

Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Higher Education Program Students in Distress Talking Techniques

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The purpose is to provide practical techniques to have language for connecting and interacting with students in distress.

- **Techniques For Your Use:**

- **De-Escalation Techniques**

Methods to assist students in containing themselves:

- Listen with empathy and reflect emotion and content.
 - Keep focus on the primary topic, avoiding secondary topics.
 - Ask questions deliberately to direct the focus back to the primary topic (*"Let's hold onto that for a moment and come back to it. Re-connecting to the first thing, which was. . ."*).
 - Use questions to assist the student in thinking about options.

- **Drawing Out Techniques**

Methods to assist student in opening up to tell their stories:

- Use minimal encouragers to talk (*"Uh, huh"*).
 - Ask open ended questions.
 - Repeat key words and phrases (*"Feeling sad?"*).
 - Ask one word questions (*"Then?"*).
 - Name Affect (*"You sound really frustrated"*)

- **Broaching the Topic Techniques**

Methods for sharing with students who are in great difficulty:

- Set context of difficult topic (*"The reason I'm bringing this up. . ."*)
 - Set context of concern (*"Because I am concerned for you. . ."*)
 - Use directedness by stating the concern without disclaimers.

- **Yes, but. . . . Techniques**

Methods for students who want help but reject any help offered and/or respond to everything with "I don't know" to assist in lowering defensiveness.

- Name the process the student is doing in order to disarm it.
 - Give time and space for the student to think.
 - Slow the process down by asking the student to "sit" with your questions (*"I'm asking a hard question, take a moment just to sit with the question"*).
 - Encourage that student does know answers.
 - Ask the question in the third person (*"Let's say a friend of yours..."* or *"Let's say you did know...."*).

- **Sitting With Anger Techniques**

Methods to staying calm and connected with students without further escalation:

- Use active listening skills without defensiveness.
- Gently set limits on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.
- Name that anger is in the conversation (*“Okay, I hear what you are saying and it’s clear you’re angry about this.”*).
- Empathize with student as anger is often a mask for feeling hurt, shamed, or invalidated (*“I’m hear you’re quite angry about this and I am also hearing that what happened really hurt you, too”*).

- **How to Refer Techniques**

Methods for making referrals for counseling to assist students in accepting them:

- Express referral as being part of a care and concern for student.
- Explain how referral can be helpful (*“I can see you are in pain. . . .you don’t have to continue managing this by yourself. Letting me help you connect with someone is a great step in addressing this.”*).
- Make referral with optimism and without communicating doubt (*“I know anxiety doesn’t get better when it is a secret and is not actively responded to. Seeking help can really make a difference”*).
- Refer to a specific person, when appropriate.
- Know UIowa resources and how to access them and to whom.

- **Dealing With Dangerousness Techniques**

Methods for managing students who are acting threatening and securing yourself by using options for safety:

- Alert police when in doubt. Better to call than not call.
- Stay in public space/leave door open.
- Stay close to the door without letting student get between you and the door.
- Have a witness be part of the conversation and have a back-up ready if needed.

And A Little More About Referrals--

- **Be Firm That Using Campus Resources Will Help**

- Students may initially resist the idea of telling others, be caring but firm in your recommendation that reaching out to resources is helpful. Also, be clear about the reasons you are concerned.(*“I’m worried about you doing well in school and I bring this up really because I care about how you are doing and want you to do well here”*).

- **Know Your Resources**
 - Be knowledgeable in advance about campus resources. The best referrals are made to specific people and/or services.
 - **Have The Student Call From Your Office/Meeting**
 - Suggest students call to make an appointment to the particular office while they are still with you. Offer the use of your phone or call the office yourself while the student waits with you.
 - **Walk the Student Over**
 - In some situations, walking the student over to the designated office is a kindness you can do.
 - **Review Department Website with Your Student**
 - Reviewing office websites with the student can make for familiarity and a better willingness to seek assistance: www.counseling.uiowa.edu.
 - **Call for Consultation**
 - If you need help in deciding whether or not it is appropriate to make a referral, call the University Counseling Service to consult: 319.335.7294.
 - **Ask for a Presentation**
 - The Higher Education Program is glad to speak regarding referrals and procedures/services. We can assist your staff, faculty, and students with fun, informative, and practical, workshops on how to manage distress including anxiety and depression to suicidal thinking. Email to schedule (barry-schreier@uiowa.edu).
- **Contact Mobile Crisis Outreach: 855.581.8111**
 - **24/7 Ulowa Support & Crisis Line: 844.461.5420**
 - **If a student requires *immediate medical attention or hospitalization*, or you feel directly threatened or there is imminent risk: Call 911**



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319.335.5359

<https://scsmh.education.uiowa.edu/>