



Supporting Students' Mental Health, a Two-Part Series

Part II: Talking with Students About Mental Health in Class

Part I offered practices we can employ to support students' mental well-being and thus create an environment that assists students' learning. Students who are suffering from mental health distress, may experience that stress impacting their capacity to engage in their courses. Chronic stress has long-lasting neurological impacts as it affects information processing, attention, memory, decision-making, motivation, and impulse control—all of which are necessary to succeed in college (Marin et al., 2011). While our awareness and recognition of signs of mental health issues provide a solid foundation, we need to take additional steps to support our students' wellbeing. Part 2 offers sample language you may find helpful when following up with students and/or suggesting on campus resources.

You are the first line of defense. In your role as faculty, you are in contact with your students on a regular basis and play a central role in noticing students who might be in distress. While this may feel daunting, simply checking in with a student can make a difference. For example, *"What can I do in my role as your instructor to help you work with this challenge?"* or *"I've noticed that the quality of your work has fallen off. I'm concerned about you and would like to support you. How can I do so?"* or *"Would you be willing to talk with someone in the counseling center?"* When we convey to students that we notice that we care about them, we connect, and we let them know that they can reach out to us. We make a human and personal connection and help link the students to resources. We do not serve as counselors or therapists.



Indicators of mental distress may include students missing classes, late work, a change in appearance or hygiene, or a participatory student becoming withdrawn. If you opt to use the low stakes journaling activities that we described in Part 1 of the series, students may write about feeling overwhelmed, feeling as though they do not belong, or lacking a support system. When I used to conduct child sexual abuse prevention training, I would tell my participants to trust themselves, and if they saw something they needed to say something. The moment you wonder whether you should speak up is the moment you should speak up—something has raised an alarm for you. Convey your observation and concern to the students and inform them of the pertinent on-campus resources, such as Counseling Center or Learning Support Services (LSS). In your role as faculty, you aim to support the students to see how you can help, whether directly or by referring them to other resources (Eng, 2022).

Sample phrasing: If you noticed that a student was struggling with time management skills you might say/write, *"From your journal entry it seems that you may be struggling with time management. This can be challenging for all of us, and academic coaching can be helpful. LSS offers academic coaching to all students at no cost and I'm happy to help you connect with that office. Emily is a wonderful colleague; she will listen carefully to your experience."*



If a student has missed several classes or assignments, you might say/write, *"I noticed that you haven't been in class/have missed several assignments and I wanted to check in with you. Your wellbeing is important to me so what would you find helpful as the first step?"*

Collaborating with students to find solutions to their academic challenges allows them to problem solve, feel heard, and have agency over their decision-making.

From their perspective you become an ally in their learning process.

If a student's statement or reaction causes you concern, check in with them, either by email, or by talking with them after class. You might write/say, *"From your statement it sounds like you have a lot going on right now. I'm concerned for you. It isn't always easy to ask for help when we're struggling, but if we were physically sick, we would go to the doctor. Our mental health needs the same care, and the Counseling Center is a great resource. It is there for all students, and it might be worth a try. It is entirely confidential and may help you."*

This language helps address the stigma associated with mental health to encourage students to utilize the appropriate resources (Talibi et al, 2016).

Survey responses indicated that students did not expect faculty to go beyond their professional role – only that they give more attention to the social dimensions of learning that are within their role (Baik et al, 2019). For example:

- Set clear and explicit expectations around coursework and deadlines.
- Learn about your students and their diverse circumstances—are they supporting a family, do they have jobs, are they on-campus or commuting?
- Consider interactive assignments and purposeful group work to foster relationships among the students in your courses.
- Share one thing that has helped support students' mental health in your courses with a colleague.

What do you need? We invite you to share what you think you might need to better support students' well-being in your courses (send [email](#)). We are in this together. When we think about how to support students' mental health through our instructional practices we may be stepping into unfamiliar territory. Talking with colleagues and sharing our wisdom and experience can help us gain confidence to do so.

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References:

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