

The Red Folder Initiative

A guide to support UWM faculty, staff, and other community members to recognize, respond effectively to, and refer to distressed students.



1. Recognize

Recognize the signs or indications that students may be in distress. Students may present with signs that are not listed.

ACADEMIC

- Sudden decline in quality of work and grades
- Frequently missed classes/assignments or use of office hours for personal support
- Conduct that interferes with classroom activities
- Multiple requests for extensions
- Doesn't respond to repeated requests for contact or meetings
- Academic work is disorganized or dominated by themes of hopelessness, isolation, rage, despair, violence or self-harm

PHYSICAL/BEHAVIORAL

- Marked changes in physical appearance such as poor grooming/hygiene or sudden changes in weight
- Strange, disoriented, or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality
- Unusual speech, such as rapid, garbled, rambling, tangential, disconnected or slurred speech
- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Observable signs of injury like facial bruising or cuts
- Intoxication, hangover, smelling of alcohol, evidence of drug misuse
- Behavior that is out of context or out of character, or manic

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Discloses personal distress like family problems, financial difficulties, assault, discrimination or legal difficulties
- Excessive tearfulness, panic reactions, irritability or unusual apathy; reactions seem disproportionate to the event
- Verbal abuse like taunting, badgering or intimidation
- Expression of concern about the student by peers
- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- Concerning interpersonal communication style (e.g., withdrawn or agitated, mutters under breath, slow response time to questions)
- Delusions and paranoia

SAFETY RISK

- Verbal, written or implied references to suicide, homicide, self-harm behavior; Implying or direct threat of harm to self or other
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Physical violence like shoving, grabbing, assaulting or use of a weapon
- Stalking or harassing
- Makes threats or disturbing comments in person, or via email, text or phone
- Signs of physical abuse
- Signs of self-injury
- Interpersonal violence
- Verbal abuse (e.g., taunting, badgering, intimidation)
- Unresponsive or altered level of consciousness

2. Respond

The following are tips on how to respond to signs of distress.

SHOW YOU CARE

- Remove distractions
- Be patient and listen for understanding
- Maintain eye contact
- Ask what they need
- Summarize what they say
- Offer help where you can
- Let them know you are there for them
- Listen carefully and acknowledge student's pain
- Stay safe: If there is an imminent danger to you, the student or someone else, call 911.
- Ask direct questions: Don't be afraid to directly ask the student if they are having thoughts of harming or killing themselves or others. By asking you are not instilling the thought.

SAY WHAT YOU SEE

- Be direct. Express your concerns directly and honestly
- Briefly acknowledge your observations and perceptions of their situation
- Stick to the facts
- Don't make assumptions
- Describe the changes you have noticed
- Ask if they are ok
- Listen!

HEAR THEM OUT

- Stay calm: Take a few deep breaths to calm yourself
- Listen! Listen carefully and acknowledge the student's pain
- Give your full attention: Be present and patient, taking the time needed to make sure you understand what is causing the distress and what they are asking for
- Be curious. Ask questions
- Affirm their feelings
- Let them know they are not alone

CONNECT WITH HELP

- Determine the need and appropriate resources available
- Disclose that you cannot guarantee complete confidentiality; you will need to appropriately share information student tells you
- Reaffirm your support and care
- Connect them to resources
- Follow up

CONVERSATION TIPS

"I've been worried about you. Is everything ok?"

"How can I help? It seems like you've had some challenges these past few weeks."

"I noticed you missed the last few classes and wanted to check in. Is everything ok?"

"You looked very tired the last few classes and have missed the last two assignments. Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"That sounds really challenging. I would like to hear more about how you've been feeling."

"It sounds like you are really overwhelmed. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It sounds like you've really been struggling and I'm worried about you. Have you thought about reaching out to the UW Mental Health Support line available 24/7 where you can call, text, or chat to connect with a crisis responder."

"Thank you for sharing your experience. I'm not an expert in this area, but I think Counseling Services could help. Would it be okay if we give them a call and ask about scheduling an appointment?"

3. Refer

Consider the situation and determine the appropriate next steps and appropriate available resources.

Does the student need immediate assistance?

YES.

- The student has a weapon and is threatening to use it,
- is threatening immediate serious self-harm or harm to others,
- or has engaged in a behavior that requires medical attention

WHAT TO DO:

If there is an imminent danger to the student, you, or others

- call UWM PD (414-229-9911) or 911.

I'M NOT SURE.

- Signs of distress are visible, but the severity is unclear.
- The interaction has left you feeling uneasy or concerned about the student and you're not sure how to proceed.

WHAT TO DO:

- Consult with [Counseling Services](#) (414-229-7429) on how best to support the student.
- Contact the UW Mental Health Support Line 24/7 (888-531-2142)
- Utilize the national crisis line (988)

NO.


- I'm not concerned for the student's immediate safety, but they are having significant academic and/or personal issues and could use support.

WHAT TO DO:

- See our list of campus resources below and help to connect the student with support on campus.
- Visit the Dean of Student's [Support U website](#) for additional referral and resource information.

Mandatory Reporting

In addition to referring a student to resources, any sexual misconduct, intimate partner abuse (including dating and domestic violence), stalking, protected-class discrimination or harassment, or related retaliation must be reported to the Title IX Office.

It is important to disclose your status as a mandated reporter and help to connect students to a confidential resource if that is what they prefer. Confidential resources are listed (symbol ).

For questions regarding these issues or the obligation to report, please contact The Title IX Office at 414-229-7012.

What's Next?

If you remain concerned about the student:




- Consult with SHAW Counseling Services regarding best strategies moving forward.
- Consult with others who know the student and/or should be aware of the situation. Follow department protocols.
- Circle back with the student after a referral to a support resource to check in.
- Contact the Dean of Student Office for guidance at (414) 229-4632 or dos@uwm.edu. Use the uwm.edu/reportit tool.
- Understand that due to privacy regulations, it may not always be possible for other campus resources to provide you with detailed information after a student referral.

Practice Self Care strategies when supporting students:


- Set good boundaries and refer the student to appropriate resources for support.
 - **Example statement:** *"I care about you and am here for you, but there are others on campus who would be better able to help you deal with the emotions that you are experiencing. I can help you get in touch with them and am always happy to support you in making these connections."*
- Consult with others if you feel uncomfortable or feel the situation has gone beyond your normal role. Trust yourself and set limits!
- Seek help when feeling stressed, anxious or down. You don't have to "go it alone." UWM's Employee Assistance Program offers confidential and free services. Find more information at: uwm.edu/hr/eap/

Campus Resources



COUNSELING SERVICES:

- **Student Health and Wellness Center Counseling:** (414) 229-7429 
- **UWM at Waukesha Counseling:** (262) 521-5480, wak-counseling@uwm.edu (This is a confidential email address that is only accessed by the Counseling Department) 
- **UWM at Washington Co. Counseling:** wsh-counseling@uwm.edu (This is a confidential email address that is only accessed by the Counseling Department) 

CRISIS SERVICES:

- **UW Mental Health Support Line 24/7** – call or text (888-531-2142) or chat using the support line portal 
- **Ascension Columbia-St. Mary's Emergency Services (24/7)** – 414-291-1200
- **Milwaukee County Crisis Line:** (414) 257-7222
- **Washington County Crisis Line:** (262) 365-6565
- **Waukesha County Crisis Line:**
 - Business Hours: (262) 548-7666
 - Non-Business Hours: (262) 547-3388

24/7 SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINES:

- **UW Mental Health Support Line 24/7** – call or text (888-531-2142) or chat using the [support line portal](#) 
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 988
- **Trevor Lifeline for LGBTQ Youth:** 1-866-488-7386
- **Veterans Crisis Line:** 1-800-273-8555 (press 1)
- **Crisis Text Line:** 741-741
- **Victim Survivor Support:** (414) 229-4582, victimadvocacy@uwm.edu 
- **Dean of Students:** (414) 229-4632, <https://uwm.edu/deanofstudents/>
- **SHAW Medical Services:** 414-229-7429, <https://uwm.edu/wellness/>