Section 8: Mental and emotional health and safety

Academic life is notorious for its pressures upon students and faculty alike, yet questions about mental and emotional health often go undiscussed. Members of the academic community are often unclear about how to respond when fellow members of the community appear to be undergoing psychological difficulty, or how privacy considerations interact with the concern to help, or what resources might be available to them and others for contending with issues of mental and emotional health and safety. In the background are also more general concerns about how to create a climate in which questions of mental and emotional health are less stigmatized and isolating, and individuals are more likely to receive the treatment they need.

Student mental and emotional health and safety

Students at all levels are under exceptionally high levels of stress, and the proportion of students seeking help for anxiety, depression, and related disorders has risen from 19% in 2007 to 34% in 2017, while lifetime diagnoses rose from 22% to 36% (Lipson et al. 2018). Debate continues over whether these increases are reflective of underlying changes in mental health as opposed to greater willingness to seek treatment, but even if the underlying rates are constant, we should be aware that it is likely that one in five undergraduates is experiencing mental health difficulties. Such problems of mental and emotional health are often the cause of academic failure even in dedicated and talented students. This should be a special concern for us as educators, particularly because colleges and universities often have available facilities for the treatment of psychological distress and disorder, though at present those facilities are having difficulty meeting demand. Depression is of particular concern since, while twenty percent of college students say their depression level is higher than it should be, only 6 percent say that they would seek help, and still fewer actually do seek help. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for students at college or university, and the number of students taking their own lives or attempting to do so is increasing, and the chief cause of suicide in this age group is untreated depression. Even students who are not depressed can find the stress and isolation encountered at colleges or universities difficult to bear, leading to behavior that can be dangerous to others as well as themselves.

One obstacle to seeking assistance, for faculty and students alike, is absence of awareness of what forms of consultation and treatment are available at the college or university, and of which services are covered by student or faculty health plans. Be aware that some students come from backgrounds where family resources and lack of adequate insurance have meant that seeking professional help has been limited to serious emergencies. Providing instructors and staff with up-to-date information of this kind at the beginning of academic terms, and posting such information in a conspicuous place, not only helps students and faculty to find their way to help, but also makes it clear that the institution and department are positively engaged on behalf of mental health, and this can lessen the sense of stigma or isolation.

Stigma and isolation are, however, not easily overcome. This places faculty, graduate student teaching assistants, and departmental staff in an important position—they are often the first in any official capacity to see signs of student distress or of unmanageable behavior, or to be approached by students seeking advice or help. Many faculty, graduate instructors, and staff are concerned that they will be violating student privacy if, when they see signs that a student is in distress or disruptive, they raise with the student the
question of counseling. But they should know that FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974) is not a barrier to taking steps to provide necessary support for individual students in crisis, or to protect the health and safety of others in the campus community.

Should a student seem to you to be in distress or at risk of behavior dangerous to the student or others, you are not violating privacy rights to raise the issue with the student. You can encourage the student to discuss their situation, feelings, and concerns, and suggest college or university resources available to the student. While you should use discretion with any information the student might communicate to you, you should not and cannot promise confidentiality. When students discuss suicide, threaten the safety of others, or give you information that suggests that they or other students might be involved in sexual misconduct covered under Title IX or that might pose a threat to safety inside or outside the classroom, you are under a professional obligation to report this information to the relevant campus offices. You should, therefore, make clear to the student that certain actions, threats, or threatening behavior must be reported, though you should also indicate that you will share this information only with appropriate campus offices. If the situation is not one of emergent risk, you should maintain as fully as possible privacy about whatever information the student shares. Other recommended practices in such situations include the following:

- Try to help the student focus on specific aspects of the problem.
- Avoid over-easy reassurance, such as, “I’m sure you’ll be all right.”
- Be accepting and respectful of what is said, allowing the student to state concerns without your becoming defensive or combative. Respect for the student’s experience and value system does not require you to validate these, but to take them seriously.
- Always keep in mind that your advice is not a substitute for professional counseling, and you should make this clear to the student and encourage them to seek additional help as needed. To that end, help the student identify available sources of professional help.
- Work with the student to recall constructive coping methods they have used in the past.
- Attempt to get the student to agree to take manageable, concrete steps to help overcome whatever academic difficulties might have arisen from their distress—uncompleted work, inability to study, failure to attend classes or exams, etc.—and to agree to keep you informed as these steps are taken.
- Have confidence in your insight and reactions in spotting difficulties and offering help, but try not to rely entirely upon your own judgment. Within the limits of confidentiality, seek the opinion of those at your college or university who are in positions of responsibility for student well-being.
- Recall that part of your responsibility is the safety of students, and be sure to familiarize yourself with recommended procedures when safety issues arise. Your college or university may have specific guidelines for conduct in such cases and for reporting, which are normally available on the website of campus security services.

One important sign of psychological distress is that a student drops out of contact with a class or an advisor. When this happens, it is not a violation of student privacy to attempt to contact the student and initiate a discussion of what might explain the loss of contact. Most colleges and universities have offices of student academic affairs (such as a Dean of Students) and counseling offices able to help students who have ceased contact, and it is appropriate for you to inform such offices of a student in academic difficulty or who has missed a number of classes without explanation.
Departments should ensure that all instructors receive a full packet of materials on mental health resources available to students as well as university or college guidelines on public safety and reporting. Departments are encouraged to schedule a session for all faculty and graduate students in which relevant mental health professionals and legal staff at the college or university provide guidance in dealing with student difficulties.

Faculty and instructors should be aware that the sources of student distress are varied and often arise from concerns outside the classroom. Most colleges and universities have offices that provide counseling and help for students who are victims of assault or harassment, who are struggling with substance abuse, whose family life is in crisis or disarray, or who face financial difficulty, however, the nature of these difficulties may make students reluctant to come forward and ask for help. Creating an environment where students feel able to bring such concerns forward and receive help is a complex matter, but is a fundamental obligation of institutions and individuals. Many faculty and staff are mandatory reporters of sexual harassment or assault under Title IX or the Clery Act, and all faculty or staff should be aware whether or not they have this responsibility, what it involves, and to whom they must make a report. It is a good practice for departments to take steps to ensure that mandatory reporters receive proper information and, where applicable, training. If a student approaches you with a concern about sexual assault or harassment, be sure to inform them immediately whether you are a mandatory reporter, but also clarify that bringing their concern to a mandatory reporter does not oblige them to take any particular action—whether to initiate a formal complaint remains their decision. Because policies concerning the reporting of potential sexual misconduct vary across institutions and are subject to change, faculty with advisory roles are encouraged to develop familiarity with their institution’s specific current guidelines, processes, and procedures for handling reports, along with possible accommodations (e.g., changing class schedules) that can be made to support students contending with such issues.

Some institutions are experimenting with creating an ombuds role that does not entail mandatory forwarding of reports of sexual harassment, which enables individuals with concerns who are uncertain or who fear reprisal to make an initial contact, explore relevant questions and alternatives, and receive advice and help. Moreover, some institutions have established “first responder” programs which train faculty and instructors on appropriate responses to students who confide with them any potential sexual misconduct; faculty and instructors can be required or encouraged to enroll in such programs, and departments can make publicly available a list of trained faculty (e.g., on the department website). In any case, faculty, instructors, and staff have the special responsibility in that they might be the individual best placed to detect signs of such problems, or to whom the student feels able to come to discuss concerns. Faculty moreover may be able to encourage students to seek assistance by helping them directly to take the next steps.

Here are some guidelines for dealing with some of the most frequent issues about student mental or emotional health:

- Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student (CSU Long Beach)
- Responding to Emotionally Distressed Students (UC Santa Cruz)

**Faculty and staff mental and emotional health and safety**

Problems with mental health and substance abuse are not confined to students. However, while many of the same good practices discussed above apply when one encounters potential mental health problems among faculty colleagues or staff, special considerations arise from the fact that faculty and staff are employees of the college or university and hold positions within an academic hierarchy in which they will be subject to
performance reviews. Confidential personal advice that would be acceptable in an informal setting between peers can be inappropriate in the setting of various institutional relationships. It is therefore often appropriate, when approached by a colleague or staff member in psychological distress or with a concern over harassment or substance abuse to encourage the individual to contact the college or university counseling services or other units specifically designed for these purposes. Faculty should be aware of whether they are mandatory reporters of sexual harassment or assault (see the section above for further discussion of mandatory reporting.) One should make it clear that, in advising a colleague to approach relevant college or university services, one is not attempting to dismiss or minimize the individual’s concerns, but rather is seeking to support and protect the individual by facilitating access to expert guidance under conditions where the rules of confidentiality and information-sharing will be strictly observed. Following up with the individual can help assure that the concern is being taken seriously.

Special services for meeting faculty and staff needs can also serve to provide a contact that is available outside the department, and available -after business hours. All faculty and staff should familiarize themselves with these services and how to reach them. If a colleague or staff member expresses imminent suicidal tendencies, appears to pose a danger to others, or discusses behavior that constitutes sexual harassment or is otherwise unlawful, it is one’s professional responsibility to determine which authorities should receive this information, and to share it with them—and to be clear with the colleague or staff member that one will be doing so. Be aware also that not all mental health crises take the form of dangerous behavior toward the self or others. (For a discussion of the incidence of mental health crises, and how to contend with them, see the guide prepared by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.)

Obviously, the present guidelines are not meant to exclude attempting to provide advice and support for colleagues in distress, and discretion must be used in deciding whether the seriousness of the distress warrants taking any further action.

Among the forms of information departments should ensure that all faculty and staff receive are the following:

- The services available to them, including confidential ways of contacting counseling services.
- What their health or other insurance will support by way of counseling or treatment for themselves or their families.
- Good practices and professional responsibilities in dealing with a colleague or staff member who is, or appears to be, in psychological distress or a threat to others.
- How to obtain further information.

Additionally, a generic presentation of information about available services for faculty and staff, and of some relevant guidelines, should be posted in the department. This increases the chance that faculty or staff will have recent awareness of the services available to them, and manifests the commitment of the university, college, and department to providing the support needed for maintaining mental health.

This commitment should extend beyond providing information and making services available for those in direct need. In federal law, the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996, the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, and the Affordable Care Act of 2010 all mandate some form of equity in the treatment of
mental and physical health. But social stigma and fear that seeking mental health treatment will harm employment prospects or social standing still inhibit many from seeking the mental health care they need, or requesting medical leave for reasons of mental health. If this situation is to change, it is necessary that open discussion of mental health issues take place within departments. Consider inviting a college or university health professional to make a presentation at a regular departmental meeting to discuss questions that might arise about physical and mental health and the services the college or university makes available. This kind of meeting will enhance awareness and also help communicate that the department is concerned with the mental as well as physical health of its members, and does not consider such questions “unmentionable.” Similarly, making faculty and staff aware of workshops for stress management and other daily mental health challenges will help promote use of these workshops and help make it evident that such challenges can occur in anyone’s life.

Above all, faculty and staff should be provided a robust environment of support and protection so that they do not feel they must face psychological difficulties alone, or that it will be destructive to their career to approach a colleague, chair, or counseling services about mental health or substance abuse problems. While institutional concerns and procedures are important, it is also important to recognize that a colleague or staff member seeking help is in distress and needs active concern and support from those the person knows and trusts.

### Responding to traumatic events on campus

Sadly, various kinds of traumatic events continue to occur on campus, including incidents of individual violence as well as harassment and intimidation of members of the academic community on grounds of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexual orientation. Acts of individual violence can leave a long wake of student distress behind them, and acts of harassment or intimidation can be harmful not only to individual students or groups, but also to the overall climate for inclusiveness and mutual trust and respect. Typically, it will fall to larger units—the college, the university, the faculty senate, the governing board—to publicly take the lead in responding as an institution to such incidents. However, contending with such incidents should not be left entirely to these entities. Such incidents directly affect our students and our colleagues, and alter the educational environment inside as well as outside the classroom. They create special challenges, and perhaps also responsibilities, for us as philosophers who teach. Philosophy should equip us to help our students in thinking about such episodes. If that is the case, what kinds of constructive contribution can we make?

The experience most of us have had as students and teachers seldom provides us with direct experience in contending with episodes of this kind, and the body of relevant research is still fairly small. However, as instructors we are often the face of the college or university that students encounter most regularly, and we have the privilege of doing so in a context centered on knowledge and learning. And as philosophers in particular, we are trained to explore controversial questions with students in a manner that promotes analytic clarity, appreciation of other viewpoints, and the investigation of fundamental normative dimensions. We do not step out of our professional or pedagogical roles if we acknowledge the occurrence of such episodes, and research conducted in the aftermath of various kinds of traumatic public events (such as September 11th; attacks on members of particular racial, ethnic, or religious groups; the appearance of posters or messages threatening students or demeaning groups of students; campus violence; and Hurricane Katrina) suggests that simple acknowledgement by instructors of these events can be helpful for students, some of whom may be feeling anxious, upset, marginalized, and unsafe. Such acknowledgement
also creates an opening for further discussion or for students to approach faculty outside class with their concerns (Huston & DiPietro 2007).

Classroom discussion of these traumatic events, like classroom discussion in philosophy generally, is likely to be more constructive if the instructor provides some structure and conceptual resources to keep the dialogue in focus and help it move ahead intellectually. It is important for instructors to prepare for such discussions by informing themselves about relevant issues and facts and getting some idea of the concerns students are likely to have, but it is not the point of these discussions to decide “what actually happened” or “who was responsible.” Rather, discussions should help students achieve deeper understanding of the many dimensions of such incidents—epistemic, expressive, cognitive, social, and moral. Providing such opportunities for thinking together in a structured setting may also help counter student distress—for example, a study of post-September 11th anxiety in college students found that mental disengagement and emotional venting alike led to reduced ability to cope (Liverant et al. 2004).

Faculty should also be aware of campus guidelines and procedures in the event of a natural disaster or act of violence, and what role they are expected to play in helping to protect the safety of colleagues, staff, and students. Departments can help promote such awareness by scheduling presentations from those with primary responsibility for such issues on campus.

Resources


Guidelines for Discussing Incidents of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination (Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan).