

Have you noticed?

An intervention guide for faculty staff dealing with the emotionally distressed student

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Christiane Carrier

Hélène Morrissette

Have you noticed?

A privileged access and particular role

The years spent in college often evoke pleasant memories, but if we stop to think about it, we can also remember them as stressful times in certain respects. Beyond the enthusiasm that specifically marks this stage of life, have you noticed that financial problems, difficult relationships, peer pressure, family problems, loss of self-confidence and efforts deployed to achieve academic success often represent stressful challenges for many college students? With a little help from family, friends, teachers and faculty staff, the vast majority manage to harmoniously weather these growing pains, but unfortunately, a certain number of students are not able to handle their personal problems. This will sometimes result in emotional upheavals that can impede their academic results and psychological well-being.

As a teacher or employee, you are in daily contact with students. You are therefore in an excellent position to notice behavioural changes characteristic of students experiencing difficulty with their studies, emotional stability or behaviour. Students will often turn to you, either because of your position, or because of their trust and respect for you. Sometimes you can find yourself directly involved in the difficulties

experienced by students. You may then become the essential link that will help them locate the appropriate professional services. In addition, your ability to decipher distress signals and the personal commitment you demonstrate concerning their situation are often cited by students as being a determining factor in solving their problems. For example, “My work placement/training coordinator, teacher, laboratory technician, etc. who persuaded me to move on to the next stage...” or again, “My mother and my friend urged me to consult someone, but it was a suggestion from my teacher that finally made me to decide to act...”

The design and rationale behind the guide

This intervention guide was developed by the Psychology Services of Cégep de Sainte-Foy following many requests by various staff members. Our practical experience with students and the adults in their immediate environment led us to recognize the importance of producing a document to answer frequently asked questions. In this way, a larger number of persons would benefit.

Does this guide offer interventions affecting only a minute fraction of the student population? No. The life of young college students is punctuated by emotional episodes that are more or less intense. At various times, most college students experience periods marked by anxiety, aggressiveness, or depression. In addition, they all see themselves as somewhat anxious and timid, more or less.

Most frequently asked questions as listed by our service

- How to recognize distress signals in students?
- How to approach students in whom we noticed a state of distress?
- What to do if someone confides information we find troubling?
- How to avoid aggravating a difficult situation experienced by the student?

These questions arise so frequently that it became important for us to deal with them in a reference document.

Other aspects of a more academic nature concerning student behaviour can, on occasion, preoccupy staff members; problems with lack of motivation, repeated failures and drop outs, to name a few.

Even though this guide does not tackle questions relating to motivation or perseverance in studies directly, we deal with these themes indirectly by describing the communication elements that promote the establishment of meaningful relationships between faculty staff and students. When combined with other factors, the relational abilities described further on make it possible to prevent creating emotional distress in the student while also facilitating his learning and success.

Other particular and unusual difficulties can also manifest themselves. What are we to do in the case of a student experiencing an eating disorder, a drug addiction, or harassment? Again, how are we to integrate adult students?

This guide is in no way exhaustive. Additional questions, some more specific than others, may not be answered by this document alone. It is above all, a tool to identify, understand, approach, and properly guide an emotionally distressed student.

Objectives targeted by this guide

The objectives of this guide are as follows:

1. Provide faculty staff with a simple tool enabling them to recognize and detect emotionally distressed students.
2. Enable faculty staff to initiate a first intervention with an emotionally distressed student.
3. Avoid aggravating students' emotional distress through inappropriate interventions.
4. Equip staff members so they may overcome certain deadlocks in their relationships with students.

Our intention here is certainly not to turn you into psychologists or demand that psychotherapy be present in all colleges. The proposed interventions make no therapeutic claims and are not designed to change the personality of any given student. Their aim is first and foremost to prevent the appearance or aggravation of difficulties in vulnerable students. Following this, they target the establishment of a positive interaction between the faculty staff member and the student.

1 The development of the young adult

A typology of problematic behaviours found in certain students is provided in Section 6 of the guide. Like all typologies, it is reductive in that it only shows the tip of the iceberg by targeting certain problematic attitudes and behaviours found in students. This classification should not therefore diminish the importance of considering the student as a whole and in all his complexity.

Several problematic behaviours of young CEGEP students relate to pitfalls encountered in negotiating developmental tasks particularly for young people in the process of becoming adults.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood entails specific tasks: Acceding to autonomy, establishing constructive relationships with peers, developing competencies, shaping one's identity and developing one's point of view. This major turning point toward adulthood poses challenges and dilemmas inherent in these new liberties and responsibilities.

1.1 Becoming autonomous

By learning to emancipate himself emotionally from his parents and other adults he depends on, the young adult-to-be seeks to transition from a relationship of dependency to more equalitarian relationships. To gain a certain economic independence and set foot in the adult world for instance, he will want to have a part-time job, which at times can prove difficult to conciliate with the pursuit of his academic goals.

The young CEGEP student wavers between his need for dependency and autonomy; he feels the simultaneous and contradictory desire to distance himself from adults while seeking their approval. He displays independence, but often insists (silently and indirectly) that adults remain his models and guideposts from

whom he still seeks approval. The young person does not want total independence but rather equality, a form of mutuality based on discussion and sharing.

1.2 The importance of peers and the development of a capacity for intimacy

As he gradually distances himself from his family, the group of friends becomes very important to the young adult. By their resemblance to him, close friends give the student a reassuring image of himself, which improves his sense of self-worth. With his friends, he feels strong and independent; alone, he may feel timid and at a loss. The group is a reassuring lifeline that saves him from the isolation and solitude that threaten his experience as a youth.

In college, the network of friends is very important; it is a source of emotional support and assistance on an academic level. The feeling of belonging to a group increases motivation for studies.

This age group is also concerned with establishing and maintaining a loving relationship along with everything this entails, including developing communication skills and inquiring about sexuality.

Towards the end of college, the young adult will question his identification to the peer group. To better define himself, he will sometimes be faced with a choice: To do like his friends or carve a place for himself that allows for self-assertion, a clarification of his individuality and his personal responsibility.

1.3 Cognitive development and the acquisition of competencies

On a cognitive level, young 17 and 18 year-olds arriving at college have usually reached the stage of formal operations, characterized by the capacity to reason and make inferences. The young adult can now visualize an infinite variety of possibilities: He is able to reason logically using hypotheses. At this stage, some students discover the pleasure of debating and will use it in verbal jousting.

The young CEGEP student discovers his abilities and his capacity for reflection. Studies and school work will enable him to develop his competencies by exercising his capacity for analysis and synthesis; he will acquire a method of intellectual work and develop a sense of discipline along with a taste for effort.

The young college student must deal with higher learning and greater competition than that found in high schools. He sometimes obtains disappointing results in the first session, and begins to doubt his ability to succeed and his choice of orientation. A student who got good grades in high school without really working is particularly at risk. He often experiences a reduction in self-esteem, discouragement, and loss of motivation if he is not among the best in class as he was in high school.

1.4 Forming an identity and developing one's point of view

Another unavoidable psychological realization for the young adult is the need to define at the same time, what he is and what he wants to be, both on a personal and professional plane. He has a desire to experiment and proceed by trial and error. Everything he experiences helps him become aware of what he is, including

his capabilities and limitations. He questions his values and the meaning he will give to his life. To become himself, the young student also needs to question the beliefs and values that have been given to him in order to define his own.

Certain difficulties are encountered in defining one's identity and vocational choice. This exploration and experimentation stage often translates into provisional choices and changes in orientation. For instance, we sometimes find an apathetic and conformist student who does not question his goals and simply conforms to the expectations of his family, or a frantic and unstable student who makes multiple successive choices.

In order to define himself, the young adult needs to be in a relationship with adults other than his parents. Most of the time, he will find these models among his teachers, specialists in sporting activities and other adults in his entourage. These significant persons provide behaviour models that allow the youth's resources to take shape; they establish limitations that have a structuring effect on his personality. The role of personnel in a teaching institution is to awaken the young adult's interest, encourage him to make efforts and surpass himself, and validate his progress.

The CEGEP student's identity is dependent on his relationship with significant persons. It is through rewarding relationships with these adults that the youth will be able to see himself as a person and develop his self-esteem. An adult who can "be with" the young student rather than "do for" him will have a structuring effect on him.

2 Preventative interaction

The previous section presented a brief overview of the developmental background of CEGEP students. We will now see how we must take certain characteristic traits of young adults into account in our interaction with them in order to avoid the appearance or aggravation of behavioural difficulties in youth.

2.1 The intensity of emotional experiences

The many changes experienced by a young adult always occur with strong emotional intensity. Occasionally, we must be able to distinguish intensity from severity. When a young adult feels emotionally insecure or when he is emotionally distressed, it is difficult for him to be effective on an intellectual level.

Even though he is experiencing them intensely, it is difficult for the young adult to verbalize his needs and emotions. An adult interacting with him must therefore be able to help him verbalize an idea, an opinion, a need, or a feeling.

2.2 The dependence/independence conflict

In his rejection of dependency, the young adult will often display a false independence by withdrawing from the adult, refusing to ask him for help and by opposing him. In spite of these appearances, he needs the adult to approach him and invite him to interact in an "interdependent" way, as adults address one another everywhere. His quest for autonomy will lead him to react negatively to infantilising authoritarianism in discussions. Closed-mindedness, withdrawal, and opposition will be the expression of his humiliation.

This pursuit of independence at all costs can also translate into a lack of expressed recognition for the help provided by the adult.

2.3 Identity instability and vulnerability

Often, the search for autonomy, the desire to experiment and the task of defining his identity are expressed as a lack of receptivity and an opposition to the adult's contribution. We could say that the young adult "stakes his claim for identify" by "opposing himself". Even though he will occasionally debate, criticize or contravene them, the young adult needs guideposts to structure his identity. The CEGEP student needs to discuss and negotiate with an open-minded, flexible adult who can be firm when it comes to "non-negotiable" values such as equality among persons, the respect of personal integrity and that of others, a rejection of violence, etc. Therefore, a balanced amount of flexibility and firmness averts many interaction problems and favours the student's development.

An identity under construction often reveals a vulnerable self-esteem, particularly as regards assessments. The young adult is often very sensitive to any feedback from others on his productions. This is why assessment comments must take into consideration the student's self-esteem to avoid triggering aggression, withdrawal, and demotivation. To this effect, it is important to:

- Assess the performance and not the person;
- Promote learning, leaving room for trial and error and readjustments rather than performance alone;
- Eliminate ungracious and humiliating comments;
- Provide feedback on successes as well as errors.

3 Factors influencing relationships with students

We have described the student's development at college. However, the adult is also undergoing change and his capacity for intervening is influenced by his personal conduct. This section of the guide deals with four important aspects to consider in a relationship with a student: The person's general state of mind, his concept of communication, his concept of conflict resolution, and his role as a faculty staff member.

3.1 The general state of the person who intervenes

The general state of a person influences his receptivity to communicate with the young adult in terms of open- or closed-mindedness, and determines his availability as well as the energy he invests in student interventions. A person who is physically or psychologically overloaded is busy on several levels of his own life. This will necessarily have an impact on the energy he will devote to the student. Consider the following examples:

- **Physical fitness (health, fatigue ...)**

A person may be ill or in a state of extreme fatigue. This will affect his ability to work and his openness toward the student. Certain health problems can entail serious preoccupations compared to which a student's anxiety can seem rather trite. A person suffering from insomnia who feels drained of energy can be more easily tempted to overlook a student's distress.

- **Past and present interpersonal relationships**

A person may be suffering or may have suffered in the past from timidity, anxiety toward certain tasks, a feeling of being isolated from colleagues, a heartache leading to a refusal to take another chance. Or again, the person may have the same mind-set as when he was young and react as he did back then, saying "I wish someone had thought to shake me up" rather than trying to understand the situation and see the needs of the student in front of him.

- **Psychological state (vulnerability, personal history...)**

At certain moments in life, a person may be grappling with personal issues that make him vulnerable to emotional tensions and outbursts. He may already have benefited from assistance in the past, or conversely have suffered from getting no feedback at a time when he needed support. For someone who already feels overwhelmed and powerless, it is natural to view the student's request as one more "headache" with which to cope".

- **Family situation (with or without children, ages of the children...)**

A person may be in a conflict situation with a young adult in his personal environment. This can diminish his level of tolerance and open-mindedness toward other young adults of similar age, insofar as he feels he has already been through too much.

- **His job status (temporary or full-time employee, personal history, and experience as a college employee)**

It is highly conceivable that a substitute teacher may take certain things more lightly by arguing that he is only "passing through". However, he may also be motivated to "give it everything he's got" hoping to leave the impression of a dedicated employee. This varies from one individual to the next, and the variations are as numerous as the persons involved.

3.2 The concept of communication and conflict resolution

A staff member's concept of communication can also present infinite variations. We suggest you consult Section 4 on general notions pertaining to the art of communicating.

We must emphasize the importance of our personal concept of conflict and its resolution. For some, there is always a guilty party and a victim; for others, someone is wrong and someone is right. Based on our personal concept, we could be tempted to see ourselves as a saviour, a lawmaker, or again a judge or an adjudicator.

As an adult in interaction with youth, it is important to be aware of our personal way of confronting our discomforts, because it greatly influences our way of dealing with those of the student. For example, if I grant myself the right to be sad, I can accord the same right to the student I am dealing with. Thus, one individual may have had the opportunity to demystify his emotional problems and the behaviours these entail, while another person, in a similar situation, may feel terrified and even powerless to act. The same goes for the personal learning of each individual as regards conflict resolution. In addition, the life experience of adults being much more extensive and possibly more complex, certain adults may imagine that the problems of their students pale beside what life has in store for them.

This can lead to wanting some students to “toughen up” and a reflex to trivialize the experience they are relating.

How to react when confronted with a troubling situation? An individual can adopt various defence mechanisms such as escape through alcohol, sleep, activity, or even food. Another person will attempt to change his ideas at all costs. One person will be paralysed, subdued; another will simply deny everything and so on ...

Socially speaking, we face the same issues. Whenever a situation does not suit us or seems unfair, several options are available. One person will rapidly commit himself, while another will react by being opposed, either actively or passively. These different attitudes will have an impact on how open the individual will be to the student’s message, and how his interventions will be coloured by them.

In summary, to facilitate exchanges with the student, knowing and being aware of oneself and one’s communication modes are crucial tools.

3.3 Our concept of our role as a faculty staff member

The way we conceive our role as a faculty staff member is another element to consider when intervening with distressed students. Many believe that this task is more or less directly incumbent on certain persons in the college environment. We expect psychologists to take care of these students. Despite the popularity of this service, a good number of students do not avail themselves of this service on their own. This is why we are calling on all personnel to help establish an efficient transmission network. In doing so, we hope to equip as many people as possible so they may use interventions whenever appropriate. However, we should keep in mind that, quite often, simply listening is enough to deflate a problem and, in most cases, additional intervention by a professional is not even required.

Will intervening with students be perceived as “one more little extra” or an intrinsic part of the role of college faculty staff? Many people could declare that the proposed interventions are pushing the limits of their duties. They could say: “This is not part of the job description”. What are the limitations? What is the general and specific responsibility toward students? These questions must be answered individually for and by everyone. One thing is for sure, noticing a problem with a student and doing nothing about it can be more worrisome and draining on the energy level of all personnel than attempting an exploratory intervention with the student to see if there is a problem.

4 Communication components

After describing the experiences of the young adult and the adults who may be interacting with him, let us now examine the general components that facilitate all communications.

The importance of communicating and discussing with students has been amply demonstrated. Good communication enables individuals to explain themselves, make themselves understood and can often prevent conflicts, not to mention a deterioration of the atmosphere in the classroom or college.

Certain general attitudes prove useful in re-establishing communication with students, such as showing concern for what they are living and showing interest in what they are doing. More specifically, here are certain elements that facilitate communication and promote

beneficial interactions.

Choose an opportune moment and take the time

- Make sure you have enough time available to talk with a student.
- Take measures not to be disturbed.
- Take the student's availability into consideration. This promotes receptivity and mutual open-mindedness.

Make contact

- Greet the person, smile, and introduce yourself.
- Maintaining contact and communication with small daily gestures promotes a climate of trust. For example, provide encouragement and congratulate the student for successful work.

Show concern for the student

- Pay attention to the student, show an interest in what he says and what he is living. For instance, getting updates on a student who has been absent from class for a while.

Listen to the student and encourage him to express himself

- Establish eye contact. Pay attention to body language. An open question such as, "What's happening with you?" is a good way to get the student to open up.
- Allow for moments of silence and reflection and then restart the discussion by saying, "Yes ...?"
- Ask the student to express what he is feeling or thinking: "Can you tell me more about this?"
- Occasionally confirm your perception of what he is experiencing: "It appears you are going through a rough time."
- Understand and discuss rather than argue.
- Focus on what the other person is saying and feeling.
- Listen instead of preparing your own answer.
- Avoid trying to convince the other person.
- Allow the other person enough time to properly present their feelings.
- Make sure that you have correctly grasped what the student was trying to say. For example, start by paraphrasing what the person expressed: "If I understand correctly, you were unable to present yourself for the exam because you had a bad flu", then complete your thought with a precise question, if you require specific information: "I was wondering why you did not come and talk to me about it back then?"
- Start your messages by using "I". We cannot overemphasize the usefulness of formulating your comments by starting with "I" when it is the adult who has something to say, whether a difficult inquiry, criticism or a request. This type of approach does not antagonize the person receiving the message and increases the

chances of the message being accepted by the student. For example, "I want to mention that I noticed your (repeated) absences. Perhaps you feel that it's none of my business, but all the same, I was wondering what is happening with you and I would like to know more...". This "I" message eliminates the judgmental aspect of a statement such as "You're not taking your studies seriously" and demonstrates the adult's interest and concern.

Respect the young person while respecting yourself

Show the young adult the same respect that you demand from him. For example, react to the student's idea with consideration and understanding even if it differs from your own.

Avoid disrespectful attitudes that impede communication such as:

- **Lecturing, pressuring, preaching**

These messages tell the student he must bow to an authority that dictates his duties and obligations with very little room for explanation. Students usually refuse to yield to these pressures and begin defending their rights and privileges more and more vigorously. For example, "what must be, must be" or again "The future belongs to the early bird" instead of "This assignment requires prior preparation because it comprises several stages".

- **Judging, criticizing, blaming, ridiculing, humiliating**

Predominantly negative assessments attack the self-image and personal confidence of students, just like everybody else. This type of communication can trigger bitterness and anger and incite students to express their hostility, resist, and defend themselves by counter-attacking. Ex.: "If you think your problems are very important, you haven't seen anything yet ..."

- **Policing, threatening**

In a spirit of contradiction, youth sometimes react to threats and prohibitions by doing the opposite of what they were just told them, simply to see if the adults will carry out their threats.

- **Dodging, deflecting, joking**

A student is usually very serious and highly motivated when he decides to confide in someone about a problem. If the adult responds by teasing him, joking around, being ironic or humorous, he risks offending the student and closing a door that was partially open. For example, "Okay! So what's your problem this week? You know, we could write a real TV drama with everything that happens to you."

Take into consideration differences in values

Accept that the student has the right to express himself, carve a place for himself, and convey different ideas. For instance, discuss with students even if you find their eccentric clothing distracting.

Understand what the young adult's behaviour triggers in us

Recognize and express (if relevant) what we feel when faced with the youth's attitude and behaviour. For example, "Since you didn't present yourself for the last two meetings, I would like to know if you'll attend the next one."

Accept the fact that agreement is desirable but not always necessary

Be tolerant and accept, if possible, a disagreement or compromise. If we tell the student that his request does not suit us, but we demonstrate an open mind, "any reasonable offer will be considered", we show him respect. It is not necessary to meet his needs every time, but he must feel respected during the interaction.

Revisit a conflict

Review a conflict situation in order to re-establish contact and avoid aggravating the problem. Verify the student's comprehension. For instance, "I hope we understand each other" or "What have you retained from our discussion?"

Try to maintain contact

Be concerned with maintaining a relationship with the student, independently of whatever problems may arise. Ex.: Greeting a student who has dropped out of your course will dissipate any doubt of possible reprisals and shows we remain available.

5

How to react to distress signals

Here is a list of the most frequent distress signals to help you detect emotionally troubled students:

- lack of concentration;
- confusion;
- persistent anxiety;
- social isolation;
- increasing irritability;

- unusual or bizarre behaviour;
- missed meetings or courses;
- procrastination;
- dangerous behaviour;
- restlessness;
- neglected appearance;
- mood swings;
- indecision;
- depression.

5.1 Advice on interacting with the student

Emphasizing to the student what we have observed, that we have questions about him, that we are sincerely concerned with his well-being and that we want to help him look for solutions to his distress can have major consequences. We encourage you, if possible, to speak openly and honestly with a student when you feel he is suffering from personal or academic problems. After choosing an opportune moment for a discussion:

- Ask to meet the student in private. This will help reduce shyness and make him less defensive.
- Briefly convey your perceptions and observations to the student and express your concerns frankly and openly.
- Pay attention to what is bothering him and try to view the situation from his perspective, without necessarily saying he is right or wrong.
- Try to identify the student's problem or concern as well as your own preoccupations.
- Strange or inappropriate behaviour must not be ignored (comment honestly, on what you observed).
- Do not commit to more than you can do. Reaching out to others always implies a certain risk, but it can be a gratifying experience if we know how to stay within reasonable limits of our capabilities. Enlisting the support of a colleague can be a good way to help yourself, either in the actual approach with the student, or in preparing for it.

5.2 Psychological services: role and availability

The role of professionals working in college psychological services is to help students resolve problems relating to interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, autonomy, conflicts, anxiety, self-confidence, and academic results. When referring students to this service, let them know that the services are free and strictly confidential.

These individual therapy services are designed for people who can benefit from a brief and intensive therapy. If a longer or more sustained intervention is required, the student will be directed to more appropriate resources, outside the college. We should keep in mind that it might take a while to obtain a first meeting depending on the time of the year and resources in place.

6

Different behaviours, different ways of acting¹

6.1 The verbally aggressive, impatient, or impolite student

A student normally adopts aggressive language when facing frustrating situations he perceives as beyond his control: The anger and frustration are displaced toward you. As a rule, this aggressiveness is not directed at you personally, but it is difficult to not feel attacked by aggressive comments and behaviour. An expression of anger is often an awkward way of asking for help.

What to do?

Show empathy

- Acknowledge the anger and frustration by saying, for instance: “I realize you’re annoyed, do you feel that your rights are being thwarted or that nobody is listening to you?”.
- Make sure you have properly grasped the reason for his anger by allowing him to tell you what is bothering him.

Set limits

- Defuse the situation: Invite the person to your office or somewhere else if you feel it is more appropriate.
- Tell him you will not tolerate his verbal aggressiveness by saying, for instance: “When you scream and yell at me this way, I cannot listen to you.”
- Tell him to move away from you (if he gets too close) by saying something like: “Please move back, you’re too close.”

Identify the source of frustration

- Help the person verbalize his problems and tackle the real issues once he calms down.
- Dispel any misunderstandings; if there are any, it helps to defuse aggressiveness. Example: “I don’t think that’s exactly what I said”.

To avoid

- Starting an argument or yelling.

¹ This section contains excerpts from an American guide produced by San Diego State University in 1992, entitled *Working with the emotionally distressed student*. We would like to thank the counselling and psychological authorities of this university for allowing us to adapt this section. We also thank Mr. André Grégoire, psychologist at Collège Ahuntsic, for translating this American guide.

- Becoming hostile or repressive, for example: “Whoa there! I’ll show you what it’s like to be spoken to in that tone.”
- Insisting that the student justify his behaviour: “Now, I would like you to tell me exactly why you’re so hateful.”
- Evading the problem by looking away and not dealing with the situation.
- Immediately agreeing to unreasonable demands in order to keep the peace.

6.2 The student who acts violently or destructively (assault on persons or objects)

Violence caused by emotional distress is rare and will usually only manifest itself when the student becomes frustrated to the point that he is unable to control himself. The old saying: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” applies perfectly to this situation.

What to do?

Try to establish verbal communication. Protect yourself by placing yourself at a certain distance and diagonally (rather than face to face or with your back turned). Keep your hands open and in sight.

Show empathy

- Avoid increasing frustration and a feeling of powerlessness by quickly and calmly recognizing the intensity of the situation by saying, for instance: “I see that you’re really mad, that you’re not kidding, and that you’re troubled by some important questions”.
- Encourage verbalization to identify what the student is experiencing.

Set limits

- Explain clearly and directly what behaviours are acceptable by saying for example: “You certainly have the right to be mad, but you don’t have the right to hit or destroy objects” or again, “If you hit me, I won’t be able to help you”.
- In case of failure, (no cooperation or minimum verbal communication), get the necessary help (other employees, the college’s security services, psychological services, first aid workers).
- If the person is unable to control himself, attacks you or breaks material:
 1. Immediately notify the college’s security services.
 2. After informing the college’s security services, if necessary, call the police by dialling 911. Explain the situation:
 - identify yourself
 - describe the facts
 - clearly identify the location where help is required
 3. Inform the head of student affairs at the college about the sequence of events.
- When the crisis has passed, return to the plan proposed in point 6.1 (The verbally aggressive, impatient, or impolite student)

To avoid

- Ignoring alarm signals from a person on the verge of exploding, for instance: yelling, screaming, clenched fists, tense muscles, threats, declarations such as, “You leave me no other choice” or “You’re pushing me to the limit”.
- Threatening, challenging, taunting, or crowding the person into a corner
- Making physical contact.
- Remaining alone with the person in crisis.

6.3 A student who loses contact with reality

This student has trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality, his dreams from his state of consciousness. His thoughts are illogical, confused, and troubled. He may invent new words, see, or hear things he alone can perceive, have irrational beliefs and a bizarre or inappropriate behaviour. Generally, this student is not dangerous. He is terrified and overwhelmed and is much more afraid of you than you are of him.

What to do?

- React with warmth and kindness, but keep a cool head.
- Recognize the feelings or fears the person is experiencing without encouraging the imaginary perceptions by saying, for instance: “You’re convinced someone is trying to harm you, I understand and I know how real this may seem to you, but I don’t hear any voices (I can’t see the devil, etc.).”
- Admit that you have trouble understanding him (if necessary) by saying for instance: “I’m sorry but I don’t understand. Can you repeat that or say it differently?”
- Focus on the “here and now” and keep the emphasis on what is real and rational.
- Address the sane side of his personality by asking, for example: “Are you receiving any help for what you’re telling me? In my opinion, you need help rapidly and beyond what I can provide”.
- Admit to your concerns and insist on your conviction that he needs help by saying, for example: “You seem to have difficulty taking in all that is happening and since I’m concerned about you, I want to help you.”
- Offer support to the college’s psychological services or establish contact with the service by clearly describing the situation.
- Outside of office hours, on weekends, holiday periods or in case the psychologist is absent:
 - Contact the crisis centre, social emergency or the CLSC in your region or dial 911. Someone will assess the situation with you and suggest what action to take.

To avoid

- Expecting normal emotional reactions.
- Arguing with the person or trying to convince him of the irrationality of his thinking, because this incites him to defend his positions (false perceptions) even more

forcefully.

- Playing along and saying, for example “Ah, yes! I hear voices (or I see the devil)”.
- Encouraging other bizarre manifestations or behaviours by mentioning, for instance, your esoteric readings ...
- Making fun of his fantasies.
- Making judgements openly by saying, for instance: “You’re really bizarre ...”

6.4 The distrustful student

As a rule, this student complains about other things than his psychological problems. He is tense, anxious, suspicious, solitary, and has few friends. He sees problems that are mainly external to him. He has a tendency to interpret a simple oversight as a major sign of personal rejection and often has extreme reactions to insignificant events. He sees himself as the focal point of gestures by others and everything that happens to him takes on special meaning. He wants justice and to be treated fairly at all costs. Feelings of being discredited and inadequate underlie most of his actions. He is often seen as capable and bright.

What to do?

- Express consideration without creating bonds that are more intimate. Remember that distrustful students have trouble dealing with human proximity and warmth.
- Be firm, stable, timely, and rational.
- Proceed with exploratory statements rather than with questions or “infallible” affirmations by saying, for example: “Is it possible that you feel you are being treated more poorly than others?”
- Be specific and clear as regards the behaviour standards you expect.
- Refer to the institution’s rules and regulations to depolarize a conflict between the two of you by saying, for example, “You know that conditions are the same for everyone and this has nothing to do with you as an individual.”

To avoid

- Assuring the student of your friendship.
- Being warm and captivating.
- Showing off or making jokes.
- Contradicting or adhering to erroneous or illogical beliefs.
- Being ambiguous, not dispelling misunderstandings.
- Attacking the image he has of himself.
- Confirming the image he has of reality by making errors in judgment where he is concerned.
- Abusing the confidentiality.
- Speaking ill of him, he will find out.

6.5 The depressed student

This student is the one who usually receives the most sympathy. He manifests a variety of symptoms, for example guilt, low self-esteem, feelings of inaptitude and inadequacy, as well as physical symptoms such as lack of appetite, insomnia or hypersomnia, lack of interest in daily activities, etc. He is not very dynamic because everything requires an effort and his energy level is low. He has difficulty concentrating and his academic results can suffer.

What to do?

- Let the student know that you realize how badly he feels and that you would like to help him.
- Go half the distance and encourage him to express how he feels, because he is often hesitant to talk and the attention others give him helps him feel he has some importance.
- Help him formulate his needs by himself.
- Express your understanding to him.
- Consult the grid in Appendix 2: How to detect a depressive state or behaviour that is potentially suicidal in a student.
- Encourage him to seek a consultation (cf. Section 7).

To avoid

- Telling him to “shake himself up”, “Not to worry”, “Crying will solve nothing” or “Everything will be better tomorrow” or “One lost, ten found”.
- Lecturing him.
- Being drawn into his stagnation.
- Trying to console him by citing “much worse cases”.
- Asking the student if he is suicidal when you think this may be the case.
- Wanting to save him by not limiting your availability, letting him believe you are the best resource for him.

6.6 The anxious student

This type of student is characterized by a marked intolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Unknown situations and new ones increase his anxiety, as do vague, overly exalted, or unrealistic expectations. This type of student is full of doubt as to his personal value and has a tendency to avoid what makes him feel anxious: assessment situations, oral presentations, improvisations, etc.

What to do?

- Encourage him to face his sources of anxiety gradually, in small stages (one step at a time).
- Let the student express his feelings and thoughts. Listening often leads to an appreciable reduction in pressure.

- Reassure him, if necessary, by clarifying the task or the stages required to complete an assignment.
- Give him only small amounts of information at a time.
- Remain calm.
- Maintain an atmosphere of cooperation.
- Be clear and precise in your instructions, explanations and expectations.
- Encourage him to seek a consultation should he become overly anxious.

To avoid

- Complicating matters even more by overloading him with ideas and information.
- Assuming responsibility for his emotional state by allowing him to avoid his sources of anxiety.
- Surprising him with an assessment.
- Bombarding him with your own worries, your statements or questions.
- Dramatizing the consequences of failing an assessment, making an error, or having trouble.
- Increasing your demands in order to stimulate motivation.

6.7 The passive and demanding student

Normally, this student will not be satisfied and will continue to make demands in spite of all the time and energy you have devoted to him. He will not evolve proportionately to your efforts. You will often have the impression he is trying to monopolize your time. In fact, this student believes his value is proportionate to the quantity of time you accord him.

What to do?

- Reinforce his initiatives rather than his successes, help him trivialize failures.
- If he asks you for advice, begin by asking him for his personal point of view before answering.
- Talk to him about your own doubts and hesitations. Advance hypotheses rather than certainties.
- Allow him, as much as possible, to make his own decisions.
- If necessary, take your leave of him, "Excuse me, but I have something else to take care of", specifying the limits of your availability, and inviting him to do his part: "Come back and see me when you have taken this step".

To avoid

- Falling into the trap of giving him advice: "Why don't you try doing" His behaviour often triggers our "parental" reflexes.
- Making decisions for him, even if he asks us expressly to do so; rushing to his assistance every time he faces a difficulty.
- Criticizing his initiatives.
- Abandoning him to his fate "so he can learn to take care of himself".

- Allowing yourself to be his sole source of support.

6.8 The student who is infatuated with you

Certain students find it easy to become infatuated with persons of authority. They play games of seduction and have a tendency to eroticise any ambiguous relationship or verbal contact.

What to do?

- Say thank you. Welcome the interest the student expresses in you as being a manifestation of positive feelings toward you. Find a way to express your gratitude for this by saying, "Thank you for your interest in me", while completing your intervention with a firm "no".
- No! Express in clear, simple, and unequivocal fashion that your interest in the student is real but does not go beyond the context of work.
- Elsewhere! Help the student see how his peers can satisfy his need for affection and acceptance.

To avoid

- Rejecting the student who wishes to get closer to you.
- Taking the initiative in the game of seduction.
- Falling right into the trap and playing along in the budding game of seduction.
- Letting yourself be carried away by the feeling of self-worth derived from the seduction or attachment
- Abruptly interrupting the relationship without explanation.
- Refusing with ambivalence, like saying "n....yes!"
- Seeing the student outside CEGEP activities, giving your personal phone number or email address.
- Giving in to the student's insistence, "well, maybe just this once..."

6.9 The timid student

The timid student is hypersensitive and fears being criticized and ridiculed. He has a tendency to avoid all risky situations, that is, those where he is exposed to the gaze and judgment of others. He has low self-esteem, underestimates his capabilities, and underestimates his successes. He has difficulty expressing himself and avoids taking his rightful place in a group.

What to do?

- Be welcoming and open to his self-expression
- Respect his rhythm of speech.
- Encourage him so he does not avoid social situations.

- Encourage him to tackle dreaded situations gradually, approaching the problem one small step at a time.
- Remind him of his previous successes and progress.
- Provide him with sources of information on resources and socializing activities.

To avoid

- Speaking for him.
- Completing his sentences for him.
- Taking steps on his behalf.
- Excusing him from oral presentations.
- Entrusting him only with behind the scenes tasks or tasks below his capabilities.

6.10 The perfectionist student

The perfectionist student thinks he has succeeded only when he achieves a perfect score. He is extremely attentive to detail and hesitates a long time before making a decision. He is shattered when he makes a mistake.

What to do?

- Help him become aware of the drawbacks to perfectionism. Suggest that he make a list of benefits and drawbacks to his perfectionism.
- Help him dissociate performance from the satisfaction derived from an activity.
- Bring him to realize that an assignment does not have to be perfect to be acceptable.
- Help him develop other criteria rather than “all or nothing” to judge his actions.
- Demystify his errors.

To avoid

- Being drawn into his world by helping him become even more perfect.
- Giving him unrealistic deadlines to complete assignments.
- Using irony to treat his mania for perfection
- Placing value on the result rather than the effort, the process and the degree of satisfaction.

6.11 The suicidal student²

Some students can experience a suicidal crisis due to their personal predispositions, disruptions in their social environment or in their life. This crisis is generally the outcome of a suicidal process triggered by repeated bereavements, academic failures, unattained ideals, and multiple disappointments. During this process, the idea of suicide becomes more and more prominent until it becomes the ultimate solution. It is not death itself that is sought but an end to the suffering. Ambivalence is present throughout the process. This explains why the presence of a person, the act of listening and the possibility of alternate solutions and hope can keep the suicidal process in check. To find out if a young person is thinking of suicide, consult the grid “How to detect a depressive state or behaviour that is potentially suicidal in a student.” in Appendix 2.

Attempt in progress: Call 911 and security agents immediately.

If you suspect a student may have suicidal intentions.

What to do?

- As soon as possible, choose a time and place to talk with the student.
- Establish a frank, direct, and respectful contact with the student.
- Be attentive to a “no” that could mean “yes”.
- Tackle the situation by sharing your perceptions with him.
- Tackle the question of suicide directly by asking him if he is currently thinking of committing suicide or dying.

The student tells you he is thinking of suicide. In this case:

- Ask him when and how he intends to end his life.
- Clearly express to the student that he needs to consider other options immediately.
- Suggest that he contact psychological services, a member of the suicide prevention committee, or a member of the consultation services of your institution.
- Check the availability of the resource.
- Offer to accompany the student to the available resource, if necessary.
- If the student threatens to commit suicide within 48 hours and refuses to cooperate, you must inform a member of the suicide intervention team or the college psychologist as soon as possible. Someone will help you identify the best approach to use with the student.
- Keep close at hand a directory of external resources (crisis centre, suicide prevention centre, CLSC, hospital centres) in your region. Use these

² 1. This section contains excerpts from the brochure entitled *Le suicide jamais de la vie*, an information guide for faculty staff of Cégep de Sainte-Foy.

resources if the crisis occurs outside regular office hours. As long as the student is not being taken care of by a competent resource, stay with him.

- If you do not feel capable of making contact with the student you are worried about, we suggest you talk to the psychologist in your immediate environment or a person from the suicide prevention centre or CSLC to see if the student in question must be approached.

To avoid

- Keeping your doubts to yourself.
- Minimizing the person's feelings by saying, "You'll see, things will be better tomorrow."
- Conveying your value judgements. Growing impatient.
- Believing that tackling the subject can trigger the action.
- Undertaking your own follow-up with the suicidal person.
- Exceeding your limitations and being unable to deliver on your promises.

7

How to get a student to seek consultation

To encourage a student to seek consultation, choose an opportune time and place to discuss it and establish a respectful empathy with the student.

The student who verbalizes a difficulty

We can motivate him to seek a consultation based on:

- the life experience under discussion;
- what is bothering him or making him suffer;
- his goals and difficulties in achieving them.

The student who does not verbalize, in whom we see a problem

In the case of a student who does not verbalize any particular problem, but who manifests an obvious discomfort via certain behavioural indicator, such as:

- withdrawn attitude;
- demotivation, absenteeism, poor results;
- high anxiety level;
depressive mood;
- unfounded aggressiveness;
- incoherent speech.

In short, when we observe any major variation in behaviour, it is appropriate to:

- speak to the student about what we have observed;
- check to see if he is suffering because of the situation and wants help improving things.

If yes, direct him to the psychological services or other relevant resource person, whether internal or external.

In all cases, it is preferable to avoid formulations such as, "You have psychological problems, and you must undergo therapy". Also, it is preferable to use language such as, "You don't seem to be yourself (or are having difficulty reaching such and such a goal), it might prove helpful to meet the psychologist to understand what you are experiencing", "to take a step back", "to clarify, identify what is happening to you, what is bothering you", "to feel less alone". Tell him frankly that, in your opinion, his situation warrants consulting a psychologist.

In summary, begin with the student's reality, avoid general statements, judgments, labels, and speaking categorically.

Factors favouring an agreement to consult the psychology services

- The confidentiality of the service and the absence of any administrative link with the academic file.
- The functions of the person making the referral and the limitations of their competencies or availability for providing personal help: "This is not my specialty", "You need someone who can take the time to understand what is happening to you".
- The contact kept up by the person making the referral, getting news on their progress, reiterating support and encouraging the student to seek a consultation. This diminishes the chances that the referral will be perceived as a refusal to help or detachment from the situation.
- The opportunity for the student to express his reactions to the suggestion that he should seek a consultation at the time the suggestion is made.

If the student refuses to seek a consultation

- It often takes a certain amount of time (weeks, months) for the student to come to terms with the idea of consulting a resource-person.
- The student may decide to seek a consultation when a second person (parent, friend, or teacher) suggests it.
- While clearly encouraging him, do not insist if there is resistance. Simply reiterate your fears and recommendations. It is better for the student to take the initiative. If he is receptive, you can suggest he make an appointment with psychology services.
- If there is a risk of suicide or major dysfunctionality (delirium, loss of control), it may be necessary for the student to be accompanied to the psychologist's office. In the case of suicidal students, refer to section 6.11.

Availability of college psychological services for faculty staff members

In general, the professionals responsible for psychological help are available to faculty staff for:

- Discussing the need or validating the reason for a consultation by a student.
- Assessing the urgency of the need for help (identify if the student needs to be seen immediately, that day, in the upcoming week).
- Identifying the most relevant external resources for helping the student.
- Helping a person intervene with a student in difficulty who does not need or does not want to consult a resource-person.

Code of ethics of psychological services

The professional activity of psychologists is governed by a code of ethics, as regards confidentiality, (code of ethics, section 39) as well as the free and enlightened consent (code of ethics, sections 16, 17 and 18).

How to detect a state of depression or a potentially suicidal behaviour in a student

1. Have you noticed significant changes in the student's behaviour?

- Sleep Eating School attendance
- Studies Consumption of drugs or alcohol
- Time devoted to studies Weight loss or gain Other changes

2. Have you noticed significant changes in the student's affectivity (emotional stability)?

- Hyperactive, excited Withdrawn, depressive
- Mood swing Anxious, panicky

3. Is the student abusing drugs or alcohol?

4. What is the quality of the student's social relationships?

- Lack of close friends
Rarely participates in group activities
Spends little time with others
Non-supportive family ties

5. Have there been recent traumatic or stressful events in the student's life?

Death of a loved one
A change in relationships with those closest to him
(Unhappy love affair)
Changes in family relationships
Poor academic results
Serious illness (AIDS, cancer, diabetes)
Other events

6. Has the student alluded to suicide or spoken of his powerlessness in solving his problems?

7. Has the student attempted suicide before?

8. Has a close friend or relative of the student recently committed suicide?

9. Is the student practicing dangerous physical activities (especially recently)?

10. Has the student expressed a growing interest in death or life after death?

N.B. The presence of one of these signs does not mean that the student is suicidal. More often than not, it is the increase in the number of signs that can be revealing, or even a drastic modification of one single aspect. However, any doubt warrants further investigation.

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