

December 3, 2007

Dear Faculty and Student Affairs Colleagues:

It is that time of year when many of our students begin to feel added stress with the challenges of academic rigor, homesickness, thoughts of the holidays, and other struggles in their development. Realizing that stress is interfering with their personal and academic goals, many students may need our assistance or support. Faculty and staff are often the first to recognize that a student may not be functioning well academically or emotionally.

Students experiencing stress may act out in a variety of ways. As someone who interacts with students on a regular basis, you are in a pivotal position to identify an emotionally troubled student. Behavior that is inconsistent with your past experience with the student may constitute “a cry for help.” Your concern and empathy could be helpful to a student in distress.

Look for these danger signals: nervousness, agitation, increased irritability or undue aggressive or abrasive behavior, excessive procrastination and/or poorly prepared work, infrequent class attendance, little or no work completed, depression or lack of energy, marked change in personal hygiene, withdrawal, indecisiveness and confusion, as well as bizarre, alarming or dangerous behaviors. When you note these signals in a student, I encourage you whenever possible, to speak directly to the student. Some guidelines for interaction include the following:

1. Request to see the student in private.
2. Listen carefully to the student and attempt to identify the student's problem or concern.
3. Do not ignore strange and inappropriate behavior. The student can be informed that such behavior is distracting and inappropriate.
4. Involve yourself only as far as you feel comfortable. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled student, you may become more involved than time or skill permits.
5. Encourage students to call the USC Student Counseling Services at 213.740.7711 or 323.442-5980 for students on the health sciences campus, if you believe that professional counseling might be beneficial. The service is confidential and there is no charge.
6. Do not hesitate to call for assistance if you are really worried about a student and unsure about what action to take:
 - Lynette Merriman, Senior Associate Dean (213.740.2421)
 - Denzil Suite, Associate Vice President (213.740.2421)

In an emergency, you may contact the Counseling Services receptionist and request to speak to the staff member on call. Let the receptionist know who you are and what kind of service you are requesting. After business hours, call the Department of Public Safety at 740-4321. Public Safety officers will notify a professional Counseling Services staff member about your request for an emergency consultation.

I hope you find this information helpful. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Michael L. Jackson
Vice President for Student Affairs