Discovering Your Students: Strategies for Managing Distressing, Disruptive & Unexpected Classroom Behavior

Sarah Mebane, Ph.D - smebane@aurora.edu
Cathi Hendricks, LCSW - chendric@aurora.edu
Counseling Center
Expectations

• What brought you here today?
• What do you hope to gain from today’s session?
Collective Wisdom

• What types of behaviors come to mind as particularly distressing or disruptive?

• What is your best strategy for managing distressing, disruptive, or unexpected classroom behavior?
Outline of Today’s Session

- Prevention
- Recognition
- Intervention
- Reflection
Prevention Strategies

● Setting the tone at the first class
● Provide information about your expectations in writing (syllabus) and verbally
● Stay current on AU’s policies regarding student & faculty conduct
● Allow students to write and talk about their expectations for you, themselves, and the class
● Allow an opportunity for students make connections with other students (Icebreaker)
  ○ Scavenger Hunt
Prevention Strategie: Self Awareness

- Setting the tone when you work with students
  - In a first meeting/interaction, what tone do you set?
  - How open are you to having difficult conversations with students about mental health? How do you communicate that openness?

- What do you think?
  - Don’t assume every student knows how to do something.
  - Let them share what they know or unsure about.
  - Be willing to listen
  - Remind yourself that behaviors that seem inappropriate or even frustrating that there might be a mental health or neurological issue
Awareness of Cultural Differences

• Race, ethnicity, and cultural background affect the way that emotional distress is expressed.
• Underrepresented groups face barriers to seeking help: denial, fear of being labeled negatively, lack of information about useful resources.
• Individuals vary in their responses to offers of help and to counseling as a possible solution.
Awareness of Cultural Differences

• Important to be sensitive to these differences as you attempt to help.
• Seek to be aware of your own assumptions and biases.
• Avoid generalizing based on appearance and behavior.
• Be aware of the language you use to communicate concern and make suggestions for help.
Awareness of Cultural Differences

- Discussion of mental health issues can be uncomfortable.
- Individual reactions are influenced by personal experience.
- Seek to be sensitive to individual differences.
- There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to helping students in distress.
Recognition Overview

● Common mental health issues among college students
  ○ Anxiety
  ○ Depression
  ○ Suicidal Ideation

● Spotlight on Autism
The Anxious Student

Facts about Anxiety

• Anxiety can be generalized across a range of situations, or it may be situation-specific (e.g., test anxiety, social anxiety, public speaking anxiety).
• Anxiety elicits a flight, fight or freeze response.
The Anxious Student

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- agitation
- panic
- avoidance
- irrational fears
- fear of losing control
- ruminations
- excessive worry
- sleep or eating problems
Anxiety in Classroom

• The student appears to be distracted
• Seems to have a “deer in headlights” expression
• Fidgets in their chair
• Most likely avoids participating in class
• May display perfectionistic characteristics (hard on themselves, rigid)
• Have difficulty letting things go (e.g. missing 2 points on a paper)
The Depressed Student

Facts about Depression:

- Depression is a common mental health problem that varies in severity and duration.
- In its less serious form, depression is a temporary reaction to loss, stress, or life challenges. It can be alleviated through the passage of time and/or the healing effects of social support, daily routines, and simple coping strategies like distraction and exercise.
- Severe or chronic depression usually requires professional help.
The Depressed Student

Symptoms of depression include:

- Feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness
- A deep sense of sadness
- Inability to experience pleasure
- Irregular eating and sleeping
The Depressed Student

Symptoms continued:
- Difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision-making
- Fatigue and social withdrawal
- Sometimes: irritation, anxiety, and anger
- In its most serious form, depression can be accompanied by self-destructive thoughts and intentions as a way to escape from the emotional pain.
Depression in Classroom

- Significant change in behavior, attitude, appearance
- Can appear withdrawn, disengaged, fatigued, ambivalent, sad
- “Slowing down” - arriving late, talking slowly
- Assignments - turned in late or not at all
- Student may disclose depression in an assignment, email, or conversation with you
- Socially isolated - resistant to group work
Suicide

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.
- Suicidal thoughts are often associated with mood or anxiety disorders, such as depression, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The suicidal person often discloses their feelings to others and they may leave clues about their despair.
- Different levels of suicidality.
Common Emotional Characteristics of the Suicidal Student

• Suicidal thoughts
• Pessimistic view of the future
• Intense feelings of hopelessness, especially when combined with anxiety
• Feelings of alienation and isolation
• Death viewed as an escape from problems
• Personal history of depression or psychosis
• Personal or family history of suicide attempts
• Substance abuse
• History of self-mutilation
Suicidal Student

- The student who discloses to others that he or she is suicidal may be ambivalent and reaching out for help.
- Students who are at high risk for suicide:
  - Have a well thought-out plan
  - Have means (gun, rope, knife, drugs/alcohol, etc.)
  - No sense of belonging
  - Sense of burden on others
  - Significant sleeping issues
  - Have little to no fear of pain or death
Suicidal Student in the Classroom

• Similar appearance as depression, i.e. withdrawn, disengaged, sad, ambivalent
• May hear them talk as if there is “no purpose,” “no one cares,” “I don’t want to bother anyone”
• Very apathetic
• Talk as if they are saying “goodbye” for good
Responding to Emotional Distress: General Guidelines

- Talk to the student in private.
- Listen carefully and validate the student's feelings and experiences.
- Be supportive and express your concern about the situation.
- Ask the student if he/she has thoughts of suicide, as needed.
- Be willing to consider or offer accommodations (e.g., extension on a paper or exam), if appropriate, as a way to alleviate distress.
- Consult - Fill out BIT report.
Autism

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are
- Characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.
The Student with Autism

- Misreading social cues, facial expressions, and body language
- Social interactions and group work are stressful
- Stress relieving activities may make others uncomfortable (e.g. flapping hands, rocking, humming, sighing)
- Intelligence and large vocabulary may hide communication challenges
- Sensory perceptions can interfere with learning (e.g. flickering lights, loud noises)
- Multi-tasking is extremely difficult
- Nebulous sense of time or overly focused with time
- Difficulty with changes and transition
- Difficulty with self-advocating
Autism in the Classroom

- Student may appear inattentive or bored
- May see ritualistic repetitive behaviors (e.g., body rocking when stressed)
- Literal interpretations of words
- Trouble staying on topic and maintaining conversation
- Knowledgeable in subject areas of interest
- May display the opposite emotion when stressed (e.g., smiling when being corrected)
- Poor awareness of body space
- Difficulty manipulating small objects
- Organizational skills lacking
- Focused on one task at a time
- Difficulty working in groups
Questions?
Intervention Overview

● How to respond to students in distress
  ● Listening and Responding Skills
  ● The Art of Making a Referral
● Small Group Activity
Listening & Responding Skills

• One of your best tools for helping students in distress is your ability to use your active listening and responding skills.
• Think about someone younger that you care about – How might you want someone to talk with them if they were having a problem?
Active Listening Refresher

- Conditions for listening
  - Opening minded
  - Ready to listen
  - Environment & location (private, comfortable & quiet)
Active Listening Continued

- Non-verbal skills
  - Eye contact
  - Facework
  - Body posture
  - Proximity to speaker
  - Verbal following
  - Use of silence

- Types of Questions
  - Open vs Closed

- Reflective Listening
  - Restating
  - Paraphrasing
  - Reflection of feelings
  - Summarization
The Art of Making A Referral

• Express concern for the student in a nonjudgmental way
• Point out what you are seeing or hearing
• Raise the issue of counseling, by explaining who we are, where we are, what we do, and what to expect
• Mention that services are free and confidential
• Normalize counseling by suggesting that you have referred other students
• Suggest that sometimes life’s problems get much bigger than we can manage on our own
Art of Referral: Autism

- Referral process is similar as stated above
- Be more directive rather than suggestive
- ASD students need others to be specific, i.e., “I think that you should talk to Cathi Hendricks about ___. She can provide support for these struggles. I am going to email her to contact you. Please make sure that you check your email and respond to her.”
Counseling Services
1400 Southlawn Pl.

★ Sarah Mebane
  844-5220
  smebane@aurora.edu

★ David Reetz
  844-5416
  dreetz@aurora.edu

★ Cathi Hendricks
  844-5406
  chendric@aurora.edu

★ Courtney Kibble
  844-5118
  cmurray@aurora.edu
Scenarios

- Small group activity
- Groups will be given different scenarios
- In your small group, discuss the following questions:
  - What are your initial reactions to the scenario?
  - How would you respond in this situation?
    - If you speak with the student, what might you say?
    - Who would you want to consult with?
    - Do you need to document your interventions?
    - Is there anyone you would want to inform?
  - What are some possible pitfalls?
    - What would be your "plan B" if your initial course of action wasn't effective?
Reflection

• After a distressing situation, take time to reflect
  – What went well?
  – What could you have done differently?
• Share with your colleagues – learn from each other
A note on Anger

- Anger is a normal emotion - everyone gets angry at one point or another
  - “Angry students” have problems with controlling their impulses; there is usually a persistent pattern.
  - Can take the form of verbal assaults, physical assault, or written forms communication.
  - It is very difficult to predict aggression and violence; although most students who lose their temper are not violent.
Anger in the Classroom

● Students can appear
  ○ Thin-skinned; overly sensitive
  ○ Quick to feel insulted
  ○ Convinced that what others have done is horrible, terrible, wrong
Anger: What to do

- In a calm voice, explain to the student that the behavior is unacceptable and the meeting will end if the student is not able to calm down.
- Use a time-out strategy if the student does not settle down and remains aggressive (i.e., ask the student to reschedule the meeting once he/she has calmed down).
- If the student has a pattern of losing his/her temper, and is not threatening or violent, you can consult with professionals at the Counseling Center via the Warmline.
- If the student makes a direct threat, is violent, or is physically aggressive toward you, contact the police immediately.
Anger: What to avoid

- Staying in a situation in which you feel unsafe.
- Meeting alone with the student.
- Positioning yourself where you have no way out.
- Engaging in a screaming match or behaving in other ways that escalate anxiety and aggression.
- Ignoring signs that the student’s anger is escalating.
- Ignoring your instincts.
Wrap-up

• What we talked about:
  – Prevention
  – Recognition
  – Intervention
  – Reflection
• Final questions?
• Final comments?

THANK YOU!