

Marywood University

Assisting the Distressed Student

A Guide for
Faculty & Staff

Counseling & Student
Development Center



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Introduction

As a Marywood Employee, a student might come to you and disclose a sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, or stalking incident that they have experienced.

Everyone responds to trauma differently. There are a number of common reactions to sexual violence. While this list is not complete, it can give you an idea of behaviors you may notice in interactions with your students. They include:

- Difficulty concentrating or completing tasks**
- Zoning out, sense of detachment, dissociation**
- Changes in eating, sleeping and hygiene patterns**
- Headaches or nausea**
- Depression, numbness, fatigue**
- Increase in substance use/abuse or eating disorders**
- Withdrawal from people and activities**
- Mood Swings**
- Changes in personality or energy level**
- Anxiety, fear, panic attacks or feelings of nervousness**
- Hypersensitivity to light, touch, noise or people**
- Flashbacks or nightmares**
- Feelings of shame, guilt, self-blame**

What to Do If A Student Discloses to You

It is helpful to:

- Inform the Student of your status as a responsible employee (unless designated as a confidential resource).
- Listen without judgment. Listening is the single most important thing you can do. No one deserves to be the victim of violence, regardless of the circumstances.
- Thank them for telling someone and sharing with you.
- Tell them that you hear them and support them. Refer the student to designated resources and support their decisions on how to proceed.
- Submit a report to the Title IX Coordinator.
- Follow Up with the student after the disclosure.

It is not helpful to:

- Ask questions that could imply fault or blaming the student, such as “had you been drinking?”
- Avoid informing the student of your status as a responsible employee.
- Give advice or tell the student what they should do.

Being Supportive in the Classroom:

Even if a student does not directly disclose an incident to you, they may be struggling with something internally or know someone who has experienced a difficult situation. Therefore, it is important to provide support and a safe environment in the classroom.

Everyone experiences trauma differently and has different reactions to the situation. Therefore, topics that can be difficult to deal with will not be the same for all students. However, there are some common difficult topics survivors might struggle with.

These include, but are not limited to:

- Discussion of stalking, rape, abuse, sexual harassment, gender based violence, sexual violence or other forms of violence.
- Themes involving power, manipulation or control
- Topics of toxic masculinity, misogyny, sexism
- Sentiments of victim-blaming in any context
- Topics around gender, sexuality, virginity
- Discussion of consent
- Language of trauma, even when used around topics unrelated to sexual violence

Being Supportive in the Classroom:

It is helpful to:

- Be prepared ahead of time if you know a difficult topic will come up in your class.
- Have a class Google form for students to alert you about topics that may be sensitive or difficult for them.
- Ask how you can support the student if they tell you a topic is difficult for them.
- Give verbal or written notice about any difficult topics that might be coming up in the upcoming classes.
- Take short breaks between difficult discussions or activities.
- If you allow students the option to “opt out” of a class or discussion based on emotional needs, make sure your attendance policies reflect this.

It is not helpful to:

- Bring up difficult topics or discussions in class without warning.
- Judge a student or ask multiple questions as to why they do not want to participate in a class discussion about one of these difficult topics.
- Conduct difficult discussions in class without time for a break or a chance to decompress.
- Limit options for students to opt out or remove themselves from the room if a topic is difficult for them due to emotional needs.

The Student Who Is Anxious:

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one's well-being or self-esteem. For some students, the cause of their anxiety will be clear, but for others, it may be difficult to determine.

Symptoms Students May Experience:

- Rapid Heartbeat
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Cold and clammy hands
- Difficulty concentrating
- A feeling of being “on edge”
- Difficulty making decisions
- Trouble Sleeping
- Feeling too fearful to act

The Student Who Is Anxious:

It is Helpful to:

- Let the student discuss their feelings and thoughts.
- Provide Reassurance.
- Encourage them to seek help, possibly suggesting the C/SDC.
- Remain calm and speak slowly.
- Be clear and directive.
- Provide a safe and quiet environment.

It is not helpful to:

- Minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting.
- Take responsibility for their state.
- Overwhelm them with information or ideas to “fix” the situation.
- Become anxious or overwhelmed yourself.

The Student Who Is Sad or Withdrawn

Sadness and apathy are often associated with depression, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. Occasional drops or changes to mood are a part of a natural emotional and physical response to life's difficulties. With the busy and demanding life of a college student, it is safe to assume that most students will experience periods of situational depression in their college careers. Major depression, however, is a whole body concern. It is not a passing blue mood. It affects the way we sleep, eat, how we feel about ourselves and the way we think about things. It is also not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be wished or willed away.

Indicators of sadness/apathy (depression):

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings.
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, helplessness and/or worthlessness.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies or activities that were once enjoyed.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Changes in appetite or weight.
- Decreased energy, fatigue.
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts.
- Irritability
- Trouble concentrating, remembering or making decisions.
- Persistent physical problems that don't respond to treatment.
- Inconsistent class attendance.
- Decline in personal hygiene.

The Student Who Is Sad or Withdrawn

It Is Helpful to:

- Let students know you are aware that they are feeling down and would like to help.
- Encourage them to seek help, possibly suggesting the C/SDC at Marywood.
- Do not ignore remarks about suicide. Always report them to a C/SDC counselor and let students know you are doing so. We will then make all appropriate and ethical efforts to intervene.
- Reach out more than halfway and encourage them to discuss how they are feeling.
- Offer options to further investigate/manage the signs of sadness/apathy.

It Is Not Helpful to:

- Minimize their feelings; e.g., “Everything will be alright tomorrow.”
- Bombard them with “Fix It” solutions or advice.
- Fear asking whether they are suicidal if you think they may be.

The Student Who Is Verbally Aggressive

Many college campuses are concerned with the number of incidents regarding strong verbal aggression and violent, aggressive and combative behavior. It can be helpful to know some indicators for this type of behavior and develop personal action plans should it occur.

The most accurate predictor of violent behavior is past violent behavior. If students have a history of this behavior, they are more likely than someone with no history to engage in it again. Since it is unusual for most faculty and staff to be privy to such information, it is necessary to be attentive to current behavior.

Frequently assaultive behavior is predicted based on observing hostile, suspicious, and agitated behavior. In the absence of the above symptoms, the presence of hyper-vigilance (e.g., looking around a lot), extreme dependency, or delusions and hallucinations may be causal factors. Other signs and symptoms that may indicate a loss of control are fearfulness and anger. Verbal communication may be loud and pressured.

The Student Who Is Verbally Aggressive

The Assault Cycle

1. The Triggering Event - An aggressor perceives a serious threat to self. This perception may not make sense to you, but it is very real to the person.
2. The Escalation Phase - Here the aggressor's mind and body prepare for fight.
3. The Verbal Aggression Phase - The most common occurrence of assaultive behavior on our campus is the verbal threat or some other form of confrontational language.
4. The Crisis Point Phase - In this phase, the aggressor acts violently against the perceived threat
5. The Recovery Phase - The confrontation appears to have passed. The person's body relaxes and their mind decreases vigilance.
6. Post-Crisis Depression Phase - Fatigue, sadness/apathy and guilt appear afterward, as the physical and emotional aspects of the crisis peak. The body and mind return to a more stable base level

The Student Who Is Verbally Aggressive

It is Helpful To:

- Maintain a posture that is poised, ready to move quickly, but not fearful.
- Avoid Physical contact or use only in a defensive manner.
- Maintain a voice quality that is matter of fact, monotone and low.
- Use clear, assertive, but non-confrontational statements of consequences, repeat as necessary.
- Use eye contact sparingly, only to emphasize a point.
- Avoid gestures if possible, as they may be interpreted as signs of weakness.
- If possible, leave an unobstructed exit for the perpetrator.

It is Not Helpful To:

- Ignore warning signs (body language, clenched fists).
- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself.
- Press for explanations for the behavior.
- Make threats or dares.

Once the student leaves your area, make sure to debrief with your immediate supervisor or department chair. The counselors at the C/SDC are available for consultation; do not hesitate to contact us. Should you, as faculty or staff, suffer adverse effects from an encounter with a distraught student, feel free to seek consultation from Marywood University's EAP Program through Human Resources.

Campus Safety, which can be reached at 348-6242, is a good resource and may be called at any time during the cycle. Finally, and for your own well-being, take these threats seriously and be prepared to act accordingly.

The Student Who Is Under The Influence

We are all aware of the toll that abuse of alcohol and other drugs can take on individuals, families, friends and colleagues. Alcohol Abuse was identified as the campus life issue of greatest concern. The costs are staggering - in terms of academic failure, vandalism, sexual assault and other consequences.

Warning Signs of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

There are many signs of alcohol and other drug use, abuse and addiction. None of these signs alone is conclusive proof of an alcohol or other drug problem. Other conditions could be responsible for unusual behavior, such as illness or reaction to a legally prescribed drug.

Impairment of Mental Alertness

- Lack of concentration
- Confusion
- Inability to follow directions
- Short - term memory loss
- Memory loss of recent events

Impairment of Motor Behavior

- Hand tremors
- Loss of balance
- Loss of coordination
- Staggering
- Inability to work normally
- Slurred speech
- Passing out from alcohol or other drug use

The Student Who Is Under The Influence

Warning Signs of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

Impairment of Interpersonal Relationships

- Detachment from or drastic change in social relationships
- Becoming a loner or becoming secretive
- Attempts to avoid friends or co-workers
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Change of friends
- Extreme change in interests
- Tendency to lose temper
- Becoming argumentative
- Borrowing money and not repaying

Impairment of Mood

- Sadness/apathy
- Extreme mood swings
- Flat or unresponsive behavior
- Hyperactivity, loss of interest in work/school
- Nervousness

The Student Who Is Under The Influence

Warning Signs of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

Violation of University Rules, Impairment of Academic and Work Performance

- Inability to perform work assignments at usual level of competence
- Missed deadlines; missed appointments, classes, or meetings
- Increased absenteeism or lateness
- Frequent trips from work area
- Coming to class, practice, or work intoxicated/high
- Legal or judicial problems associated with alcohol or other drug use
- Not scheduling morning classes
- Neglected school/work obligations for two or more days in a row.

Some individuals with substance abuse problems are still able to perform at a high academic level.

The Student Who Is Under The Influence

Other Warning Signs

- Damaging Property while under the influence
- Attempting to build up self confidence through alcohol or other drug use
- Carelessness of friends' welfare while intoxicated or high
- Drinking “the morning after” to alleviate discomfort
- Planning day around drinking or using other drugs
- Changes in personality as a result of alcohol/drug use or blackouts
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Academic probation because of alcohol/drug use
- Uncomfortable in situations where there is no alcohol or other drugs
- Arrested for drunk or disorderly conduct
- Increase in alcohol or other drug tolerance
- Sexual situations while under the influence that are later regretted
- Accidents while under the influence
- Receiving a lower grade on an assignment or in a class because of alcohol or other drug use
- Difficulty in limiting intake

The Student Who Is Under The Influence

It Is Helpful To:

- Accept and acknowledge students' feelings; give them a chance to air their feelings.
- Focus on drug issues; what has happened leading up to the situation.
- Permit students to say how they regard their problems; what they think their alternatives are, what they tried, etc.
- Support them by identifying their strengths and resources.
- Be willing to admit limitations of your assistance and be ready to refer to a specialist.
- Find out sources of emotional support that the student trusts. Encourage involvement from friends, family physician, clergy, employer, etc.
- Contact the C/SDC at 348-6245 and/or walk the student to the C/SDC.

It Is Not Helpful To:

- Convey judgment or criticism about the student's substance abuse.
- Make allowances for the student's irresponsible behavior.
- Ignore signs of intoxication.

Getting a Person to Seek Help May Be a Challenge

Here are a few hints for getting the message across:

- Educate yourself about substance abuse.
- Confront the person when they are sober.
- Give facts based on personal experiences related to the individual's use.
- Show honest concern and patience. If angry at the individual, do not participate in intervention.

Marywood University

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*McGowan - 1201 University Ave
Room 1017
8:30 AM - 4:30 PM
Monday - Friday
570-348-6245*

*After Hours Press Option #1 to speak to
an on-call Crisis Counselor*

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