

# Faculty Guide to Supporting Student Mental Health

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How to create a culture of care on campus



The Jed Foundation

# The State of Student Mental Health

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The emotional well-being of students has become a top priority in higher education as mental health challenges among college students have risen significantly in recent years. According to the annual [Healthy Minds Study](#) (HMS), in 2021 more than 80% of students reported that emotional or mental health difficulties hurt their academic performance one or more days in the previous month. Forty-one percent of college students screened positive for major to moderate depression. A third screened positive for anxiety. And 2020 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that suicide risk is highest for adults ages 18 to 25. HMS found that in 2021, 13% of college students had thoughts about suicide.

These numbers are even higher in underrepresented and marginalized groups on campus.

The Jed Foundation (JED) is committed to changing this. We partner with colleges and universities to promote student mental health, reduce substance misuse, and prevent suicide. We do this through an [evidence-based, comprehensive public health approach](#) in which everyone on campus plays an active role in supporting student well-being, including faculty.

While we know the primary role of faculty is to share your knowledge and expertise with students, we also know that you are often the people students turn to when they are struggling. That gives you a unique opportunity to support student mental health and create a culture of care on campus. And we are here to help you feel comfortable making the most of it.

## About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health. Learn more and access resources at [www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org).

## Faculty Are on the Frontlines

- Nearly 80% of higher education faculty reported having dealt with student mental health issues over the past 12 months. ([The Role of Faculty in Student Mental Health](#), Mary Christie Foundation, 2021)
- Nationally, 35% of students said they would talk to a faculty member if they had a mental health issue affecting their academic performance. ([Healthy Minds Study](#), 2020)
- Academic pressure is associated with many common mental health symptoms, including anxiety, depression, substance use, and poor sleep quality. ([Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019](#))

Most faculty are not clinicians, and we know from working with faculty that it can feel intimidating or overwhelming to think about supporting students' emotional health, especially given all of the responsibilities you already have. But the good news is that you do not have to be a mental health professional to support a student with their mental health. You just need to pay attention, listen, and connect students to help if—or when—they need it.

**This guide will walk you through straightforward—but significant—steps you can take to:**

**Support** mental health in the classroom

**Recognize** a student who is struggling

**Reach out** to a struggling student

**Connect** students to professional help when it is needed

# How to Support Mental Health in the Classroom

A proven way to prevent suicide is to teach young people how to ask for help when they need it. It is a skill that will help keep them safe, build their emotional resilience, and serve them well their whole lives. Below are steps you can take to send students the powerful message that there is help and you can support them in finding it.



## Talk About It

Begin your semester by telling the class that students can come to you when they are struggling, and reiterate that message during high-pressure times, such as exams or charged political or campus events.



## Know Your Campus Resources

The Office of Student Affairs or the Dean of Students office are good places to ask if your school has:

- A campus counseling center or relationships with off-site counseling centers or mental health providers
- A Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) or Community Assessment Response and Evaluation (CARE) team
- Providers at the health center who can treat mental health issues
- Academic services and support
- Disability or accessibility offices or services
- Specific supports for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or other underserved groups
- A protocol to follow when a student may be at risk for harming themselves



## Put Resources in Your Syllabi

Here is some sample language to accompany them:

*“If you are feeling stressed, worried, or down during the semester, or if you notice signs of emotional distress in someone else, please feel free to stop by my office or consider reaching out for support. Here are some campus resources:” [list campus resources]. “If you or someone you know needs to talk to someone right now, text START to 741-741 or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a free, confidential conversation with a trained counselor 24/7.”*



## Encourage Self-Care

Consider incorporating meditation, [breathing](#), or other mindfulness practices into the classroom and adding self-care activities—such as getting exercise, spending time in nature, or talking with a friend—to assignments. You can also model self-care by sharing with students what you do to manage stress.



## Make Thoughtful Deadlines

Avoid making assignments due late in the evening, so that students can prioritize sleep, which is foundational to emotional well-being.



## Allow Mental Health Absences

Consider allocating excused absences for both physical and mental health reasons, and include this policy in your syllabi.

# How to Recognize a Student Who Is Struggling

You know your students. If something concerns you, trust your gut and err on the side of checking in. It may turn out that nothing substantial is going on, but showing students you care is also a part of supporting mental health. Students—like all of us—fare better when they feel seen, cared for, and part of a community.

These are important signs to pay attention to, because they may indicate a student is struggling and needs support:

- Missed assignments
- Repeated absences
- Decline in academic performance
- Reduced participation in class
- Excessive fatigue
- Poor personal hygiene
- Inappropriate or exaggerated behavior
- Alarming or worrisome content in assignments

## How to Reach Out to a Struggling Student



### DO

- Find a way to speak privately to the student, for instance after class when other students have left, or in your office.
- Tell them what you are observing that makes you concerned.
- Ask open-ended questions about how they are doing.
- Let them know you are here to listen and connect them to support if they need it.
- Share campus resources and ask if they need support or help in accessing them.
- Report any concern that a student is at immediate risk (see next page) to campus authorities (BIT or CARE teams, counseling center, or campus security).



### DON'T

- Underestimate the student's struggles. It is far better to check in unnecessarily than to dismiss a potentially harmful situation.
- Promise confidentiality—school guidelines might require you to report a student who is at immediate risk of harming themselves (see next page).
- Leave the student alone if you feel they are at immediate risk.

# How to Know When a Student Needs Immediate Help

A student may be at immediate risk and should be connected to professional mental health services right away if they:

- **Express despair.** “Sometimes it feels like I’d be better off dead.”
- **Express hopelessness.** “No matter what I do, nothing gets better. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even worth being here at all.”
- **Talk about leaving their family or friends.** “I feel like I’m such a burden to them. They’d be better off without me.”
- **Mention self-harm.** “It seems like the only thing that makes me feel better is cutting myself.”
- **Show signs of self-injury,** including wearing long sleeves in warm weather to hide injuries.

## What to do:

- **Stay calm.** This will help you think clearly about how to respond and can help reduce the student’s anxiety.
- **Let them know you hear them and want to help.** (See wording examples on next page.)
- **Walk the student to the campus counseling center** for an urgent consultation.
- **Call campus security and/or 911** if your campus does not have a counseling center, it is closed, or the student refuses to go.
- **Stay with the student** until help arrives.

# How to Start the Conversation

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## Ways to approach a struggling student.

“I’ve noticed you’ve seemed a little down lately, so I wanted to check in with you. What’s been going on?”

“I noticed you missed class a few times. What’s going on for you?”

“You seem really tired in class lately. How are you doing these days?”

## Ways to respond when a student shares their struggle with you.

“I’m so glad you told me about this. Let’s brainstorm how we can get you some support.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me. There’s good support on campus—I’ll help connect you to it.”

“Wow, that sounds really hard. It makes sense you are struggling. Let’s figure out what on-campus supports can help you right now.”

## Ways to talk with a student who needs immediate help.

“I understand that you are hurting right now. I am here to help you and connect you to good support on campus.”

“I hear that you feel hopeless right now. I’ve worked with the counseling center, and I think they could help. Let’s walk over together.”

“I can tell that you’re very upset, and I’m concerned about you. I’m going to connect you with someone who can help you stay safe.”

***If a student declines support, call campus security or 911.***



Remember that you are never alone when you help students. You can enlist other professionals on campus and connect students to on- or off-site mental health services. And know that you can have a huge positive impact when a student is at a crossroads in their life. Just showing you care can create a positive ripple effect that changes a student's trajectory, educational experience, and sense of connection on campus. It is the responsibility and privilege of everyone on campus to support the well-being of the community, and you can be a champion of that.

## Resources for Supporting Students

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[Mental Health is Health](#) and [Seize the Awkward](#) both have information on spotting someone who is struggling and opening up a conversation with them.

Here are some unique ways to check in with students from JED Campus Alum [The College of Charleston](#) and The Red Folder Initiative from JED Campus [Stonehill College](#).

JED offers [You Can Help](#) trainings for faculty and students on supporting students in distress.

*Learn more about how The Jed Foundation can [support your campus](#). You can also email [jedcampusinfo@jedfoundation.org](mailto:jedcampusinfo@jedfoundation.org).*

## Contributors

Thank you Columbia University's Design for Social Innovation students who met with JED Campus stakeholders (faculty, staff, and students) to help create the beginning of this guide to support the mission of The Jed Foundation.

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