

Responding to Students in Distress:

A Resource Guide for Faculty and Staff



Introduction

Each year, university counseling centers are treating an increasing number of students, making mental health concerns a priority for higher education institutions. At RMU, students have sought help for issues such as anxiety, depression, relationship issues, family problems, self-injury, and academic difficulties. As a faculty or staff member, you are in a unique position to help students who would benefit from mental health services. Our hope is that the information in this booklet will help you to understand the signs of a mental health crisis and to appropriately respond to students' needs.

Common Issues for College Students

Anxiety

It is normal to experience anxiety at one time or another, and when managed appropriately, anxiety is a helpful motivator for studying or homework. Excessive anxiety can lead to academic and social problems as well as physical symptoms.

Common symptoms may include: excessive worry, trouble sleeping, low concentration, restlessness, panic attacks, and irritability.

Depression

We all feel sad from time to time, but sadness usually passes within days. Clinically depressed people will exhibit multiple symptoms for a minimum of two weeks, representing a change from previous functioning.

Common symptoms may include: a depressed mood during most of the day, the loss of interest/pleasure in activities that had been enjoyable, sleep disturbance/over-sleeping, change in appetite, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness/guilt, concentration and memory problems, and recurrent thoughts of death.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Common warning signs of drug and/or alcohol abuse include: an abrupt negative change in academic performance, falling asleep during class, tardiness, missing classes, lack of personal hygiene, change in physical appearance, and smelling of alcohol or marijuana.

A student who appears intoxicated during class or during interactions with university officials may have a problem that requires attention.

Dysfunctional Eating and Eating Disorders

Dysfunctional eating is a complicated issue that is influenced by physical, emotional and societal issues. There are three types of eating disorders associated with dysfunctional eating:

- Anorexia: eating too little or exercising excessively so the student is unable to maintain a healthy body weight
- Binge eating: eating a large amount in a small period of time
- Bulimia: binge eating followed by purging behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, fasting, using laxatives and/or diuretics, or excessive exercise

Grief

While we often think of grief as occurring when a loved one dies, grief can be caused by a breakup, divorce, or a close friend moving away. Everyone responds to grief in his or her own way. Initial reactions can be intense and may cause someone to shut down emotionally.

Signs that a person may be grieving include: crying, sighing, trouble sleeping, low appetite, social detachment, sadness, frustration, anxiety, concentration problems, and questioning life's meaning.

Psychosis

Psychosis is a condition that often surfaces in young adulthood and can be exacerbated by stressful conditions. The main feature of psychotic thinking is "being disconnected from reality." Symptoms include:

- Speech that makes no sense
- Extremely eccentric or bizarre behavior that indicates hallucinations
- Significantly inappropriate or an utter lack of emotion
- Strange beliefs that involve a serious misinterpretation of reality
- Social withdrawal
- Inability to connect with/track normal interpersonal communication
- Extreme and unwarranted suspicion; can lead to paranoia

If you believe a student is psychotic, do not agitate the student by questioning their behavior or arguing with their beliefs. Accompany the student to the Counseling Center if the student is highly impaired and you have questions about their ability to maintain safety. Speak to the student in a direct and concrete manner regarding your concern for their well-being and the plan for getting them to a safe environment.

Relationship Issues and Domestic Abuse

A few red flags in unhealthy relationships include: excessive jealousy or insecurity, coercion, or emotional and/or physical abuse. Abuse is a pattern of forceful or controlling behaviors used against another individual without regard for their health, safety, or human rights. Abusers can be male or female and an intimate partner, friend, family, acquaintance, or a complete stranger.

Sexual Assault or Violence

Latest research tells us that 1 in 5 college students will be sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of forced and unwanted sexual activity, including kissing, groping, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and rape. Victims might be coerced into sexual acts through verbal or non-verbal threats or through the use of alcohol or drugs.

Signs that a person has been sexually assaulted include: hyper-vigilance, withdrawing from family and friends, disrupted sleep, self-blame, trouble concentrating, and emotional outbursts. Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim, but victims often feel extreme guilt after an assault.

Title IX:

If a student tells you that they have been sexually harassed or assaulted, you are required to make a report to the Title IX office, unless you are a Confidential Resource. Confidential Resources on campus include: athletic trainers, campus ministry, Counseling Center staff, and student health services (nurses/nurse practitioners). For more information about Confidential Resources and Title IX, please visit:

<http://odie.rmu.edu/title-ix>

It is recommended that you encourage any student who has been assaulted to talk to Counseling Center staff. We will link the student with on and off campus supports.

All RMU faculty and staff, except for Confidential Resources, are Required Reporters under Title IX.

Self–Injury

Self-injury is when a person intentionally causes physical damage to their own body. The majority of self-injury involves a person cutting and scratching themselves with sharp objects. A person may also burn, bite, or hit themselves, or pull their own hair.

Self-injury is different from a suicide attempt. People who self injure usually use it as a way to cope with difficulties in their life and/or to relieve painful emotions. Counseling or therapy is recommended to assist people in finding more helpful methods for coping.

Suicide

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students, however, it can be preventable. Students who are suicidal sometimes tell people about their thoughts or give clues to others about their feelings. Some warning signs of suicide include: hopelessness, helplessness, an inability to cope, a drastic change in appearance or personal hygiene, and disregard for personal goals and relationships.

Please note that the existence of these factors does not necessarily mean that a person is going to attempt suicide. However, the presence of a number of these warning signs, especially if they show changes from the person's usual mood and behaviors, calls for increased awareness.

A suicide threat is defined as any spoken, written, or behavioral indication of self-destructive tendencies with the intent of taking one's own life. **Personnel will take all such threats seriously and follow the RMU Suicide Prevention Policy by contacting the Counseling Center.**

**If you believe a student is suicidal,
contact the Counseling Center immediately at:
(412) 397-5900 (M-F, 9-5)
(412) 397-5925* (after hours)**

***Please note: this phone number is for RMU faculty and staff only
and is not to be given out to or used by students**

When talking to a student who may be suicidal

- Listen intently and allow the student to express his or her feelings.
- Practice reflective listening– reflect back to them what you think he or she is saying in a non-judgmental manner.
- Validate his or her feelings and help them calm down.
- Help him or her gain understanding of the situation and regain a sense of control.
- **Directly ask them if they have considered hurting themselves. *Do not just wonder, ask.***
 - If they say yes, contact the Counseling Center immediately during business hours at (412) 397-5900 or the crisis counselor after hours at (412) 397-5925.
 - If the student says no, assist them in scheduling an appointment with the Counseling Center by calling (412) 397-5900.

Symptoms of a Mental Health Crisis

- References to suicide, death/dying, or self injury
- Abrupt changes in mood, behavior or appearance
- Missing class frequently or repeatedly asking for special considerations on assignments
- Dramatic shift in academic performance
- Frequent conflicts with peers and/or faculty and staff
- Lacking energy or commenting about not being able to sleep
- Coming to class under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- A change in personal relationships such as a loss in the family or the ending of a significant relationship
- Uncharacteristic, drastic change in social interactions such as becoming more socially withdrawn

Appropriately Responding to Students

Talk to the student privately.

- Ask the student to speak with you away from their peers

Create an atmosphere of openness and acceptance.

- Be encouraging. Show students that you are available to talk and want to hear from them.
- Communicate regularly with students and learn their names when possible.
- Make students feel appreciated and heard.
- **Never promise confidentiality**, but you may ensure students that the conversation will be otherwise private.

Summarize what you see as the issue.

- Ex. “I’ve noticed you are missing class a lot lately.” Instead of “Why are you missing so many classes?”
- Ex. “Do you mind me asking why you have had such difficulty handing in your papers on time?” Instead of “Why do you always turn in your papers late?”

Express interest and concern.

- Students are more willing to receive help when someone shows concern about them than when they are forced to go.

Be direct and specific.

- Tell the student the specific behaviors that concern you.
- If you are wondering if a student is suicidal or wanting to hurt him/herself, it is best to ask directly to assess severity.

Be non-judgmental.

- If a student tells you their problem or issue, do not judge them, be supportive and listen.

Referring Students in Distress

With the Student’s Knowledge

During business hours (M-F 9am-5pm), contact the Counseling Center directly at (412) 397-5900 and explain that you have a student who would like to meet with a counselor. The Counseling Center staff will walk you through the intake process. If you feel more comfortable walking the student to the Counseling Center, please do so.

Without the Student’s Knowledge

Faculty and staff are encouraged to report any incident or behavior that may require an intervention or is of concern. If you are concerned about a student, please submit a report to the Crisis Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team. For more information about the CARE Team and/or to make a report, please visit www.studentlife.rmu.edu/care-team.

In an Emergency Situation

During business hours: Please feel free to escort the student to the Counseling Center. The Counseling Center is located on the lower level of Patrick Henry Center (adjacent to the main entrance of Nicholson Center) and is open Monday - Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM.

After hours: If it is a mental health crisis, call the confidential emergency line at (412) 397-5925. Please note that this phone number is for faculty and staff only and is not to be given out to or used by students.

For all other emergencies, call the University Police at (412) 397-2424 and explain that you have an urgent situation.

**If you feel threatened or in danger of any kind,
OR if you feel that someone else is in danger,
contact University Police immediately at
(412) 397-2424.**

Information about the Counseling Center

- Faculty and staff are encouraged to contact the Counseling Center for consultation about student concerns.
- Counseling is free and confidential.
- Counselors are mental health professionals.
- Students can walk in or make appointments.
- Sessions with counselors last about an hour.
- Students can choose what to disclose.
- The Counseling Center has a waitlist at times but will still have initial meetings with students, check in with them, and connect them with appropriate campus and community resources.
- The Counseling Center does not write excuses from class or provide academic accommodations, but we will write a confirmation letter that a student is seeking counseling services, if a student requests it. It is up to faculty and staff to decide how to use that information.

Referring Students for Academic Concerns

If you are primarily concerned about a student's academic performance, contact the Center for Student Success by calling 412-397-6862 or by submitting an Early Alert Form online. For more information, visit www.studentlife.rmu.edu/center-for-student-success/faculty-staff-forms.

Preventing Academic Distress in Students

- Encourage students to seek tutoring and meet with their counselor throughout the semester as needed.
- When class size permits, learn and use the names of students.
- Use the class syllabus to inform students in writing of standards and expectations (e.g., respect, courtesy, timeliness, etc.) for classroom conduct and of possible consequences for disruptive behavior. Devote time during the first class to review this information in the syllabus.
- If needed, have students sign a copy of the syllabus on the first day of class agreeing to these expectations, and keep it on file.
- Serve as a model by demonstrating appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior in all interactions with students.

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries with Students

Basic Guidelines for Setting Boundaries

- Be proactive, not reactive, by establishing limits from the beginning
- Communicate boundaries clearly
- Be consistent in applying boundaries
- Confront boundary violations early and gently
- Seek consultation and support in maintaining boundaries and/or dealing with boundary violators

Signs You May Be Overextending Yourself

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by a student situation
- Feeling angry at a student
- Feeling afraid to the point of panic
- Having thoughts of “adopting” or otherwise rescuing a student
- Reliving similar experiences of your own

Preventing Professional Burnout

- Learn campus resources and know where/when to refer students (i.e. Center for Student Success, Counseling Center, Center for Global Engagement).
- Let students know up front when they should expect replies to their email. Treat your email as you would office hours and set a regular time to check it and respond to students.
- If you are spending most of your time on certain students, remind them about alternative resources (i.e. tutoring, counseling, etc.). If they seem reluctant, offer to walk or call with them the first time.
- Consult with the head of your department about policies regarding student conduct and how to handle disruptive students.

If you have questions or concerns about maintaining healthy boundaries with students, please seek consultation with the Counseling Center.

The Crisis Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team

What is the CARE Team?

Mission Statement: The Crisis Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team at Robert Morris University is a proactive, multi-departmental approach to support the safety, health, and well-being of all students, faculty, and staff. The CARE Team works collaboratively with faculty and staff to identify, track, and respond to reports of concerning, disruptive, or potentially threatening behavior within RMU's student population. The focus of the CARE Team is to provide assistance to students who may be in distress, while also balancing the needs and well-being of the RMU community.

The CARE Team is comprised of representatives from the Center for Student Success, Counseling Center, Faculty, Residence Life, Student Health Services, Department of Athletics, University Police, and Student Programs & Student Community Standards.

When to Make a Report

Faculty and staff are encouraged to report *any incident or behavior* that may require an intervention or is of concern. The CARE Team uses these reports to assist the student, while also considering the behavior's impact on the greater campus community. When in doubt, make a report.

How to Make a Report

To submit a report, please complete the CARE Team Report Form and provide as much information as possible. For more information or to make a report, please visit www.rmu.edu/careteam.

**For a mental health crisis, call the Counseling Center:
(412) 397-5900 (M-F, 9-5) or (412) 397-5925* (after hours)**

***Please note: this phone number is for RMU faculty and staff only**

**If you or someone else is in imminent danger, call the
University Police immediately: (412) 397-2424.**

Multicultural Issues

The Robert Morris community is a fusion of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. We often encounter people whose goals, viewpoints, and cultures differ from our own.

When dealing with students from other cultures:

- Show respect for each person's culture, viewpoints, and values.
- Be aware of differences. Words may have different meanings in different cultures.
- Be comfortable. Is the person uncomfortable because physical boundaries for conversing have been breached? Are there certain cultural expectations for dealing with males and/or females?
- Refer the person to the Counseling Center or Multicultural Student Services, for support, connection, and adjustment issues.

Working with International Students

Traveling abroad to college separates the student from their family, friends, and culture. These separations can place a strain upon the student's personal and educational development and can cause students to withdraw from peers and new possible friends. When working with international students it is important to recognize that mental health issues have different interpretations in different parts of the world. For example, in some cultures, discussing or admitting to the need for support is taboo. Be sensitive to the needs of each student's culture while encouraging students to:

- Keep in contact with their families
- Seek campus resources, such as the Center for Global Engagement and the Counseling Center, and participate in on-campus activities with Student Life
- Establish communication and connections with other students experiencing the same feelings
- Experience this new culture and teach others about their own culture

Counseling Center

Holly Harmon, LCSW, Director / Therapist: (412) 397-6863

Tiffany Hartz, Assistant Director / Therapist: (412) 397-5429

Diane Dahm, Crisis Counselor / Outreach Specialist: (412) 397-6040

Dara Sakolsky, M.D., Ph.D., Consulting Psychiatrist: (412) 397-5900

Office Number: (412) 397-5900

E-mail: counseling@rmu.edu

Website: www.rmu.edu/counseling

Campus Resources

University Police: (412) 397-2424

Center for Student Success: (412) 397-6862

Health Services: (412) 397-6221

Dean of Students: (412) 397-6483

Residence Life: (412) 397-5252 - office, (412) 397-5242 - emergency line

Title IX Office: (412) 397-5472 or (412) 397-5968

Veterans Education and Training Services: (412) 397-5498

Off-Campus Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 24/7 support: (800) 273-8255

Re:solve Crisis Network (Allegheny County) - 24/7 support: (888) 796-8226

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape - 24/7 support : (866) 363-7273

Veterans Crisis Line - 24/7 support: (800) 273-8255

Heritage Valley Sewickley Hospital: (412) 741-6600

Staunton Clinic Intake Department: (412) 749-7341

UPMC Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic: (412) 624-2000

Greenbriar Treatment Center: (800) 637-4673

Women's Center and Shelter of Pittsburgh: (412) 687-8005

RMU Counseling Center Mission Statement

The RMU Counseling Center supports the academic mission of the University by providing crisis intervention and short-term counseling services for all enrolled students experiencing psychological problems or concerns. We strongly believe that ***Individuals Matter***, support the six core values of Robert Morris University and seek to support an engaged and positive learning experience for all students. Through our mission, the Counseling Center strives to:

- enhance the educational experience of RMU students by addressing the social, emotional, developmental, interpersonal, and cultural needs of students.
- work with all available support networks including family, partners, friends, faculty, staff, administrators and coaches to create a comprehensive treatment approach.
- increase campus awareness and reduce stigma about mental health issues
- work with students, staff and faculty to foster a supportive and welcoming campus environment.
- provide evidence based interventions that are beneficial to students and engage in continuous quality improvement initiatives and measurements

We accomplish this mission through a variety of professional services, including individual and group therapy; psychopharmacology; crisis intervention; drug & alcohol and sexual violence educational programs; outreach, and consultation. In addition to direct counseling services for students, the Center provides consultation, outreach, and education to the entire campus community.

Location

Patrick Henry Center

Lower Level

6001 University Boulevard

Moon Township, PA 15108

P. 412.397.5900