



Guidance for Faculty in Identifying and Engaging with Students Who May Be in Distress

SUNY System continues to promote remote instruction as the safest and most responsive choice for most instruction in the spring of 2021. This is a challenging time for our students, removed from their regular routines, social network, and college community. Faculty are well positioned to help students feel connected to their coursework, degree program, and institution. During challenging times, faculty provide a critical lifeline and are often the first to notice when a student is struggling. As such, it is important that we protect and monitor not only the physical health but the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our students.

The purpose of this document is to provide faculty with guidance in the identification and engagement of students who may be struggling with academic, social, or emotional needs in the virtual learning environment. It includes information on how to identify student behaviors online that may indicate emotional or mental distress and outlines safe engagement strategies for faculty to support students seeking assistance or crisis management.

SUNY System continues to offer online QPR suicide prevention training at no cost to all students, faculty, and staff. QPR stands for Question, Persuade, and Refer — the 3 simple steps anyone can learn to help save a life from suicide. QPR is a 1-hour, evidence-based training program. SUNY System strongly recommends all faculty complete this training. You may access it here; use org code SUNY: <http://www.qprtraining.com/setup.php>

Next, because regular face-to-face contact with students is extremely limited, it is important to understand signs of distress that may be apparent in remote learning. These can include:

- Withdrawal from classes or class activities (e.g., discussion boards, online “office hours”)
- Major declines in quality of coursework or consistently turning things in late without adequate explanation
- Major changes in appearance—a formerly well-dressed student appears unkempt or unwashed
- Demonstrating or discussing little interest in things that used to provide pleasure—exercise, movies, etc.
- Talking openly about substance misuse with other students or faculty in online posts or forums
- Showing rage or anger, particularly related to minor challenges or frustrations
- Talking about feeling hopeless or feeling like there’s no purpose
- Sharing song lyrics, social media, or other media related to suicide or self-injury
- Talking about being a burden or a liability
- Talking explicitly about suicide or suicide methods

Finally, we want to ensure that you are informed about what to do if you identify signs of distress among your students. The following are some approaches you may use when engaging with a student who may be in distress or crisis:



- Seek a chance to be face to face – Zoom, FaceTime, or another app. If not a video chat, the phone is better than email or text. Give yourself a chance to hear and see how the student is acting and responding.
- Start with connection. Ask how the student is doing in life outside of the classroom. Is the student exercising? Working? Spending time with family?
- Be specific in your concerns and use positive language. Recognize the excellence in prior efforts if a student has been struggling.
- Student counseling and health centers are still providing care; make sure the student knows about resources specific to the campus that can help.
- If a student is visibly upset or sounds upset, ask if they are okay. Ask how you can help. Be specific in your suggestions.
- **If a student appears to be in crisis**
 - Ask directly if they have thought of suicide or self-harm. QPR training <http://www.qprtraining.com/setup.php> teaches us to ask the question safely and appropriately. Give the student space to answer the question honestly.
- **If the student answers yes**, direct them to emergency mental health resources. This may include counseling centers who have walk-in/dial-in hours or the local emergency room. Be specific and ask the student if you can help them schedule an appointment.
- **Provide information on free crisis and emotional support resources.** Because suicidal thoughts can come and go, it is critically important that students have crisis hotlines on hand if a suicidal crisis were to arise.
 - **Crisis Text Line** is a free 24/7 texting service that students can use for anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, relationship problems, domestic violence, and bullying. They simply **text Got5U to 741741** to connect with a trained counselor.
 - **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.
 - **NYS Emotional Support Line, 1-844-863-9314**, provides free and confidential support, helping callers experiencing increased anxiety due to the coronavirus emergency.
- Follow up. Give the student a concrete date that you will touch base with them. Send them a calendar invite.
- Send email or other correspondence in the meantime. Let them know that you are thinking of them.

Thank you for all that you do to create a prepared and caring campus community. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we maintain this sense of community, even in a remote environment. If you have questions, please contact the Director of Student Wellness for the SUNY System, Dr. Leah Wentworth, at leah.wentworth@suny.edu

SUNY promotes training and other resources to support mental health on campus: <https://www.suny.edu/mental-health/>