

UNIVERSITY OF  
PITTSBURGH

studentaffairs

A photograph of a University of Pittsburgh campus scene. In the foreground, a large, dark bronze statue of a panther is perched on a rock. Behind it, a large, leafy tree stands in front of a multi-story brick building with many windows. To the left of the tree, a clock tower is visible. The sky is clear and blue.

# **Working With Distressed Students**

# Depressed or Suicidal Students

## What to look for:

- **Signs of depression such as flat affect, slow speech, sighing, difficulty concentrating, missing class or other events, expressions of hopelessness/worthlessness, isolation, agitation, or irritability**
- **Direct or indirect comments suggestive of wanting to die**

# Depressed or Suicidal Students

## What to do:

- **Directly ask students if they are feeling depressed or hopeless, and/or are having thoughts of hurting themselves or others.**
- **If yes to any of these, call the University Counseling Center while the student is still with you.**
- **If the student is in imminent danger, call the University Police.**

## **Angry or Upset Students**

- **Do not physically touch the student; respect personal space.**
- **Find a quiet, private place to talk; soften your voice and slow down your speech.**
- **Try to clarify the problem. What is upsetting the student? Try to see the problem from the student's perspective, as well as your own.**
- **Listen carefully and solicit suggestions from the student about possible solutions.**

# Written Content of Concern

- **How to evaluate whether a student's disturbing writing reflects creative exploration or something more problematic:**
  - **Is the writing excessively violent?**
  - **Does the violence seem more expressive of rage or anger than it does of thematic purpose?**
  - **Do the characters think about or question their violent actions?**
  - **Is this the student's first piece of violent writing?**
  - **Does the nature of the violence suggest depression or suicidal thoughts?**
  - **Does the writing express hostility toward certain groups or is it threatening to others in any way?**

# Written Content of Concern

- **How to respond to disturbing writing:**
  - **Consult with a department chair or others in the department to gain other perspectives.**
  - **Consult with the University Counseling Center.**
  - **You may choose to discuss the written content with the student to determine its purpose.**
  - **Make the discussion informal. If the student seems at all threatening, do not meet the student alone.**
  - **Open the conversation by focusing on the writing itself, rather than on the writer. Find out about the inspiration for and evolution of the writing. Let the student talk as much as necessary so that you can gain a sense of the person behind the writing.**

# General Suggestions for Working with Distressed Students

- Convey to the student that you are concerned and willing to help.
- Talk directly with the student. Try to understand the student's concern within reason.
- If you are concerned about your safety or the safety of the student, call the police (811 on-campus or 911 off-campus).
- If the student is not in imminent danger, refer him/her to the counseling center. Try to get the student to call while you are with him/her. You may even decide to walk the student to the counseling center. A counseling center staff member can be reached after-hours via the 24-hour emergency system through the campus police (811 on-campus or 412-624-2121 off-campus).

# General Suggestions Continued

- **If the student is unwilling to go to the counseling center, refer them to the Re:Solve Crisis Network (1-888-796-8226). Staff from Re:Solve Crisis Network are available to come to the student if necessary.**
- **It may be important to ask the student for permission to contact his/her parents.**
- **Assist students in setting up appointments with campus resources (i.e., Counseling Center, Student Health Service, Academic Advising) while they are in your office.**
- **Consult with the Counseling Center and/or Office of Student Conduct at any time to formulate an intervention strategy.**