

DISTRESSED AND DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS A GUIDE FOR CSUSM FACULTY AND STAFF

This guide outlines behavior indicators of distressed and disruptive students, and response strategies for CSUSM faculty and staff.

IDENTIFYING A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

As a faculty or staff member at CSUSM, you may be the first to notice a student who is experiencing difficulty. In these situations, your relationship and experience with the student can bridge the individual to available resources and care. Our environment facilitates relationships where care and concern can be communicated; however, faculty and staff are not to provide mental health counseling or attempt to diagnose students in distress. Most frequently, the best care for struggling students is to notice signs of distress, communicate care, and connect students to the appropriate resources.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Distress:

- Stated need for help (directly or indirectly). Listen for both the content of what a student is saying as well as the underlying feelings and intentions of their message. Notice tone of voice and gestures.
- Students may also communicate problems via e-mail or through written class assignments.

Academic Indicators:

- Infrequent class attendance with minimal or no work completed/or sudden change in attendance or performance.
- Excessive procrastination and/or very poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous coursework.
- Repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., deadline extensions).
- Behavior which regularly interferes with effective class management. (See Disruptive Students section in this guide.)
- Essays or creative works that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair.

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators:

- Dependency (e.g., the student who hangs around or makes excessive unproductive appointments during office hours).
- Tearfulness – unexplained and frequent.
- Frequent or high levels of irritable, unruly, abrasive, or aggressive (not threatening) behavior.
- Unable to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.
- Overly anxious, nervous or tense.

- Recent traumatic changes in personal relationships (e.g., death of a family member or close friend, divorce and other changes in significant relationships).

Physical Indicators:

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class.
- Marked changes in personal hygiene.
- Impaired speech and/or disjointed thoughts.
- Excessive weight gain or loss.
- Coming to class bleary-eyed or smelling of alcohol or other substances.

Safety/Risk Indicators:

NOTE: Any indicators from this section should be acted on immediately.

- Current expressed suicidal thinking or planning
- Any written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality or a suicidal tone to it.
- Statements to the effect that the student is “going away for a long time”.
- Severe depression, or mood swings.
- History of suicidal thoughts or attempts, coupled with ongoing depressed mood.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors.
- Essays or papers that focus on despair, suicide or death.

Students in a Serious Mental Health Crisis

If a student is in a serious mental health crisis, you may hear or see the following:

- Suicidal statements or suicidal behaviors/attempts.
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions.
- Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts).
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren’t there); bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate for the situation (e.g., talking to someone that is not present).
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostile, suspicious, and/or agitated behavior).

WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT IS IN DISTRESS

When you believe that a student, or anyone else in the college community, is talking about harming themselves or others, **you have a responsibility to act:**

- Regardless of who the person is, if you perceive an imminent danger to self or to others, call University Police by calling 911 immediately.
- For situations where a mental health emergency is not present and the student is not in immediate danger, submit a Cougar Care Network Referral:
<https://www.csusm.edu/ccn/index.html>

Dean of Students Office staff will review the referral and take appropriate action.

IMPORTANT: This form is NOT designed as an emergency response notification. Please note that referrals are not reviewed after 5:00 PM, on weekends, or during official University holidays or breaks.

IDENTIFYING DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR

On occasion, you may find a student whose behavior is causing distress to you or others. These concerns vary greatly, but can be broadly categorized as excessively demanding or aggressive/potentially violent. These situations or behaviors may include:

- Becoming confrontational or argumentative.
- Inability to accept limits.
- Verbally threatening faculty, staff, or other students.
- Sending alarming notes, e-mails, or messages to faculty, staff, or other students.
- Becoming verbally abusive.
- Overt physical disruptions (throwing papers or books; turning over chairs, etc.).
- Overt acts of violence directed at faculty, staff or student (hitting, pushing, etc.).
- Delusions/hallucinations and general suspiciousness

WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT IS DISRUPTIVE IN CLASS

The severity and frequency of a student's misconduct influence the action that might be appropriate to a specific instance of disruptive behavior. Below are suggestions, listed in the order of increasing severity.

- Provide clear expectations for standards for classroom behavior in the syllabus.
- At the onset of inappropriate behavior, consider a general statement to the entire class.
- If behavior continues, speak directly with the student but do not meet alone with a student you believe to be a threat to your personal safety. (If this is the case, please contact University Police prior to scheduling)
- Complete a Cougar Care Network Referral: <https://www.csusm.edu/ccn/index.html>
- Make a written record of any meeting to discuss disruptive behavior. Send an email to the student summarizing the conversation and request a response acknowledging the discussion and expectations outlined.
- Involve others as appropriate: Talk to your department chair or contact the Dean of Students Office.
- If necessary, remove the student from the class session. If a student refuses to leave a class when directed, call University Police for assistance. Report any removal from class to your department chair and notify the Dean of Students Office after class has concluded. The Dean of Students will review the student's behavior and follow-up with the student as appropriate. All efforts will be made to address the behavior prior to the

next class session. Faculty do not have the ability to remove a student for the duration of the semester.

Responding to a Threatening or Potentially Violent Student

In the unlikely event that you encounter a threatening or potentially violent student, keep in mind the following principles. It is important to report threatening or violent behaviors to University Police immediately.

Be aware

Look for changes in behavior before physical aggression occurs. You may observe the student increasing the volume of their voice, pointing fingers, or leaning forward in a potential attacking position.

How to respond verbally

- Remain calm and in control — do not mirror the student's behavior or tone of voice. Take slow deep breaths to maintain your composure.
- Use the student's name.
- Listen and respond empathically — do not interrupt or deny the student's feelings. Remain nonjudgmental, build trust and communicate understanding to de-escalate the situation.
- Convey a willingness to assist. Offer acceptance, respect, and understanding of the student's concern.
- Set limits. Offer options, but also outline limits and discuss potential consequences to irresponsibility.

How to respond non-verbally

- Keep at least one leg length away (about 36 inches) to avoid the person's personal space, to prevent escalation, and to increase your own personal safety.
- Maintain an open stance — keep your hands open in plain view. Do not cross arms or point fingers.
- Maintain appropriate eye contact and facial expressions.

Meeting with a threatening or potentially threatening student

If meeting with a student causes you concern for your safety, please consult with the Dean of Students Office, University Police, and your department chair prior to scheduling.

- Do not meet alone.
- Alert a colleague of the meeting and have that colleague ready to assist. If appropriate and schedules permit, a UPD Officer can be on "standby."
- Keep door of your meeting place open.
- Keep yourself between the student and the door for a quick exit, if needed.
- Terminate meeting immediately if your intuition senses something is wrong.

- Follow the verbal and nonverbal guidelines above.

If attacked

- Immediately increase personal space.
- Call UPD or yell for help.
- Use the least force necessary to protect yourself and keep the student from harm.

You are not alone. We are here to help.

The following resources are available to assist members of the CSUSM community in maintaining a safe, fair, and inclusive environment:

CSU Red Folder

Cougar Care Network
Dean of Students Office
USU 3500
760-750-7627
www.csusm.edu/ccn

Student Health and Counseling Services
760-750-4915
Same number can be used to access an after-hours counselor – between 5pm & 8am, weekends, and holidays)
www.csusm.edu/shcs

University Police Department
760-750-4567
24 hrs/day, 365 days/year
www.csusm.edu/police

Request a presentation/training/workshop:
<https://calstatesanmarcos.wufoo.com/forms/s7s6hixog7nsid/>