Campus Crisis Intervention

There is no doubt that college students are under tremendous amounts of stress—living independently for the first time; striving for good grades; balancing work, school, and new friends. Sometimes the pressure gets to be too much. How can postsecondary faculty and staff help a student who is seemingly in crisis? The following tips are provided by Dr. Maggie Gartner, the Executive Director of Texas A&M University’s Student Counseling Service.

- Remember that a crisis is time-limited. This means a crisis pushes a person toward some type of resolution. A crisis is generally framed within a 6-week period, but could be longer or shorter based upon the student’s resources and ability to cope.
- During a crisis, a person’s habits and coping patterns are suspended or overwhelmed, and s/he is especially open to learning new methods of coping.
- There is sometimes a rise of energy during the crisis, signified by emotional turmoil that, if focused and directed, can be used for crisis resolution.
- You see the person as having strengths. These should be emphasized, e.g., the individual was coping until now, even if mal-adaptively.

What To Do

I. Listen
   - Make contact with the person at the feeling level rather than factual level.
   - Identify the person’s feelings.
   - Accept the person’s right to feel that way.
   - Reflect back to the person what you are feeling or experiencing.

II. Explore the problem in the NOW
   - Focus on the last four to six weeks.
   - Try to identify a precipitating event, but note that there isn’t always one.
   - Avoid asking a lot of questions. If you do ask questions, make them open-ended. Ask the person to be concrete and specific when answering.

III. Define the problem
   - Make sure that you both agree on what the problem really is. Keep in mind that “the” problem is usually the one that is causing the person the most pain.
   - Focus on the problem or a small part of the problem that has the greatest likelihood of some immediate action-producing results.

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### IV. Explore Resources

- Ask the person **what** he or she:
  - has done so far to resolve the conflict.
  - would like to do to resolve the conflict.
  - might be afraid of doing.
- Ask the person **who** he or she:
  - has talked to about the problem.
  - would like to talk to about the problem.
  - is afraid to talk to about the problem.

### V. Contract

- Agree on a plan of action to resolve the crisis with the person. **Be specific.**
- Specify goals.
- Plan and schedule a time for follow-up.

## Dealing with the Student in Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I see . . .</th>
<th>What I do . . .</th>
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| **Level I** – Not disruptive, but:  
  - Major changes in academic work, attendance, or appearance  
  - Change in style of interaction  
  - Depressed or anxious mood  |  
  - Talk quietly to the student  
  - Assess depth of problem  
  - Provide support  
  - Consult as needed  
  - Refer to appropriate resource |
| **Level II** – New or consistent behavior(s) that is/are disruptive to others:  
  - Significant emotional distress  
  - Repeated requests for special consideration  
  - Unusual or exaggerated emotional response(s)  |  
  - Speak directly with the student  
  - Assess depth of problem  
  - Consult as appropriate  
  - Walk student to counseling center  
  - Request release to speak with the counselor  
  - Document the interaction |
| **Level III** – Highly disruptive behavior, i.e., hostile, aggressive, violent, volatile:  
  - Inability to communicate clearly  
  - Overtly suicidal thoughts and threats; homicidal threats  
  - Other threats toward you and/or the University  |  
  - If possible, speak directly to the student  
  - Meet in a quiet, public area  
  - Consult with colleagues and/or the police  
  - Refer as appropriate  
  - Walk to the counseling center.  |

**NOTE:** **IF YOU ARE AFRAID, CALL THE POLICE.**  
Do not consult, do not waste time, and do not try to “fix” things. **CALL THE POLICE!**

### Referrals

- Know your referral resources
- Be direct and express your concerns for the student
- Anticipate concerns and fears about counseling and be ready to address them
- Instill hope and a positive expectation
- Offer support
- Accept “no,” except in cases of emergency
- Follow up with the student