



SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: RESPONSE GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: RESPONSE GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES

This guide is designed to help employees **recognize signs of students in distress**¹, **respond with care**, and **refer students to the appropriate supports**. While you're not expected to act as a counsellor or solve their problems, you can **offer a supportive presence and help connect students with the right resources**.

You may experience a strong internal reaction when you notice a student in distress – this is a normal response. If there is no immediate risk to safety, it's okay to take a moment and respond when you feel ready. **Offer support to the best of your ability and refer to the Support Navigation Tool** (page 4) for further assistance.

ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

Be conversational and respectful of a student's privacy. Share information only when it is necessary to ensure the safety of the student or those around them².

- **Be clear and direct in your observations.**

"I've noticed you've been absent the last three classes, and I'm concerned. How are things going for you?"

- **Respond with empathy and curiosity.**

"Thanks for sharing. It sounds like you're going through a difficult time. What would be helpful?"

- **Listen without judgement and encourage healthy coping.**

"So, you are feeling overwhelmed with school, finances and family; and you're asking for a one-week extension on your next assignment. What else do you think might support you in getting back on track?"

- **Be clear about the limits of your role.**

"I can give you an extension, but it sounds like you may need more support. How about I connect you with a student service [i.e. Early Assist, Counselling]?"

- **Set boundaries when needed.**

"I need some time to think about this, let's revisit the conversation tomorrow."

¹ Distress is defined as a **noticeable change in a student's thoughts, feelings, or behaviours** that arises when **stressors or demands exceed their ability to cope** and interferes with their ability to manage daily activities. **Students may face challenges that may lead to distress** such as financial or housing pressures; family caregiving commitments; experiences of harassment or discrimination; loneliness, isolation, and relationship conflict; fear of failure to meet academic or career goals; and barriers to education related to health or disability status; or increased severity of reported mental health concerns.

USE EARLY ASSIST (NON-EMERGENCY SERVICE)

Early Assist is a confidential service that helps connect students facing personal or academic challenges with the appropriate resources. When a [referral form](#) is submitted, a case manager follows up with the student to offer tailored support. Students can also self-refer.

Reminder: Early Assist is not an emergency service. For an emergency response, call 9-1-1 and contact Campus Security at 604-451-6856.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS AND EQUITY-DESERVING STUDENTS

For some Indigenous students, wellbeing is connected to cultural identity and community. With the student's consent, contact [Indigenous Initiatives](#) at 604-432-8474 and/or submit an [Early Assist referral form](#). For immediate assistance, Indigenous students can call the 24/7 [KUU-US \[BC Wide Indigenous\] Crisis and Support Line](#) at 1-800-588-8717.

When responding to a mental health crisis, consider the **student's safety, dignity, and consent**. Some students may be wary of engaging with police or healthcare systems due to the ongoing impacts of historical and systemic harms.

Faculty and staff are encouraged to complete training in [Indigenous Awareness](#), [Unconscious Bias](#), [Anti-Racism](#), and [Relearning Gender](#) to strengthen their capacity for culturally safe and equitable support.

SUPPORT NAVIGATION TOOL

The flowchart in the next page provides guidance on responding to students in distress, whether the matter involves a general concern, an urgent situation, or an emergency. Begin by asking yourself, **"does the student pose an immediate risk of harm to themselves or others?"**

- If yes, see the **Emergency pathway**.
- If no, continue to the **Concern or Urgent pathways**.

To better understand the student's experience, refer to the **Elements of an Effective Response** (page 2) for how to ask thoughtful questions and listen actively. For more details on recognizing, responding, referring, and reconnecting, explore the [4R Framework](#) on the Early Assist website.

² Privacy/confidentiality may not always be guaranteed in emergencies, or in situations involving violence toward a minor or workplace violence. In these cases, employees may be obligated to report concerns to BCIT or external authorities. If you are unsure if such an obligation exists in a particular situation, contact your manager/supervisor.

DOES THE STUDENT POSE AN IMMEDIATE RISK OF HARM TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS?



CONCERN

NO

URGENT

YES

EMERGENCY

RECOGNIZE

- Increased absences and/or sudden decline in academic performance
- Intense emotional reactions [e.g. intense anger, sobbing, persistent worry]
- More withdrawal or enthusiasm than usual
- Concerning changes in energy level, hygiene, or appearance

I've noticed that you missed a few assignments lately, which is not like you. How are things going for you?

I noticed you seem distracted and upset lately. How are you doing?

REFER

If a student shares personal, relationship, or academic concerns that do not involve risk to self or others, refer the student to the appropriate supports and encourage them to connect directly. Options include:

- Relevant student services such as [Counselling](#), [Accessibility Services](#) or [Financial Aid and Awards](#) (see the departments and services [summary](#)).
- The [Student Services website](#) which helps students self-identify the right support.

- Their Program/Department Head for academic-related concerns.
- [Here2Talk](#) (24/7 free, immediate, confidential counselling and community referral service via online chat, mobile app, or phone at 1-877-857-3397).

If the support you've provided is not working, multiple services are needed, or the appropriate service is unclear, submit an [Early Assist referral form](#). Inform the student that the referral has been submitted and a Case Manager will contact them.

RECONNECT

If possible, follow up with the student after some time has passed to determine if they have received sufficient support:

I wanted to check in after our last conversation. Did you get a chance to make an appointment with counselling services?

If you do not hear back, you can send a closing email to close the loop for yourself [where appropriate]:

Since I have not heard back, I hope that means the resources we discussed were helpful. I'll step back from reaching out for now, but please don't hesitate to get in touch if any questions come up in the future.

RESPOND

- Expressions of suicidal thoughts [without an imminent plan or intent]
- Disclosure of [sexualized violence](#) or another traumatic event [e.g. assault, abuse]
- Disorganized or incoherent thoughts, writing, or speech
- Frequent impact from substance use

I'm concerned about you and want to make sure you get the help you need. Would it be okay if I connected you with a counsellor or crisis line?

I want to make sure you are safe. Would it help to explore some support options together?

If you believe the student is having difficulty coping and does not pose imminent risk of threat or harm, offer to call the resource together with the student to help them connect. Options include:

- **Counselling and Student Development:** 604-432-8608 during business hours.
- **National Suicide Crisis Helpline:** 9-8-8 [call or text 24/7] for immediate support if a student expresses thoughts of suicide.
- **BCIT Security:** 604-451-6856

if a safety and security plan is needed.

- **BC Mental Health and Crisis Response Line:** 310-6789 [no area code needed] for 24/7 consultation and appropriate referrals.
- **KUU-US [24/7 BC Wide Indigenous] Crisis and Support Line:** 1-800-588-8717 for Indigenous students.

After supporting the student in the moment, submit an [Early Assist referral form](#) for follow-up support.

- Direct or indirect reference to suicide with a plan
- Violent, destructive or threatening behaviour to self or others
- Trouble remaining conscious and medical distress
- Significant impact from substance use

Has all that pain you're going through made you think about hurting yourself or others?

That sounds like a lot for one person to take. Are you planning to end your life?

If a student shows any of the aforementioned emergency behaviours, including expressing plans of suicide or posing immediate risk of harm to self or others:

- Call 9-1-1 right away
- If on campus, also contact BCIT Security at 604-451-6856 to

help direct emergency services when they arrive.

When it is safe to do so, guide the student to a quiet space and **stay with them until help arrives**.

After supporting the student in the moment, submit an [Early Assist referral form](#) for follow-up support.

If a student mentions suicide with a plan:

I hear you mentioning suicide and a plan, and I want to ensure you are safe. We need extra help now, so let's call emergency services together.

WHAT IF A STUDENT SAYS “NO” TO A REFERRAL

Sometimes a student may not want to seek support or refuse help. Consider safety first.

- If there is immediate risk of harm to self or others, ensure your own safety. Call 9-1-1 and notify BCIT Security at 604-451-6856:

“As a BCIT employee, I am obligated to act if I believe a student’s safety is at risk. I’ll be calling 911 and notifying BCIT Security, who can help guide the next steps to keep you safe.”

- If there is no immediate risk of harm, respect the student’s right to accept or decline support. Maintain needed boundaries and expectations:

“I understand you’re not seeking support right now, but I do need to remind you that maintaining [classroom/conduct] expectations is essential for a respectful and productive learning environment.”

TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN WELLBEING

Supporting students who are experiencing distress can be meaningful, difficult, and/or draining.

After responding to another person in crisis:

- Seek support from trusted colleagues or your manager (while respecting privacy and confidentiality – this is about debriefing your experience).
- Take responsibility for setting your own limits and clearly communicating them to others.
- Ask yourself: Am I feeling overwhelmed, and would it be helpful to get additional support? Employees can access free, confidential 24/7 counselling through Homewood Health at 1-800-663-1142.

REMEMBER,
YOU ARE NOT
ALONE IN THIS.

A list of key resources can be found in this [services summary](#).

If you feel overwhelmed or are unsure how to help a student in the moment, [call a crisis line for guidance](#).

For immediate support for thoughts of suicide, [call or text 9-8-8](#) (24/7 National Suicide Crisis Helpline).

For less urgent phone support, [call the BC Mental Health and Crisis Response Line 310-6789](#).



