How to help: A guide for administrators, faculty, and staff

This guide is intended to familiarize the Vassar community with the process of referring a student to counseling. By using this guide, we increase the likelihood of a successful referral. If you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Counseling Service at 845.437.5700 to speak with one of our counselors.

We count on you
As an administrator, faculty, or staff member interacting with students, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavioral changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. You play a key role in helping students obtain the assistance they need.

Distinguishing between a student in crisis and a student experiencing stress
A student in CRISIS:
If a student is in a mental health CRISIS, you might see or hear the following:
- Statements about suicide or death, or attempts at suicide or self-harm
- Written or verbal threats, or attempted assault or homicide
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Extreme anxiety, panic, or uncontrollable crying
- Inability to communicate (e.g., jumbled, pressured, or slurred speech; disjointed thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or behaving in a way that is at odds with reality)
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence)

How to help when a student is in CRISIS:
If the student may be in immediate danger (e.g., someone is already injured, has overdosed, is threatening to use a weapon, or is on a ledge, open stairwell, building top, etc.), immediately contact:
- Campus Response Center – 845.437.7333 OR
- Police, Fire, Ambulance – 911

If the student is experiencing a mental health crisis and is NOT in immediate danger, contact:
- (M-F 8:30am-5pm) Vassar College Counseling Service – located in Metcalf House; 845.437.5700
  - VCCS counselors provide crisis intervention for students who are experiencing a mental health crisis. During normal business hours, members of the Vassar community may contact the Counseling Service to request a brief meeting with a counselor to discuss urgent situations. You may also consider walking with the student to the Counseling Service. This is one way of showing your concern and support and it helps ensure that the student connects with a mental health professional.
- (Outside of normal business hours) VCCS Counselor-on-call – 845.437.7333
o When residence houses are open to all students, VCCS’s Counselor-on-call is available during evenings and weekends to discuss urgent situations. Call the Campus Response Center and ask to speak to the Counselor-on-call.

• Other resources in the Poughkeepsie area:
  o Dutchess County Helpline – 845.485.9700
  o St. Francis Hospital – 845.431.8892
    - Mental health professions are available at all times for crisis intervention, telephone counseling, information and referrals.

A student in DISTRESS:
STRESS is a part of every student's life. However, there are some indicators that, when present over time, suggest that a student's stress level may be a cause for concern. In these circumstances, you might see or hear the following:

• Uncharacteristic changes in academic performance
• Uncharacteristic changes in attendance at class or meetings
• Depressed mood
• Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
• Social withdrawal
• Increased alcohol or drug use
• Marked change in dress, hygiene, or weight
• Repeatedly falling asleep in class
• Requests for extensions or special considerations or accommodations
• New or recurrent behavior that interferes with the effective management of your class, work team, etc.
• Unusual or exaggerated emotional response to events

How to help a student experiencing psychological DISTRESS:
When you have determined that a student may be struggling due to psychological distress, we suggest the following guidelines for making a referral:

Talk to the student PRIVATELY and express your concerns DIRECTLY. This may help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.

Be HONEST and SPECIFIC about your concerns. Explain why you want to talk. Example: "I am really worried about how you are doing. I want to try to understand what is going on for you."

Describe your OBSERVATIONS in a non-judgmental way. Example: "For the past two weeks, I’ve noticed that you seem sleepy in class, participate less than you used to, and have missed classes."

Express your FEELINGS. Example: "I’m concerned about you."

LISTEN to what the student tells you.
Offer your RECOMMENDATIONS. If you have determined that a student might benefit from professional counseling, we suggest the following guidelines:

- Anticipate student’s concerns and fears about seeking counseling. Be prepared to discuss them.
- Tell the student how to contact the Counseling Service
  - Have the student call 845.437.5700 or stop by Metcalf House to make an appointment with the next available counselor. If it is an urgent situation, help the student identify the need to speak with the Counselor-on-call and inform the administrative assistant of who made the referral (faculty, staff, administrator).

You don’t have to do it alone!
If you are unsure of how to handle a specific situation with a student, we encourage you to consult with one of the mental health professionals on our staff. Call us at 845.437.5700, tell the administrative assistant who you are (faculty, staff, administrator), and ask to speak with one of our counselors. A brief consultation may help you sort out the relevant issues and explore various approaches.

If you are not comfortable talking with a student directly or a student is unwilling to follow your referral recommendations, it is important that you share your concern with others.

The Student of Concern Team (SOC) meets regularly to proactively identify, support and monitor students who are exhibiting moderate to elevated levels of distress, academic or residential life disruption, other significant mental or physical health issues, or becoming a risk of harming themselves or others.

Alert the Student of Concern team about your concern:  
http://vassar.edu/studentofconcern

Also, take a moment to review the information located on our website about how to handle specific challenging situations involving students.

Quick Facts about the Counseling Service

- There is no charge for our services.
- Services are confidential (see “A Note to Our Clients” on our website for an explanation of our policies) and records are NOT part of students’ academic records.
- The Counseling Service uses a brief counseling model.
- 20-25% of current students use the Counseling Service each year.
- About half of the graduating seniors have contact with the Counseling Service some time in their years at Vassar College.
- We are in Metcalf House M-F 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM.
- Our 24-hour/day Counselor-on-call service is available outside of normal business hours for emergency consultation. Our Counselor-on-call service is only available during the academic year when residence houses are open to all students. Please
see our ‘Need Help?’ page on our website to determine the appropriate contact person/department/agency in urgent situations.