How to Raise a Sensitive Issue or Approach a Student

The purpose of this handout is to provide a model and context to help you raise a sensitive issue with a student and if needed, to be able to make a referral. A simple model for talking to a person about a sensitive topic often consists of the following statements or elements: "I care", "I see", "I feel", LISTEN, "I want", "I will".

Model outline This is a basic outline that you can adapt to your situation. It provides a context to raise an issue and can help you organize a conversation.

I care Make statements that help set the tone and describe your relationship with the person. For example, “as your instructor, your advisor, your TA, your supervisor…” etc. You want to set the tone for the person to take some action. Saying that you care helps the person be more willing to accept the observations you are about to share. Remember this is a “carefrontation” and not a confrontation.

I see Include specific, observable behaviors and avoid making a judgment or diagnosis.

I feel Make statements of how these behaviors concern you and why you want to raise the issue.

Listen An important step in this process is allowing the person to react and share information. If he/she gets angry or provokes you, remain calm and focused. Remain factual and non-judgmental.

I want Try to get the person to agree to some form of positive action. Encourage a referral to a professional when needed. Be optimistic, yet realistic. “Carefrontations” do not always work the first time. Be open to further involvement -- never close the door. It may be necessary to set some limits or firm resolution, for example, “I want you to attend class”, or, “See the TA for additional review”.

I will Indicate your support, what you are willing to do help, and your limitations. Don’t make promises you cannot or will not keep. DON’T promise absolute confidentiality. “What you say to me here is confidential unless it involves harm to yourself or others.” If the student is dangerous to self or others, you will need to act. [http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/crisis/index.html](http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/crisis/index.html)

An email example – a student may be absent from class or you might want to use an email to set up and appointment:

Dear (student name),

As your instructor I am concerned (I care) about how you are doing in class. I see you failed the last exam and you have not been participating in class discussion (specific, observable behaviors). I am worried (I feel) that you may fail this class and I would like (I want) to talk to you about difficulties that may be keeping you from succeeding. My office hours are …. If these times do not work please email me suggested times so we can make an appointment (I will meet with you).

An example during office hours This example demonstrates how the model might work with a student who comes into your office and begins to describe personal problems that are interfering with his/her academic work. There is a slight variation with this example as you are suggesting they seek help.

I Care I am glad you came in to talk.
I see “I have noticed that your work has deteriorated in the past month ...”(summarize specific observations as clearly as possible; missed classes, assignments, grades, participation, etc.). “Is
there anything else of importance I should know about”? Affirm any concerns the student has described; “I see you are experiencing a lot of stress” “The death of … has really affected you.”

I feel “I am worried about how these problems are affecting your well being and your academic work.

I want “I want you to meet with the TA (or “me”) for extra review of the material. I would also like you to consider talking to a counselor at the University Counseling and Consulting Services or at Boynton Health Service. Do you think that might be helpful”?

Listen Pay particular attention to any concerns or questions the student may have about receiving professional help. The information you present and the manner in which you convey it can have a positive impact.

I will “Here is a card with the University’s Student Mental Health website, or, if you wish to call, you can use my phone”. (Respond directly and honestly in terms of your ability, willingness, and limitations in being able to help. For example, “Given these circumstances, I can give you a two day extension on your paper.”)

The final decision to seek help rests with the student and not the person making the referral. If the student is not ready to seek out professional counseling, other sources of consultation and self-help groups are available. Faculty can also view additional resources for consultation at http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/

General guidelines

1. Educate yourself about resources before you need to use them. Go to http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu
2. Know your feelings and attitudes toward a student or issues. What are your motives? Avoid preaching, punishing or criticizing, and remember it is “carefrontation” and not a confrontation.
3. Observe and document. Prepare in advance a list of specific problems that have occurred.
4. It is very important to choose a location and time where you can talk in private without embarrassment or interruptions.
5. Are you the only or best person to approach this individual? If you are a TA- should the instructor handle this? If you are the instructor, does a TA have additional information?

Emergencies - If you (or someone you know) is having a mental health crisis and/or is in immediate danger, please call 911. Dangerous crisis situations include suicidal behaviors or threats, homicidal behavior or threats, irrational dangerous behavior, or excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. If you are concerned about a student who displays behaviors that may harm the student or others, call the University's Behavioral Consultation Team (BCT) at 612-626-3030 for assistance. The BCT is a team of staff from several departments across the University with administrative, academic, and legal expertise. The team's staff can help you develop strategies for monitoring and mitigating the situation. The BCT is available Monday through Friday 8-4:30. If the situation of concern is an emergency, call 911.

Confidentiality Students may be concerned about privacy or parental notification. Mental Health professionals adhere to Minnesota State Laws and professional ethical standards which guarantee that everything a student mentions to them is held in the strictest confidence. This confidence can be broken only after the student gives written permission to release information. Exceptions to these standards are very limited (e.g., if the individual is a danger to self or others, if the issue includes child abuse, or if records are subpoenaed as part of a criminal case).

Provost’s Committee on Student Mental Health 11/08