize: A student in this category of distress is going through periods of sadness, anxiety, irritability, or social withdrawal, perhaps related to transitional stress, academic pressures, or relationship issues. While these fluctuations may be “normal”, they can be particularly distressing for a student with limited coping skills.

Respond: How can I be helpful?

- Engage in active and reflective listening, provide empathy and encouragement.

Refer: How do I make a referral?

- Encourage this student to seek support from peers and other campus resources.
- Make the student aware of available mental health resources.

LEVEL 2: Intense and/or Chronic Uncomfortable Emotions

Recognize: A student in this category of distress is experiencing strong, extended bouts of anxiety, depression, or social isolation, which may include non-lethal self-harming behavior (such as cutting) or suicidal thoughts (without a plan or intent to follow through).

Respond: How can I be helpful?

- Engage in active, reflective listening, and inquire about the methods they are using to manage their stress. If you are concerned about safety, ask directly if they are considering suicide.
- **If the student is seriously considering suicide (i.e., they articulate a plan or intent to take their life) follow steps in Level 3.**

Refer: How do I make a referral?

- Ask if they are receiving support from a counselor or other health professional. If not, encourage them to make an appointment at the Wellness Center (and offer to help them do so). In addition, follow up with the Wellness Center by phone (x2574) or email (sdwellnesscenter@pointloma.edu) to let them know that you are referring a student over to see them.
- After meeting with the student, make note of the situation, and consult with your supervisor, department chair, or school dean. Notify the Student Care Group (x2596) by completing a [Student Concern Form](https://tinyurl.com/PLNUStudentCare) (<https://tinyurl.com/PLNUStudentCare>).
- Follow up with the student to express care and ongoing encouragement to seek treatment.

LEVEL 3: Danger to Self or Others

Recognize: A student in this category of distress is expressing evidence of being a danger to self or to others.

Respond: How can I be helpful?

- Maintain a calm demeanor with the student, but engage appropriate emergency personnel immediately. Do NOT attempt to manage the situation on your own.

Refer: How do I make a referral?

- If the student is an **immediate threat** to harm themselves or someone else (e.g., the student abruptly leaves your office after disclosing a plan to harm themselves, is actively threatening to harm someone else, or has a weapon), CALL 911 and notify Public Safety (x2525).
- If the student is expressing evidence of being a danger to self or to others, but is **NOT an immediate threat** to harm themselves or someone else (e.g., they have a plan to take their life, but have no intent to immediately follow through), walk the student over to the Wellness Center and request that they be seen immediately for a crisis appointment. In the event that the Wellness Center is closed, stay with the student and contact Public Safety (x2525).

- After connecting the student to emergency personnel, make note of the situation, and contact the Student Care Group to let them know that the student is struggling by emailing Melanie Wolf, Associate Dean of Student Care & Engagement at MelanieWolf@pointloma.edu. Consult with your supervisor, department chair, or school dean.

BUT WHAT DO I SAY?

At times, faculty and staff can be hesitant to start a conversation with a student because of fears of saying the “wrong thing” or simply because they don’t know how to get the conversation going. If this is the case for you, here are a few guidelines that might help.

Getting the Conversation Going: Start with open-ended questions to give the student opportunity to open up.

- “It seems like you might be having a hard time – can we talk?”
- “I’m concerned about your absences from class – how are you doing?”
- “Part of my role is taking time to check in with students – do you have a couple of minutes to touch base?”

Keeping the Conversation Going: Highlight the strengths and supports you’ve observed. In addition, use phrases that reflect thoughts and feelings and provide empathy and validation.

- “I understand why you would feel that – this is a busy and challenging time in your life.”
- “You may have people who care about you.”

Offering Next Steps: When making a referral, start by asking what they’ve done in the past. In addition, be sure to normalize the help-seeking experience. If they express reluctance to seek help, explore their reasons nonjudgmentally. Again, use phrases that reflect thoughts and feelings and provide empathy and validation.

- “I know a lot of students find it helpful to talk to a counselor when they’re feeling like this.”
- “What would keep you from talking to a counselor about these things?”
- “Could it be worth just one session to see what it’s like?”
- “I’d be happy to walk you over or help you make an appointment.”

Final Things to Remember

- Never promise confidentiality to a student, and remain within the boundaries of your role. Always be upfront and honest about your reasons for concern with a student.
- Good listening is the most important thing you can do. Having authentic connection with others goes a long way for all of us during times of struggle.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

- **Public Safety: 619-849-2525**
- **Counseling Services: 619-849-3020; in Taylor Hall rm. 101, counselingservices@pointloma.edu**
- **Wellness Center: 619-849-2574 Medical & Dietician services. In Nicholson Commons, past the bookstore. sdwellnesscenter@pointloma.edu. See: <https://www.pointloma.edu/offices/wellness-center>**
- **Loma Care: 24/7, urgent medical care and counseling services <http://www.timelycare.com/LomaCare>**
- **Student Care Group: 619-849-2596**
- **Residence Life: 619-849-2482**
- **Multicultural and International Student Services: 619-849-2524**
- **Career Services: 619-849-2446. careerservices@pointloma.edu; <https://www.pointloma.edu/career-services>**
- **Educational Access Center: 619-849-2533. EAC@pointloma.edu**

Benton, S. L., Benton, S. A., & Perl, M. F. (2006). Key issues for faculty regarding college student mental health. *College student mental health: Effective services and strategies across campus*, 121-138.

Additional information adapted with permissions from Calvin College Center for Counseling and Wellness.