

What is psychological distress?

► **Psychological Distress:**

- » going through a rough time
- » starting to show signs of a mental disorder

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, nearly 21% of 9- to 17-year-olds have a mental disorder causing at least mild functional impairment. Five to 9% are estimated to have severe impairment.

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed high school students in 2009, they found that roughly 14% had seriously considered suicide in the past year. And over 6% had taken the next step and attempted suicide.

We have many at-risk students in our school system. Luckily, our school counselors are trained to help these students and connect them with resources in and outside of the school.

Identifying students who are at-risk for psychological distress

This means noticing what’s going on with your students: noticing worrisome behavior and worrisome changes in behavior.

Here are just a few warning signs that might indicate psychological distress. While not always indicative of an underlying mental-health problem, students exhibiting these signs do warrant attention.

ACADEMICS	COMMUNITY	BEHAVIORS	APPEARANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistent or deteriorating grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of social interaction; withdrawn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressed feelings of worthlessness, shame, humiliation, hopelessness, despair 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticeable weight gain / loss
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missed / late / incomplete assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience of grief / loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant or excessive worrying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweating as if it’s too hot; shivering as if it’s too cold
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistent or decreasing attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying (instigator or recipient) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying in or outside of class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disheveled appearance; poor grooming / hygiene

ACADEMICS	COMMUNITY	BEHAVIORS	APPEARANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of participation in class 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Falling asleep in class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unusual, bizarre appearance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disorganized, expansive, tangential writing 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a daze 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noticeably slow or rapid speech
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty concentrating 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rude, disrespectful behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dilated or constricted pupils
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outbursts of anger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoidance of eye contact
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agitated, restless behaviors: hyperactivity, pacing, fidgeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smelling of alcohol
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marked shifts in mood from one class to the next, or shifts which occur rapidly in the same class period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of self harm
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excessive demands for your time and attention 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexually provocative behaviors 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking to oneself; responding to unseen stimuli 	

Approaching students who are at-risk for psychological distress

Once you identify, you need to approach. That means letting the student know you're concerned and trying to gauge the severity of the situation. This conversation should happen when you have time to talk, in a place where you will not be overheard by others.

You can skip approach and go straight to the school counselor to refer the student; however, students are often more motivated about seeing the counselor when they're personally referred by someone they know and trust.

► **Several things may happen when you approach students.**

- » They may have a reasonable explanation that alleviates your concern.
- » They may say things that cause you to remain concerned, in which case you should refer the student.
- » They may push you away and refuse to talk. That's okay. At least that student knows that someone cares. If you are still concerned, you can talk to the counselor about the student.

Here are three **effective** techniques for having conversations like this.

EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES		
Discuss specific, observable behaviors (instead of exaggerating, generalizing, or negatively labeling).	Use "I" statements (with terms like "I think," "I feel," or "it seems") to soften your observations.	Reflect on what you think the student is saying, thinking, or feeling.
<p>Instead of... <i>"You always freak out over exams."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"Last week, when you made a B on that exam, you asked a lot of questions about it and your voice was shaking. You seemed upset."</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"You're being more quiet than usual."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"I feel like you're being more quiet than usual."</i></p>	<p><i>"It sounds like you're under an awful lot of pressure."</i></p> <p><i>"So you think a lot about whether or not you'll get into college."</i></p> <p><i>"You're saying it's harder to connect with people because you feel different from them."</i></p>
<p>Instead of... <i>"You're texting Ms. Sandifer all the time."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"Ms. Sandifer told me you seem worried about your yearbook articles, that you text her a lot of questions."</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"You put too much pressure on yourself."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"I think you put too much pressure on yourself."</i></p>	<p><i>"I guess the way your grandma expresses her concern is frustrating."</i></p> <p><i>"So you've dealt with it and you feel you're totally over it."</i></p>

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<p>Instead of... <i>"You have some weird ideas about suicide."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"You wrote some things about suicide on last week's homework that concerned me."</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"You're having trouble concentrating."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"It seems like you're having trouble concentrating."</i></p>	<p><i>"You mean, you would talk more if you had more to say."</i></p>

Here are three **ineffective** techniques for having conversations like this.

INEFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES		
Give advice.	Judge the student or his / her actions.	Disagree or try to change the student's mind.
<p>Instead of... <i>"You need to toughen up a little. Otherwise, college is going to be hard for you."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"I'm concerned that the stress you feel might continue when you get into college, or even get worse."</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"It's really irresponsible to miss so much school."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"Why do you miss so much school?"</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"I disagree. Grades are very important. They can help you get into college."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"You're right that grades aren't everything, but they could help you get into college."</i></p>
<p>Instead of... <i>"I think you should go to college."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"What do you think about going to college?"</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"It's not normal for a student to want so much feedback."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"You seem to like a lot of feedback. Are you worried about your performance?"</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"You're wrong. Unhappiness doesn't last forever."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"Sometimes when we feel unhappy, it can seem like it will go on forever. But over time things do change."</i></p>

Give advice.	Judge the student or his / her actions.	Disagree or try to change the student's mind.
<p>Instead of... <i>"You should see the school counselor."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"Have you considered seeing the school counselor?"</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"You've got a real attitude."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"You said a few things in class last week that I wanted to talk to you about."</i></p>	<p>Instead of... <i>"No, the counselor can help you."</i></p> <p>Try... <i>"You may be right. The counselor might not be able to solve all your problems. But he might be able to help with some of them."</i></p>

Referring

► Referral can mean:

- » referring the student to the counselor
- » referring the counselor to the student
- » both

Here are some effective tactics for talking to students about the school counselor.

EFFECTIVE TACTICS			
Describe the benefits of talking with the counselor.	Explain how talking to the counselor could help them meet their goals.	Let them know the counselor has helped other students with similar issues (without naming names).	Offer to personally introduce them to the counselor.
<i>"Sometimes talking about things like this helps release some of the pressure."</i>	<i>"If you can learn to channel the pressure in good ways, I think you'll do really well in college."</i>	<i>"She has a lot of experience working with students who are under pressure."</i>	<i>"I could introduce you and tell him a little about what we talked about today."</i>

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<i>"The counselor isn't part of your regular life, so you don't have to watch what you say."</i>	<i>"It sounds like your grandma isn't going to stop worrying until she knows you're going to be okay. Maybe if she knows you're willing to talk with the counselor, she'd feel better."</i>	<i>"We've had other students here who've lost parents or brothers or sisters to suicide. And the counselor has worked with them. So she knows the kind of pain that people can feel when they're left behind."</i>	<i>"I'd like to introduce you to the counselor. That way, you know her and if you decide you do want to talk to her you can."</i>
<i>"It's confidential, so no one has to know that you're seeing him."</i>	<i>"You could play basketball for the team, but you'd have to learn to manage your temper a little better."</i>	<i>"The counselor works with a lot of students who find they're getting blocked by anger or stress or things like that."</i>	<i>"I've worked with him for a long time. Let's go down now, just for a second, and I'll introduce you."</i>

After reaching out to a student, follow up in the coming days, weeks, and months to see if things are improving. These don't have to be long conversations. Even a quick question like "How's everything going?" lets them know you're still thinking about them.

Where can I go for more information?

► **If you're unsure how to handle a particular situation, you can talk to:**

- » the school counselor
- » the principal
- » a colleague

► **In an emergency, you should call:**

- » school security
- » 911

► If you ever realize that a friend, family member, or you yourself may be at-risk, seek a referral for a mental health professional from:

- » your doctor
- » someone you trust

► If you want to explore these topics further, visit these sites:

» **HelpGuide**

www.helpguide.org/mental/depression_teen.htm

HelpGuide has information on the signs / symptoms and effects of teen depression, as well as information on how to talk to a depressed teen.

» **Suicide Prevention Resource Center - Teachers Resource Page**

www.sprc.org/featured_resources/customized/teachers.asp

SPRC has information for teachers on recognizing and responding to warning signs.

» **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides immediate assistance to individuals in suicidal crisis by connecting them to the nearest available suicide prevention and mental health service provider through a toll-free telephone number: (800) 273-TALK (8255).