

# How to Support a Student Experiencing a Mental Health Crisis

## Whole-Campus Approach

Everyone on campus, no matter their role, has a part to play in mental health crisis response. Your role is to support students in the moment and connect them to resources. CICMH recommends that all schools consider having a strong mental health crisis response policy as part of their whole-campus approach to mental health. It is also recommended that this policy be widely distributed/displayed to faculty, staff, and students. Depending on your campus' policy, you may be instructed to direct students to particular resources. It is your responsibility as an individual to know and understand your campus' policy. For more information on how your school could undertake this work please see the [Mental Health Crisis Response on Campus Toolkit](#).

Students can experience crises all throughout campus, not just in the health and wellness or counselling department(s). You may come across a student who appears to be in crisis. This may occur when you least expect it. It is important to be as prepared as you can be and take note of any behaviours you notice in the moment. The goal of this conversation is to support the student and diffuse the situation as much as you can. You are not expected to be a counsellor.

If you are able, try to connect emotionally with the student as well. This connection lets the student know that you are acknowledging them/their situation and care about their well-being. Students report that even knowing someone is listening to them can impact their stress level (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). If you are speaking to a student in crisis, there are some important things to keep in mind:

- Ensure you have the time to begin the conversation with the student. If you are rushing and/or distracted, the student will notice and may not feel comfortable opening up to you. These conversations can often take longer than expected, so you want to make sure you have the time to focus on the student and this situation (CAPS Counselling and Psychological Services – University of Michigan, 2022). If you don't, consider alerting a colleague or connecting the student to someone who has adequate time to speak with them.
- If possible, let your team members, co-workers, etc. know that you are stepping away to have a conversation with a student (and where you'll be if moving to a different space), so that others know your whereabouts and can check in if needed.

**A crisis** is any situation that puts someone at risk of harming themselves or others and/or puts them at risk of being unable to care for themselves or function in a healthy manner. **Distress** is a state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life.



# Set the Stage

In a crisis, one of your aims is to make the student you're supporting feel safe. If they feel safe, then they may be more willing to share necessary information with you and access any resources you provide them with. Letting a student know you're there for them by saying things like "I am here to help" will go a long way in making them feel safe.

While you're interacting with this student, there are a few things you will want to remember. Try to focus on remaining calm. If you project worry, the student may pick up on that and become increasingly agitated. Be aware of your tone, facial expression and body language as well. You want to attempt to have an open posture (e.g., arms uncrossed) and speak in a calm, neutral tone (e.g., use specific, non-judgmental terms; use non-confrontational speech) in order to make the student feel safe and welcome (CAPS Counselling and Psychological Services – University of Michigan, 2022).

If you notice that the student seems agitated, there are things that you can try to help calm them down. Some ideas include offering them a safer space within your office or a quieter place to sit and talk, if available. The student may or may not be comfortable leaving the space, so follow their lead based on what they communicate to you. Offering them a glass of water/beverage can give the student a moment to collect themselves and potentially relieve dehydration, which can contribute to anxiety and depression (Solara Mental Health, 2018). You can also suggest taking some slow, deep breaths and doing this alongside them (CAPS Counselling and Psychological Services – University of Michigan, 2022). Try not to have this conversation in an open, busy environment if you can help it, as this is not conducive to respecting the student's privacy and having a productive conversation. These actions can help to calm the student down and give you a moment to consider how to best approach this interaction.

If you are in a situation where a student is having a crisis during a class, make sure that you stay calm and take the time to listen to the student's concerns. From here you can decide how to best approach the situation. For more information on how to manage disruptions in the classroom in order to diffuse potential crisis situations, please refer to CICMH's "How to Support Students Who Are Behaving Disruptively in Class" infosheet.



**If you have specific knowledge that is applicable to this student's situation, for example if you're a coach and you're speaking to a student athlete, feel free to ask additional questions that may help you build a rapport with them to assess their current needs. Trust your insights and reactions as you have experience working with students in all kinds of situations.**

Here are some questions you can ask the student to help you better understand their current situation and the resources they may need:

I'm noticing that you're [name something that you've noticed] and I wanted to check in with you. Is that alright?

Gives you a chance to name what you've noticed and lets the person know that you see them and are concerned about them.

Do you have a safe place to go to/ Is this a safe place for you?

Lets you know if they have any fears about their safety.

Have you been experiencing more stress than usual?

Helps you to get a better understanding of whether this is the person's usual baseline.

What are some of the things that are causing you stress?

Can help you to think about the resource options that may be the best fit for the situation.

How have you been coping with your stress?

Can let you know if they will be able to self-regulate while waiting for external support.

Do you have a [designated] support person?

May let you know if they have a particular person that they rely on in situations like this or if they have a safety plan in place with particular contacts that they can reach out to.

Do you have any outside personal supports (friends, family, etc.)?

Lets you know if they have other folks around who can provide support/help.

Can also let you know if they're isolated from others.

Can let you know if the issue is within their support group.

Are you currently contemplating/In the past 3 months have you contemplated harming yourself or others?

Helps you to delineate if there is a risk of harm to the student or yourself/others in the community.

- If the student says they are planning to harm someone else, this is an emergency. Call **911** or a **local mobile crisis response team**.
- For a list of local mobile response teams, see CICMH's "Crisis Response Teams by Region" infosheet; which is part of the [Mental Health Crisis Response on Campus toolkit](#).
- From here, you can narrow down appropriate referral resources.

Are you currently contemplating/ In the past three months have you contemplated suicide?

- Helps you to delineate if there is an urgent risk of harm to the student so you can call 911 for appropriate supports.
- If the student answers yes and is having imminent thoughts of and/or has a plan for suicide, **call 911**. After calling 911, stay with the student until emergency services arrive onsite.

Not sure what services available for students to access? CICMH's Recognizing, Responding, and Referring Student in Crisis Flowchart can help you discover the supports available on your campus and in the community.

## Referral

1. Once you've gathered information using these questions, work with the student to come up with an appropriate plan for referring them to supports (on- or off-campus).
  - This is where your campus' mental health crisis navigation path will come in handy, letting you know what resources are available to the student.
2. Know that there's a chance the student may not be ready to a referral.
  - If that is the case, make a plan to check back in with them at a later date.

In a moment of crisis with these tips and helpful questions, you may be able to help a student to process their situation as well as connect them to the appropriate mental health supports.

## REFERENCES

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