



How Can I Help a Student in Distress?

The Basics

LISTEN

Don't lecture, try to fix, advise, correct or disagree – just listen.

EMPATHIZE

Try to put yourself in their shoes.

SET LIMITS

Involve yourself only as far as you want to go and as time and/or skill permits. Maintain clear interpersonal boundaries and a professional relationship.

CONSULT AND REFER AS NEEDED

If you feel that more than one discussion of the distress will be necessary, consider a referral to Counselling or another resource.

Additional Tips

Always speak to the student in private. Make sure you have some time to give him/her your undivided attention (need not be a lot of time).

State the reasons for your concern gently, honestly and directly. Use concrete, behavioural descriptions of what you've observed. Try to avoid assumptions and judgements about what's "behind" the behaviour.

The student may or may not choose to disclose much detail about what is actually going on. Your expression of concern – a sign that someone has noticed and cares – is important regardless of whether or not the student "opens up."

People in distress often are unable to see more than one or two possibilities. You may be able to help the student identify and explore more options. Try to do this without judging, advising or persuading.

If the student is requesting flexibility or special consideration regarding academic requirements, be clear and specific about what concessions, if any, you are prepared to make. If you need time to consider the request, say so.