How to Help a Student in a Mental-Health Crisis

By David Gooblar | DECEMBER 17, 2018

As faculty members, because we see our students on a regular basis, we often can tell if they are struggling emotionally. Yet we’re not mental-health professionals. Most of us don’t have the training to know how to offer support and guidance to students who are suffering with mental-health issues. So how should we help?

Anxiety, in particular, seems to be on the rise among undergraduates. The most recent data from the American College Health Association suggest a mental-health crisis on American college campuses. In its 2017 survey of 26,000 undergraduates, 40 percent said that at some point in the previous 12 months they had felt "so depressed that it was difficult to function," 61 percent had experienced overwhelming anxiety, and nearly 13 percent had seriously considered suicide. Those are worrisome numbers, and many faculty members see the fallout in our classrooms every day.

To find guidance, I spoke with Barry Schreier, director of counseling services at the University of Iowa, where I teach. He has been working in campus mental health for 27 years, and maintains that instructors have a significant role to play in helping students with their mental health. He recommended a three-step response.

**Step No. 1: Notice.** Only about 15 percent of students who have killed themselves on a college campus had any interaction with their institution’s counseling service. At the
same time, research strongly suggests that those who do attempt or complete suicide are telling people before they do it. "If they’re not telling the counseling center, who are they telling?," Schreier asked. "They’re telling the people they know." That includes faculty members, since we are regular fixtures in their lives over an extended period and are in a position to notice when something's not right.

It’s the noticing that is crucial, Schreier said. You don’t have to diagnose a mental illness; you just have to recognize that someone is in distress. That’s not as difficult as it might seem. Distress might manifest itself as a downturn in a student’s hygiene. A student suddenly might start missing class or failing to turn in assignments. Or someone who is normally alert and engaged might now be falling sleeping in class.

Those signs don’t require a lot of training to spot — they just require you to be paying attention. If you feel that something is going on with a student, Schreier said, you’re probably right. "You’re going to notice distress. We often have an intuitive sense of that." Trust that intuition.

**Step No. 2: Ask.** So once you’ve noticed their distress, what do you do next? Schreier is adamant on this point: Ask them about it. "Lean in on your students," he said. "Lean in and ask them about themselves. Help them tell their story a little bit."

That doesn’t require much more than talking with a student after class. You can say something like, "Hey, you seem a little off these days. Is everything OK?" You can send an email. You can ask a student to come by your office. The idea is to show concern and give the student a chance to talk about the problem. Maybe it’s the usual stuff — academic stress, interpersonal drama, not enough sleep. But maybe it’s not. Many of us have a natural inclination to explain away irregularities. It’s probably nothing, we tell ourselves. And a lot of the time it is nothing. But, Schreier said, we have to push past that
incline and reach out to students. They may feel uncomfortable opening up to us. That’s their right. But we have to give them the chance.

But isn’t it risky to get so personal with our students? Won’t students feel as if we’re overstepping our bounds?

While acknowledging that instructors need to stay within the limits of their faculty role — don’t, for example, invite a struggling student to come stay at your house — Schreier maintains that the risks of inaction are far greater than the risks of action: "What’s the worst that could happen? The student might tell you, ‘Bug off. I can’t believe you asked me that.’ But I’d rather that was the case than the student vanishes because something terrible has happened and then you sit, thinking, ‘Dammit, I knew something wasn’t right.’"

In short: Go out on a limb, show your students you care, and inquire when you notice potential distress.

**Step No. 3: Refer.** Keep a piece of paper in your office with the phone numbers of relevant mental-health and student-services offices on the campus. Bookmark your institution’s counseling center. Be ready to point students in the right direction. If necessary, you can even call the counseling service yourself, and hand the phone to the student. Or you can walk the student there. A little preparation — just knowing what resources are exist and how to seek them — can go a long way toward being able to help
if such a situation arises.

**Pedagogy Unbound**

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- Will Students Actually Believe They Can Do This Assignment?
- Will Students Actually Want to Do This Assignment?
- How to Teach Information Literacy in an Era of Lies

Like many instructors, I include information about campus mental-health resources on my syllabi, along with a brief paragraph telling students about the many people working on the campus to help take care of them. I tell students on the first day of class: These people’s jobs are to help you; that’s what they are here to do. There’s no shame in taking advantage of resources created with you in mind.

Instructors can do that basic step — acknowledging in advance that students might need help, and letting them know where to get it — even when students don’t show signs of distress, Schreier said. Let them know you understand that college is stressful sometimes, that there are resources available, that they are not alone.

I asked Schreier if students ever mentioned to the counseling staff any specific things that instructors did that were helpful, and he had a ready answer. He’s heard over and over again that when a faculty member starts class by asking students how they are, even briefly, it makes a difference. "They hear it," he said. "Whether they answer you or not, they heard that you did it. It means you’ve thought about them. You weren’t just thinking about the job you have to deliver."

None of these steps require a lot of time or planning. You don’t need to be an expert in mental health to be able to look out for your students. You don’t need to radically change your syllabus, your lesson plans, or your pedagogical approach. You just need to care about your students, invest a little time in preparation, and do something if you notice that something is off. As the human face of your institution, you are in the best position to connect students to the help they need.
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