

A Guide to Making A Referral

This guide is intended to assist Vassar College faculty and staff in making referrals to the Counseling Service. Its primary objective is to familiarize you with the referral process and thereby increase the likelihood of a successful referral. In writing the guide we have attempted to provide answers to the questions that are commonly asked of us by those seeking to make a referral.

Nearly 500 students are seen each year at the Counseling Service for individual or group counseling. Approximately 15% of the students we see for personal counseling indicate that they had been referred. Clearly, you play a key role in helping students obtain the kind of assistance we can provide.

Quick Facts about the Counseling Service

- The Counseling Service has been in existence since 1949 when it was founded as Student Guidance.
- There is no charge for our services.
- The Counseling Service uses a brief counseling model yet we do not place a limit as to the number of sessions a student may have. However the average number of sessions is 5.
- Nearly 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.
- We are in Metcalf House M-F 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.

The reasons that individuals seek help from counselors are as varied as people themselves. An individual's motives for seeking counseling might range from wishing to solve a particular problem to desiring to enhance his or her own personal development. The following indications can be useful in making a decision about referring an individual to the Counseling Service. To prevent possible overreaction to a single or an isolated behavior, it is advisable to look for clusters of signs that appear at approximately the same time.

INDICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

Stated Need for Help. The need for help with a problem may be stated directly or indirectly. For this reason, it is important to attend to both the content of what a student is saying and the possible feelings and intentions accompanying his or her message. Listening involves hearing the way things are being said, noticing the tone used, and observing the expressions and gestures employed. Special notice is to be taken of incongruities of expression or muted or extreme emotions.

Students may communicate personal problems to you via email rather than face-to-face. Others may get your attention in a written class assignment by

references to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, depression and thoughts of suicide, or death.

Changes in Mood or Behavior. Actions that are inconsistent with an individual's normal behavior may indicate that he or she is experiencing psychological distress. An individual who withdraws from usual social interaction demonstrates an unwillingness to communicate, commits antisocial acts, has spells of unexplained crying or outbursts of anger, or demonstrates unusual irritability may be manifesting symptoms associated with a psychological problem.

Anxiety and Depression. Anxiety and depression are two of the more common psychological disturbances that can present significant problems for students. When these common emotional states become prolonged or severe, they can impair an individual's normal functioning. If this occurs, some kind of psychological assistance may be useful and should be recommended.

References to Suicide. While some references to suicidal thoughts or plans are more serious than others, all should be taken seriously. Of particular concern are situations when an individual alludes to specific detail of where, when or how he or she may attempt suicide. In such cases, professional help must be sought immediately. Never assume that references to suicidal ideas or plans are attempts at gaining attention. It is always best to err on the side of caution.

Judgment about the seriousness of a suicidal reference or threat should be made in consultation with a mental health professional.

Physical Complaints. Physical distress or complaints, which seem to have no apparent cause, may be indicative of emotional problems. Such symptoms may include a loss of appetite or excessive eating, insomnia or excessive sleeping, gastrointestinal distress, headache or general malaise.

Traumatic Changes in Personal Relationships. Personal problems often result when an individual experiences traumatic changes in personal relationships. The death of a family member or close friend, difficulties in marriage or family relationships, divorce, changes in family responsibilities, and difficulties in other significant relationships can all result in increased stress and psychological difficulties.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse. Students may attend class under the influence of a drug or exhibit signs of being "hung over." Excessive drinking, drug abuse, or drug dependence are almost always indicative of underlying psychological problems. At the same time, they, in turn, cause problems of their own. Both the substance abuse and the emotional issues may warrant referral for professional attention.

Academic Problems. Many students find the demands of college-level academic work to be greater than anticipated. While it is expected that all students will go through some adjustment period, those who demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between their performance and their potential may be in need of assistance. Frequent absences, failure to complete assignments, and

inattentiveness in class are problems that might have a psychological basis and thus could be appropriate for consultation in the Counseling Service. Many of our clients indicate that personal problems have an effect on their academic performance and have experienced improvements in academic performance as emotional concerns are addressed.

When to Refer

There are other guidelines that may help you to define the extent and limits of your involvement with a particular student's problem. A referral is usually indicated in the following situations:

- A student presents a problem or requests information that is outside your range of knowledge. Students often present complex and complicated emotional problems that may feel overwhelming to you as the listener,
- You feel that personality differences between you and the student will interfere with your helping the student,
- You feel uncomfortable dealing with the issue or problem because of your personal relationship (he or she is a friend, neighbor, relative, etc.),
- A student is reluctant to discuss a problem with you,
- You do not believe your contact with the student around the issue has been effective,
- You lack sufficient time to listen effectively to the student,
- A student is becoming over-reliant or dependent upon you,
- You begin to feel that the advising relationship is crossing a boundary into a counseling or therapeutic relationship.

If you are uncertain if a student is appropriate for counseling or if you have a specific concern about a student, you may wish to call and consult with a counselor.

How to Refer

When you have determined that a student might benefit from professional counseling, we suggest the following guidelines:

- Use a direct approach with the student and express your concern for his or her welfare. Do not attempt to deceive or manipulate the student into seeking counseling. Make it clear that this recommendation represents your best judgment based on your assessment of his or her particular problem(s). Be specific regarding the behaviors that have raised your concerns, and avoid making generalizations about their meanings for the individual.

- Anticipate student concerns and fears about seeking counseling. Be prepared to discuss them. Some typical concerns are presented in the next section.

To make an appointment the student can either call (437.5700) or stop by Metcalf House. Some faculty members have called to make an appointment while the student was in the office. Unless the student requests a specific counselor for the intake interview, he or she will be assigned to an available counselor.

Leave the option open, except in emergencies, for the student to accept or refuse counseling. If the student is skeptical or reluctant for whatever reason, simply express your acceptance of those feelings so that your own helping relationship with the student is not jeopardized. Give the student an opportunity to consider other alternatives by suggesting that he or she might need some time to think it over. If the student emphatically says "no," then respect that decision, and again leave the situation open for possible reconsideration at a later time.

Ask the student at a later date what action he or she has taken. Even if the student did not accept your attempted referral it will show your continued interest.

Student Concerns About Counseling

Students often have a number of concerns about seeking assistance for emotional problems that, if not directly discussed, can deter their acting upon a referral. It is useful to anticipate these issues and subsequently to make responses that are factual, encouraging, and appropriate. Here are some examples:

Concern: Only crazy people go to counseling (and I'm not crazy).

Response: I don't think you are crazy. People go to counseling for all kinds of problems. The Vassar College Counseling Service sees 500 students a year for individual counseling. Many students I've known have found it useful.

Concern: Going for counseling is a sign of weakness. It shows I can't handle my own problems.

Response: You are capable of handling most of your problems. There are some, however, that are difficult to handle alone. Recognizing when you need assistance, and then getting it, is a sign of good problem-solving ability.

Concern: Counseling won't work for me. It's not effective.

Response: It is true that there is no guaranteed result. However, there is a high probability that counseling will be helpful to some extent. It has worked for a large number of students and it could work for you. Give it a try; you can always decide whether it is useful or not.

Concern: The counselor will tell other people about my problem.

Response: What you share with a counselor is considered confidential. Information is not released to anyone (parents, friends, instructors) without your permission.

Confidentiality

Professional and legal codes dictate that the sessions conducted by Counseling Service staff are confidential in nature. Information about those sessions or their content will be released only (a) upon a student's written request, (b) in circumstances which would result in clear imminent danger to the individual or others, or as may be required by law. The Counseling Service adheres strictly to this policy.

Faculty or staff members often have an understandable desire to know if a student who has been referred to the Service has actually attended a session and/or if any progress is being made. Because of the need to maintain confidentiality however, we will not acknowledge any contact, or lack of it, with a student.

This policy can at times be a source of frustration for faculty or staff who want some basic information. The desired information can best be obtained by following up with the student. We also encourage students to let the referring faculty or staff member know that he or she kept an appointment. Students are free to disclose any information they wish to share.

Counseling records are not part of a student's academic record.

The Counseling Process

Students who have not been to counseling may want to know what happens on a first visit to the Counseling Service. We follow a uniform set of procedures that make up our "intake" process:

1. The student completes an intake form. The form takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and includes: basic demographic information (age, major, address, etc.) and a description of our policy.
2. The student is introduced to a counselor. All counseling sessions are conducted in private offices.
3. The counselor begins with an initial interview. Typically, the interview will be 45-50 minutes. Some of that time is devoted to establishing good rapport and putting the student at ease. The student is encouraged to express his or her concerns. The purpose of the session is to make an initial assessment of the client's concerns, contributing factors, and coping strategies. The counselor will determine whether the Service can be of assistance. The counselor may make a referral to a local therapist or other practitioner when this is most appropriate.

4. The counselor schedules subsequent sessions when appropriate. Generally, the counselor who does the initial interview will see the client for later sessions. Exceptions are made when the counselor already has a full caseload, believes another staff member is better suited to the client's needs, or the student requests to work with a new counselor.

Counseling Service Services

The Counseling Service provides a range of services in addition to individual counseling.

Group Counseling. Group Counseling is available to assist persons who share similar concerns. The size of a group is generally from 5-10 members.

Three or four groups are offered each semester and may include: Grief and Loss Group, a general Psychotherapy group, a group for individuals struggling with food and body concerns, and a group for students working to improve their relationships, a group for first year students experiencing a difficult transition to Vassar, and a workshop for transfer students.

Outreach Programming. Presentations, workshops, and seminars are given as requested for classes, residence halls, groups, and organizations. Specific programs are planned in advance by Counseling Service staff and are advertised each semester. Among the topics presented are: Stress Management, Relationship-Building, Grief Process, Depression and Anxiety. Programming can be developed at the request of faculty, staff, administrators, or students.

Consultation. Counseling Service staff meets with individuals, small groups, organizations, and departments to assist in defining issues and developing strategies to deal with concerns. Examples include:

- I have a friend who needs counseling. What should I do?
- We want to improve relationships among our members. How do we go about that?

Referral. The Counseling Service maintains an extensive list of resources available in the local area and can provide suggestions for referral. Private practitioners, physicians, substance abuse treatment services, and human service agencies are among some of the resources we can help you to locate.

Crisis Intervention

An on-call counselor is available after hours and on weekends while students are in residence. In the event of an after-hours emergency, the Counselor On-Call can be reached through the Campus Response Center, x7333.

Staff, 2009-2010

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All telephone calls for the professional staff are received at our central number (845.437.5700). Each staff member does have a private office phone number that is not released. We do not give these numbers out because outside calls made directly into a staff member's office, if he or she were engaged in a counseling session, would be disruptive.

HELPFUL PHONE NUMBERS

Counseling Service	845.437.5700
Career Development	845.437.5285
Dean of Students	845.437.5315
Dean of Studies	845.437.5255
Disability and Support Services	845.437.7584
Health Education	845.437.7769
Health Services	845.437.5800
Learning, Teaching and Research Center	845.437.5215
Religious and Spiritual Life	845.437.5550
Residential Life	845.437.5860
Sexual Assault and Violence Prevention	845437.7769
Security	845437.5221
Campus Response Center (Emer.)	845437.7333