

Addressing Student Mental Health Concerns in Online Courses

Online courses provide a valuable opportunity for faculty to connect with students and help support their mental and emotional well-being. This document provides suggestions for faculty to consider when designing and teaching their online courses along with recommendations for ways to identify students who may be in distress and respond to them effectively. MSU instructors are certainly not expected to function as counselors, but they may find themselves in a situation in which they are uniquely positioned to provide empathy, support and guidance to a student in distress.

WHILE PLANNING THE COURSE

* In designing the course, consider building in opportunities for students to share their experiences with the pandemic and other current issues as an aspect of class discussions, assignments, and group work.¹

* Consider adding language to your course syllabus and other course spaces that communicates the following messages to students:



Faculty members, while not counselors, are appropriate contact people for students who are experiencing mental health or other difficulties. In short: **“I’m here, I care, and it’s okay to reach out to me.”**



Recognize students may be facing significant health, financial, and other stresses outside the classroom, and reaffirm that your priority is to work with them to ensure they can successfully participate in and complete the course. While maintaining appropriate academic rigor, offer flexibility in ways students can successfully fulfill class requirements.



Remind students there are many campus resources they can reach out to for help, particularly MSU’s Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS), which can now be accessed remotely.



SUGGESTED SYLLABUS LANGUAGE:

Almost all of us are struggling with a unique set of challenges these days, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic fallout, ongoing efforts for social justice, and other experiences. While I am not a trained mental health professional, I am someone you can reach out to if you're struggling, whether or not your concerns pertain directly to this course. Our conversations will be confidential, though please remember that all faculty at MSU are mandatory reporters if issues of violence, sexual harm, or harassment are disclosed*. I'm a good listener, and I can help connect you to campus and other resources that are here to help you. As your course instructor, I am committed to helping you successfully complete this course, but it's even more important to me that you experience our virtual classroom as a space that is open, inclusive, and supportive.

**Additional information about faculty as mandatory reporters, including syllabus language, [here](#).*

WHILE TEACHING THE COURSE



Find moments throughout the semester to “check in” with students and reaffirm the above messages from your syllabus.



If you're comfortable doing so, consider disclosing some of the unique challenges you are facing during these difficult times. Faculty can serve as role models for normalizing these experiences, provide “permission” for students to share them in class, and model healthy ways of coping.¹



To the extent feasible given the size of the class and other factors, try to keep an eye out for students who may be exhibiting signs of crisis or severe mental distress (see below). Try to be extra aware of students who may be at higher risk due to their racial and gender identities, sexual/attractional orientation, socioeconomic challenges, and other factors.



IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WHO MAY BE IN DISTRESS

Patterns of student behavior that may indicate a mental health concern include atypical behaviors, unusual behaviors, and academic performance problems.²

ATYPICAL BEHAVIORS (Changes in an individual's usual behavior)	UNUSUAL BEHAVIORS	ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS
Becomes irritable/short-tempered/obsessive	Emails are accusatory, manipulative, sexually inappropriate or threatening	Late assignments from beginning of course
Sudden deterioration in quality of work	Discussion post contents are bizarre, fantastical, paranoid, disruptive, confused, or show disorientation	Diminishing quality of work from beginning of course
Abruptly begins turning in late assignments	Student clearly seems out of touch with reality	Not returning emails or phone calls
Becoming disrespectful in discussion posts		Not turning in work at all
Stops responding to email		Not re-doing work when given an opportunity
Content of work becomes negative/dark/odd in tone		Ongoing display of anxiety about assignments



SUGGESTIONS FOR REACHING OUT TO STUDENTS WHO MAY BE IN DISTRESS

- Be clear and to the point about the student's behaviors of concern while also expressing non-judgmental acceptance of the student's state of mind. Phrases such as *It seems you are having a rough time* or *I sense that you are really stressed out* show concern without confrontation.³
- Emphasize to students that they are not alone; this is a new situation for all of us and we are all struggling in different ways to adapt to it.⁴
- Provide suggestions that will help students connect to needed resources on campus, including [counseling](#) services, [medical](#) services, and [health/wellness](#) services. MSU CAPS has created a [Virtual Care Kit](#) for students and posted [additional information for faculty](#) on ways to effectively work with students who may be experiencing mental or emotional distress.
- If you do not get a response from the student, consider submitting an EASE report, which will be sent to the student's academic advisor, and cc'ing the student. You might also contact the student's advisor directly, particularly if the student is in CAL (list of CAL advisors [here](#)).
- If you have immediate concerns about the student's safety, you can submit a [BTAT](#).
- Be sensitive to aspects of the student's cultural identity, including racial and gender identity, sexual/attractiveness orientation, and socioeconomic status, and how this may impact their experiences of the pandemic and other current issues. Also be aware of ways your own cultural identities may influence the ways you respond to the student.
- As you reach out to students, be mindful about keeping appropriate boundaries as a faculty member. Your goal is to be an empathetic listener and help students get connected to campus and other resources that can assist them further. It may feel natural to do everything you can to try to help a student who is in distress, but undertaking ongoing problem-solving or therapeutic efforts together may create an adverse situation for both of you. If you find yourself in this situation, it's a good idea to reach out to a trusted colleague, department chair, or CAL's Faculty Excellence Advocate for support.
- Be mindful of the extra stress you are under as an online educator, and reach out to colleagues and friends to share your experiences and ask for support. Remember MSU's [Employee Assistance Program](#) is also available to help support faculty. Taking on this additional burden on behalf of your students is hard work on top of an already demanding job. Don't forget to take care of yourself as well.



CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

¹ Field, Kelly. (2020). Ten tips to support students in a stressful shift to online learning. *Chronicle of Higher Education, Special Collection: Coping with coronavirus: How faculty members can support students in traumatic times*, p. 8-11.

² Sharkin, Bruce (2006). *College Students in Distress: A Guide For Faculty*. New York: Routledge.

³ Barr, Bonny (2014). [Identifying and addressing the mental health needs of online students in higher education.](#) *Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 17(2), n.p.

⁴ The Jed Foundation (2020). Covid-19 resource guide for higher education professionals. <https://www.jedfoundation.org/covid-19-resource-guide-for-higher-education-professionals/>

