Faculty and staff are often in a position to identify students who are in difficulty. Recognizing signs of emotional distress and responding with interest and concern can be a critical factor in helping students resolve the problems that are interfering with their educational success. This also supports the concern that many faculty and staff have for the well-being of students and their role in linking students to campus resources such as Counselling.

**WHY A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLOR?**
A Professional Counsellor offers:
- A specific role (objectivity and confidentiality)
- Skills (counselling, testing and consultation)
- A focus (student-oriented problem-solving in a BCIT context)
- Student Success, Personal, Relationship, Career and Crisis/Critical Incident Counselling assistance
- Referrals information and assistance

**WHO IS A STUDENT IN DIFFICULTY?**
A student in difficulty is any student who encounters major obstacles to the successful completion of their program. Students typically experience post secondary education as a time of significant transition and adjustment. Stress arising from this period of change may be of an educational, social, financial, work, family, or institutional nature. At times this stress can become so severe that it poses a serious threat to educational progress. Many students have temporary setbacks or special needs which can be surmounted if they can access counselling resources which offer support and aid in the development of enhanced coping skills. Timely and effective assistance to address the needs of these students increases the probability that they will achieve their educational goals. Other students experience difficulties because they lack the interests and/or the intellectual, social, or emotional resources needed to cope with the demands of life at BCIT. These students are at considerable risk and while remediation to enable these students to cope successfully may not always be possible, it is important to provide assistance to help them address the issues, explore alternatives, and make appropriate decisions.

**IDENTIFYING AT RISK STUDENTS**
The indicators listed below are important when considering whether to refer a student. To prevent possible over-interpretation of a single or isolated behaviour, it is useful to consider everything you know about the student and to look for clusters of signs.

1. **Stated Need for Help**
   Students may communicate a need for help directly. Listen to the content of what is being said and how it is being said (tone of voice, expressions, and gestures).
   Having someone listen can result in the student feeling better.

2. **Marked Changes in Mood or Behaviour**
   Actions which are inconsistent with a student’s normal behaviour may indicate that they are experiencing psychological distress. Indicators include marked changes in behaviour, such as:
   - withdrawal from usual social interaction, including classroom participation
• withdrawal from academic work (missed classes, assignments, or exams)
• disruptive behaviour in class
• conflict with classmates, instructors, friends, and family
• repeated requests for special consideration, especially when this represents a change from previous functioning
• noticeable changes in energy level (hyperactivity or exhaustion)
• notable changes in personal hygiene and/or appearance that suggest neglect
• spells of unexplained crying, outbursts of anger, or unusual irritability
• difficulty concentrating, confusion, marked indecisiveness
• expressed feelings of helplessness or hopelessness

3. **Difficulties Communicating and/or Apparent Distortions of Reality**
Communication difficulties and apparent distortions of reality may be symptomatic of more severe psychological problems that require professional assessment and treatment. Repeated demonstration of the following behaviours are cause for concern and intervention:

• irrational conversation
• garbled and disjointed thoughts or speech
• auditory or visual hallucinations
• inability to distinguish fantasy from reality
• disorientation
• disturbing material in academic assignments
• bizarre, strange or paranoid behaviour (e.g., apparently unfounded accusations of persecution)

4. **Significant Changes in Personal or Cultural Relationships or Identity**
Problems often result when an individual experiences a traumatic change in a personal relationship. Break-ups, the illness or death of a family member or close friend, difficulties in marriage or family relationships, or changes in family circumstances can all result in increased stress and psychological difficulties.

Attending BCIT is also often a time of exploration and change with respect to personal, sexual or cultural identity. Although these transitions can be very positive, they may also be accompanied by stress and conflict.

5. **Learning Problems**
Many students find the workload demands of their program are much greater than they anticipated. While it is expected that all students will go through some adjustment period in this regard, those who demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between their performance and their potential may need assistance.

Difficulty in keeping up with course work, inadequate preparation for exams, incapacitating test anxiety, or problems associated with concentration suggest a referral to Counselling would be helpful.

6. **Student Retention Issues**
Research suggests that counselling is effective in combating student attrition. Students who are considering dropping out, contemplating a transfer to another educational institution, or worrying about possible failure may find counselling assistance beneficial in their decision-making process.
SITUATIONS REQUIRING IMMEDIATE REFERRAL

1. References to Suicide
If a student talks in a specific manner about harming themselves, immediate referral is necessary. Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to suicide (even ‘jokes’ or ‘hints’) should be taken very seriously. Any judgement about the seriousness or possible lethality of the suicidal thought or gesture should not be made without consultation with a mental health professional.

In the event of an actual suicide attempt immediately call 911 and BCIT Safety and Security. Follow up with consultation with Counselling to assist with subsequent reactions and concerns of other affected students.

2. Harm To Others
Behaviour that poses a threat to others or seriously disrupts the classroom must be immediately addressed. Harmful behaviours might include:

- verbal and non-verbal threats
- intimidating behaviour
- violent acts (to people or property)
- otherwise antisocial behaviour

Intervention varies with the severity of the offending behaviour. Minimally this would include outlining the unacceptable behaviour to the student, requesting that this behaviour stop, outlining the consequences to the student should they not comply with this request, and referring the student to an appropriate campus resource such as Counselling.

Physical violence causing bodily harm and specific threats should be reported to BCIT Safety and Security.

3. Disordered Eating
If a student shares concerns regarding disruptive eating patterns such as excessive dieting, uncontrolled binge eating, and induced vomiting after eating, it is important that professional treatment be accessed as soon as possible. Numerous factors are involved in the cause of disordered eating and effective treatment must address psychological, social, as well as biological aspects of this problem.

4. Drug and Alcohol Abuse
If a student appears to be inebriated (outside of social situations) or you suspect drug use, it is important to attempt to refer the student for Counselling — substance abuse is almost always indicative of psychological problems.

In the case of an apparent drug overdose or severe drug reaction, call 911 and Safety and Security.

WHEN ELSE SHOULD YOU REFER?
A referral is usually indicated in the following situations:

- A student presents a problem or asks for assistance outside your range of knowledge
- You feel that unresolvable personality differences will interfere with your ability to help
- A student is reluctant to discuss a problem with you
- You do not believe your efforts to assist the student have been effective
HOW TO APPROACH A STUDENT WHO APPEARS TO BE IN DIFFICULTY

If you decide to approach a student you’re concerned about, or if a student reaches out to you for help with personal problems, the following suggestions might make the opportunity more comfortable for you and more helpful for the student:

LISTEN to the student in private when both of you have the time. Give the student your patient, undivided attention, and let them talk with minimum interruption. Often just a few minutes of effective listening is enough to help the student feel cared about and more confident about what to do.

ACKNOWLEDGE the student’s thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, compassionate way. Let the student know you understand what they are trying to communicate by reflecting back the essence of what they’ve said. (“It sounds like you’re not used to such a big campus and you’re feeling left out of things.”)

EXPRESS CONCERN without making generalizations or assumptions about the student. Be specific about the behaviour which gives you cause for concern. For example, “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and I’m concerned,” rather than “Where have you been lately? You should be more concerned about your grades.”

OFFER HOPE. Reassure the student that things can get better. Help them realize they have options and resources, and that things will not always seem hopeless. Your purpose should be to provide enough hope to enable the student to consult a professional or other appropriate person and not to solve the student’s problems.

MAKING A REFERRAL

In making a referral it is important to point out that help is available and seeking such help is a sign of strength and courage rather than a sign of weakness or failure.

• Be direct in letting the student know that you believe it is important to access professional assistance in this situation.
• Inform the student that Counselling is confidential. Disclosures and records are treated confidentially and information is released only with the written permission of the student, within the limits of the law.
• Ensure the student has the contact name, number, and location of the Counsellor and Counselling and Student Development.
• If the student is receptive, suggest they make a Counselling appointment.
• Except in emergencies, leave the option open for the student to accept or refuse assistance. If the student takes a defensive posture, don’t force the issue and don’t attempt to deceive or trick the student into going.
• If you can, prepare the student for what they might expect if they follow your suggestion. Tell them what you know about the Counsellor or Counselling and Student Development.

IF A STUDENT IS RELUCTANT TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

• Seeking Counselling is a personal choice.
• Restate your concerns and recommendations simply and clearly.
• Make it clear that your suggestion to seek additional resources represents your best judgement based on your observations of the student’s behaviour.
• Acknowledge, validate and discuss student’s real fears and concerns about seeking help.
• Point out that a situation does not need to reach crisis proportions in order to benefit from assistance. Emphasize that, although some people may feel that seeking help is an admission of weakness or failure, in fact, it takes considerable courage and integrity to reach out.
• Remind them that Counselling is professional, confidential and free of charge.
• In some cases, a student may be motivated enough to seek help, but not motivated enough to expend the effort or risk to take a look at his/her concern in depth. It is important at these times to not allow yourself to be pushed beyond your limits in terms of skills and time available to assist.
• Finally, give the student an opportunity to consider other alternatives by suggesting that they might need some time to think it over. If the student emphatically says “no,” then respect that decision, and leave the situation open for possible reconsideration at a later time.

HEALTHY LIMITS
When assisting students in difficulty, it is important not to extend yourself beyond your comfort level in terms of involvement, skills, and time commitment. Healthy limits enable you to help students in an effective and personally satisfying manner. Maintain clear and consistent boundaries and expectations. Dealing with students in distress can be a stressful and taxing experience. Seek out the support of your colleagues, supervisor, the EFAP program and other resources as part of taking care of yourself.

FOLLOW-UP
Arrange a time to meet with the student again to solidify their resolve to obtain appropriate help and to demonstrate your commitment to assist them in this process. Offer to check with the student later to see that the referral appointment was kept and to hear how it went. Provide support while the student takes further appropriate action or pursues another referral if needed.

CONSULTATION
Counsellors are available to hear any concerns you may have about a student. A brief consultation can help you to sort out the relevant issues, explore alternative approaches, and identify other resources. Ask for a consultation:
• If you are concerned about a student and unsure whether or not to intervene
• If you are uncertain about how to respond to a student’s request for help
• If a student resists your efforts to assist/refer and you are uncomfortable with situation
If your consultation questions are urgent, inform the receptionist that you are dealing with a crisis that requires immediate assistance.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS DURING WEEKDAY OFFICE HOURS
Students requiring immediate help can be seen the same day during weekday office hours at:

Counselling & Student Development 604-432-8608, SE16-127

Time is set aside each day to see students on a quick response basis. For urgent situations involving students unable to secure help on their own—call first, then accompany the student to Counselling and Student Development.
AFTER HOURS EMERGENCIES

For urgent situations involving students unable to secure help on their own:

- If a student is acting in a manner which seems likely to endanger themselves or others and is unwilling to seek help on their own, call BCIT Safety and Security and/or 911.
- Accompany the student to the nearest Hospital Emergency Department. (Call 911 for assistance)

When BCIT Counselling and Student Development is closed, you can also call any of the following crisis lines. Lines are open seven days a week during the times listed. All of the crisis and information lines will take calls from anyone in the Lower Mainland. You do not have to call the number in your area to receive help.

**General Crisis Counselling and Suicide Prevention**
Vancouver: 604-872-3311 (24 hours/day)
Surrey: 604-951-8855 (24 hours/day)
SHARE: 604-540-2221 (24 hours/day)
Richmond: 604-279 7070 (0900 to midnight)

**Sexual Assault Crisis Counselling**
WAVAW: 604-255-6344 (24 hours/day)
(Women Against Violence Against Women)

**Sexual Assault Information Line**
604-822-9090 (recorded information 24 hrs/day)

**Sexual Assault Services**
Emergency Department, Vancouver General Hospital
604-875-4995 (24 hours/day)

**Family Violence/Spouse Abuse (Transition Houses)**
Vancouver: 604-872-7774 (24 hours/day)
Burnaby: 604-298-3454 (24 hours/day)
Richmond: 604-270-4911 (24 hours/day)
North Vancouver: 604-987-3374 (24 hours/day)
ELEVEN STEPS TO MAKING AN APPROPRIATE REFERRAL

1. **Listen carefully** to the student as they describe their situation.

2. **Ask questions** to clarify that you understand their specific needs.

3. If you’re not sure that a particular resource or referral would be appropriate (eg. Counselling), **ASK**.

4. **Research** available materials for Counselling. (web, brochures, etc.)

5. If you can’t find exactly what you’re looking for, **try contacting a similar resource** and asking if they can refer you to other resources.

6. **Ask your colleagues or supervisor for help** and ideas as needed.

7. Offer your best suggestions to the student, and **encourage them to choose** which options they wish to pursue.

8. If the student appears **hesitant, or reluctant** to access Counselling, you can:
   - Offer to **contact Counselling yourself** while the student is still in your office.
   - Offer to **sit with the student** while they place the initial contact call themselves.
   - Offer to **accompany the student** to the appointment, if appropriate, and if you feel comfortable doing so.

9. Give the student **printed information** on Counselling to take with them. If you don’t have printed material, write down the pertinent information for the student to take with them.

10. With the student’s permission, you might also want to contact the Counsellor to provide some **background information**.

11. Offer to **follow-up** with the student to ensure the referrals were effective, but don’t insist on knowing what the student has done.
COUNSELLING TEAM
Counsellors are professionally trained and have extensive experience working with adults in post-secondary settings. They are committed to providing the highest levels of service consistent with the College of Psychologists and the B.C. Colleges Institutes Counsellors Association and Canadian Counselling Association accepted ethical standards.

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CONFIDENTIALITY
All information gathered in Counselling sessions is held in strict confidence. No information is released to Institute administrators, instructors, outside agencies, or anyone else unless authorized by the student or required by law.

CONTACT COUNSELLING AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT
In person: SE16-127, Burnaby Campus
By phone: 604-432-8608
By fax: 604-431-7261
Web site: www.counselling.bcit.ca
Hours: Monday – Friday 0830-1630 (Sept–May)
0830-1600 (June–Aug)

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