



COUNSELING CENTER

**Responding to Students in Distress:
A Resource Guide for
Faculty and Staff
2025-2026**

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Responding to Students in Distress: A Resource Guide for Faculty and Staff

Introduction

Each year, university counseling centers are treating an increasing number of students, making mental health concerns a priority for higher education institutions. At RMU, students have sought help for issues such as anxiety, depression, relationship issues, family problems, self-injury, and academic difficulties. As a faculty or staff member, you are in a unique position to help students who would benefit from mental health services. Our hope is that the information in this resource guide will help you to understand the signs of a mental health crisis and to appropriately respond to students' needs.

Issues College Students May Face

Anxiety

It is normal to experience anxiety at one time or another, and when managed appropriately, anxiety is a helpful motivator for studying or homework. Excessive anxiety can lead to academic and social problems as well as physical symptoms.

Common symptoms may include: excessive worry, trouble sleeping, low concentration, restlessness, panic attacks, and irritability.

Depression

We all feel sad from time to time, but sadness usually passes within days. Clinically depressed people will exhibit multiple symptoms for a minimum of two weeks, representing a change from previous functioning.

Common symptoms may include: a depressed mood during most of the day, the loss of interest/pleasure in activities that had been enjoyable, sleep disturbance/over-sleeping, change in appetite, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness/guilt, concentration and memory problems, and recurrent thoughts of death.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Common warning signs of drug and/or alcohol abuse include: an abrupt negative change in academic performance, falling asleep during class, tardiness, missing classes, lack of personal hygiene, change in physical appearance, and smelling of alcohol or marijuana.

A student who appears intoxicated during class or during interactions with university officials may have a problem that requires attention.

Dysfunctional Eating and Eating Disorders

Dysfunctional eating is a complicated issue that is influenced by physical, emotional and societal issues. There are three types of eating disorders associated with dysfunctional eating:

- Anorexia: eating too little or exercising excessively so the student is unable to maintain a healthy body weight
- Binge eating: eating a large amount in a small period of time
- Bulimia: binge eating followed by purging behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, fasting, using laxatives and/or diuretics, or excessive exercise

Grief

While we often think of grief as occurring when a loved one dies, grief can be caused by a breakup, divorce, or a close friend moving away. Everyone responds to grief in their own way. Initial reactions can be intense and may cause someone to shut down emotionally.

Signs that a person may be grieving include: crying, sighing, trouble sleeping, low appetite, social detachment, sadness, frustration, anxiety, concentration problems, and questioning life's meaning.

Psychosis

Psychosis is a condition that often surfaces in young adulthood and can be exacerbated by stressful conditions. The main feature of psychotic thinking is "being disconnected from reality." Symptoms may include:

- Speech that makes no sense
- Extremely eccentric or bizarre behavior that indicates hallucinations
- Significantly inappropriate or an utter lack of emotion
- Strange beliefs that involve a serious misinterpretation of reality
- Social withdrawal
- Inability to connect with/track normal interpersonal communication
- Extreme and unwarranted suspicion; can lead to paranoia

If you believe a student is psychotic, do not agitate the student by questioning their behavior or arguing with their beliefs. Accompany the student to the Counseling Center if the student is highly impaired and you have questions about their ability to maintain safety. Speak to the student in a direct and concrete manner regarding your concern for their well-being and the plan for getting them to a safe environment.

Relationship Issues and Domestic Abuse

A few red flags in unhealthy relationships include: excessive jealousy or insecurity, coercion, or emotional and/or physical abuse. Abuse is a pattern of forceful or controlling behaviors used

against another individual without regard for their health, safety, or human rights. Abusers can be male or female and an intimate partner, friend, family, acquaintance, or a complete stranger.

Sexual Assault or Violence

Latest research tells us that 1 in 5 college students will be sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of forced and unwanted sexual activity, including kissing, groping, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and rape. Victims might be coerced into sexual acts through verbal or non-verbal threats or through the use of alcohol or drugs.

Signs that a person has been sexually assaulted include: hyper-vigilance, withdrawing from family and friends, disrupted sleep, self-blame, trouble concentrating, and emotional outbursts. Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim, but victims often feel extreme guilt after an assault.

It is recommended that you encourage any student who has been assaulted to talk to Counseling Center staff who can link the student with on and off-campus supports.

Title IX:

If a student tells you that they have been sexually harassed or assaulted, **you are required to make a report to the Title IX office**, unless you are a Confidential Resource. Generally, only campus ministry, Counseling Center staff, and Student Health Services staff are considered confidential resources.

Title IX reporting can be done via the following link: <http://titleix.rmu.edu/for-students/report>. Reporting can also be done via telephone (412) 397-5490. You may also communicate with the Title IX Office by emailing titleixoffice@rmu.edu. For more information, please see rmu.edu/about/titleix.

Self-Injury

Self-injury is when a person intentionally causes physical damage to their own body. The majority of self-injury involves a person cutting and scratching themselves with sharp objects. A person may also burn, bite, or hit themselves, or pull their own hair.

Self-injury is different from a suicide attempt. People who self-injure usually use it as a way to cope with difficulties in their life and/or to relieve painful emotions. Counseling is recommended to assist people in finding more helpful methods for coping.

Suicide

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students, however, it can be preventable. Students who are suicidal sometimes tell people about their thoughts or give clues to others about their feelings.

Signs of a mental health crisis, which increase the risk of suicide, include:

- Abrupt changes in mood, behavior or appearance
- Excessive alcohol or other drug use
- Ending of a significant relationship / death of a loved one
- Disregard for personal goals and relationships / dramatic shift in academic performance
- Isolating from friends and family
- Neglecting appearance and hygiene
- Lacking energy or commenting about not being able to sleep
- Expressing the belief that life is meaningless / feelings of hopelessness
- References to suicide, death/dying, or self-injury
- An organized suicide plan
- Previous suicide attempt
- Obtaining a weapon or other means of hurting oneself

The presence of a number of these risk factors, especially if they indicate changes from the person's usual mood and behaviors, calls for increased awareness.

A suicide threat is defined as any spoken, written, or behavioral indication of self-destructive tendencies with the intent of taking one's own life. RMU personnel should take all such threats seriously and **follow the [emergency protocol](#) listed on page 7.**

Appropriately Responding to Students Who May Be Experiencing a Mental Health Crisis

Talk to the student privately

- Ask the student to speak with you away from their peers.
- Listen intently, allow the student to express their feelings, and provide validation.
- Reflect back to them what you think they are saying in a *non-judgmental manner*.
- **Never promise confidentiality**, but you may assure students that the conversation will be *private*.

Express interest and concern

- Students are more willing to receive help when someone shows concern about them, rather than when they are forced to seek help or feel judged/confronted.
 - Try saying "I've noticed you are missing class a lot lately" instead of "Why are you missing so many classes?"
 - Try saying "Do you mind me asking why you have had such difficulty handing in your papers on time?" instead of "Why do you always turn in your papers late?"

Be direct and specific

- Tell the student the specific behaviors that concern you.
- If you are wondering if a student is suicidal, **directly ask them if they have considered hurting or killing themselves. Do not just wonder; ask them.**
 - If they say yes, follow the emergency protocol listed below...

EMERGENCY PROTOCOL

If you believe a student is suicidal or in crisis, stay with them and follow these steps to get help:

- If the student is experiencing a medical emergency, call the University Police at (412) 397-2424, or call 911.
- If the student is not in imminent physical/medical danger, contact the Counseling Center immediately...
 - During business hours (M-F, 8:30 am-5:00 pm) at (412) 397-5900
 - After hours and on weekends, contact the RMU Police at (412) 397-2424 (as they can contact the Counseling Center's on-call staff).

Referring Students in Distress (for Non-Emergency Crises)

With the Student's Knowledge

During business hours (M-F, 8:30 am - 5:00 pm), contact the Counseling Center directly at (412) 397-5900 and explain that you have a student who would like to meet with a counselor. The Counseling Center staff will walk you through the intake process. If you feel more comfortable walking the student to the Counseling Center, please do so. We also recommend following up with a CARE Team report.

Without the Student's Knowledge

Faculty and staff are encouraged to report any incident or behavior that may require an intervention or is of concern. If you are concerned about a student, please submit a report to the Crisis Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team. For more information about the CARE Team and/or to make a report, please visit: rmu.edu/careteam.

Please note that CARE Team reports are not to be used to REPORT an emergency, as these emails are not monitored 24/7. However, after following the emergency protocol, you are encouraged to follow up with a CARE Team report.

The Crisis Assessment and Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team

What is the CARE Team?

The CARE Team works collaboratively with faculty and staff to identify, track, and respond to students in distress (personally or academically) within RMU's student population. The focus of the CARE Team is to provide assistance to students in academic or personal distress, while also balancing the needs and well-being of the RMU community.

The CARE Team comprises representatives from the Center for Student Success, Counseling Center, Faculty, Residence Life, Department of Athletics, University Police, Dean of Students, Student Equity and Title IX, Global Engagement, and the Center for Veterans and Military Families. The CARE Team gathers bi-weekly during the school year to discuss student issues and to create a plan to keep both the individual and the campus safe.

When to Make a Report

Faculty and staff are encouraged to report any incident or behavior that may require an intervention or is of concern. The CARE Team uses these reports to assist the student, while also considering the behavior's impact on the greater campus community. When in doubt, make a report.

How to Make a Report

To submit a report, please complete the CARE Team Report Form and provide as much information as possible. The link to this report can be found here:

https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?RobertMorrisUniv&layout_id=1

All submissions are reviewed within 24 hours and addressed as soon as possible. Due to privacy limitations, we may not be able to inform you of the outcome of your concern. If the team needs any further information, you will be contacted by a CARE team member.

Information about the Counseling Center

- The RMU Counseling Center offers both virtual and in-person services to currently enrolled students.
- Faculty and staff are encouraged to contact the Counseling Center for consultation about student concerns.
- Counseling is free and confidential.
- Counselors are mental health professionals.
- Students can call/email to schedule appointments or walk in for same-day crisis appointments.
- Sessions with counselors last about an hour.

- Students can choose what to disclose.
- The Counseling Center has a waitlist at times but will still have initial meetings with students, check in with them, and connect them with appropriate campus and community resources.
- The Counseling Center does not write excuses from class or provide academic accommodations, but we will write a confirmation letter that a student is seeking counseling services, if a student requests it. It is up to faculty and staff to decide how to use that information.

Referring Students for Academic Concerns

If you are primarily concerned about a student's academic performance, contact the Center for Student Success by calling 412-397-6862, or you can submit an alert online through the Navigate system, as follows...

- Go to rmu.edu/colonialnavigate (you will need to sign in), search for the student's name, and click on "Issue an Alert" on the right-hand side under "Actions."
- From here, enter factual information regarding your academic concern for the student.

Preventing Academic Distress in Students

- Be encouraging. Show students that you are available to talk and want to hear from them.
- Communicate regularly with students and learn their names when possible.
- Make students feel appreciated and heard.
- Encourage students to seek tutoring and meet with their Success Coach throughout the semester, as needed.
- Use the class syllabus to inform students in writing of standards and expectations (e.g., respect, courtesy, timeliness, etc.) for classroom conduct and of possible consequences for disruptive behavior. Devote time during the first class to review this information in the syllabus.
- If needed, have students sign a copy of the syllabus on the first day of class agreeing to these expectations, and keep it on file.
- Serve as a model by demonstrating appropriate, respectful, and responsible behavior in all interactions with students.

Working with International Students

Traveling abroad to college separates the student from their family, friends, and culture. These separations can place a strain upon the student's personal and educational development and can cause students to withdraw from peers and new possible friends. When working with international students it is important to recognize that mental health issues have different interpretations in

different parts of the world. For example, in some cultures, discussing or admitting to the need for support is taboo. Be sensitive to the needs of each student's culture while encouraging students to:

- Keep in contact with their families
- Seek campus resources, such as the Center for Global Engagement and the Counseling Center, and participate in on-campus activities with Student Life
- Establish communication and connections with other students experiencing the same feelings
- Experience this new culture and teach others about their own culture

For more information about working with international students, please visit CGE's website - <https://www.rmu.edu/academics/provost/cge> - or call them at (412) 397-4243.

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries with Students

Basic Guidelines for Setting Boundaries

- Be proactive, not reactive, by establishing limits from the beginning
- Communicate boundaries clearly
- Be consistent in applying boundaries
- Confront boundary violations early and gently
- Seek consultation and support in maintaining boundaries and/or dealing with boundary violators

Signs You May Be Overextending Yourself

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by a student situation
- Feeling angry at a student
- Feeling afraid to the point of panic
- Having thoughts of "adopting" or otherwise rescuing a student
- Reliving similar experiences of your own

Preventing Professional Burnout

- Learn campus resources and know where/when to refer students (i.e. Center for Student Success, Counseling Center, Center for Global Engagement).
- Let students know up front when they should expect replies to their email. Treat your email as you would office hours and set a regular time to check it and respond to students.
- If you are spending most of your time on certain students, remind them about alternative resources (i.e. tutoring, counseling, etc.). If they seem reluctant, offer to walk or call with them the first time.
- Consult with the head of your department about policies regarding student conduct and how to handle disruptive students.