

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

Wave of Support brings together the programs and services of the many existing student support offices on campus with the goal of building a healthier campus. Browse all student resources at: care.tulane.edu/student-support

Need more urgent support?

- [The Line for Tulane Students: 504-264-6074](https://www.tulane.edu/care/line). When students want to talk to someone right away, they can call, text or chat with our crisis line, any time, day or night, for confidential 24/7 support.
- [24/7 Student Affairs Professional On-Call support: 504-920-9900](https://www.tulane.edu/care/247) 24/7 professional staff on call for urgent situations. You can also submit an online concerns report by visiting [tulane.edu/concerns](https://www.tulane.edu/concerns) or using the QR code below:



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, deep 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 to campus authorities



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.
- 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.

If you see any of the following warning signs in students, it may also be time to check in:

Missing classes, assignments, and/or exams

Repeated need for extensions and/or excused absences

Lack of responsiveness to outreach

Statements like “I’m really stressed” or “I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

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 “Active Listening and VAR”)
- Walk the student to The Counseling Center or call them at (504) 314-2277 for an urgent consultation. If the student would prefer Case Management and Victims Support Services (CMVSS), walk them there or call (504) 314-2160.
- Call campus security at (504) 865-5911 and/or 911 if facilities are closed or the student refuses to go.
- Stay with the student until help arrives.

How to Start the Conversation

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.”

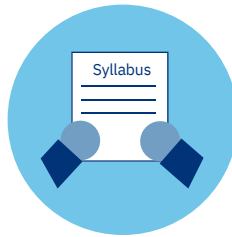
If a student declines support, call campus security at (504) 865-5911 and/or 911.

NORMALIZE THE NEED FOR HELP

Mental health issues are common, especially among college students. The number one thing students say they value most in a professor is [approachability](#). There are a variety of ways you can indicate to your students that you are a safe person to speak to:



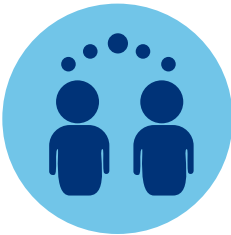
Share with your class at the beginning of the semester that they can talk to you if they are struggling for any reason.



Include mental health resources on your syllabi along with the more typical academic and tutoring resources available to students.



Ask advisees about how much sleep they are getting, if they are feeling stressed, and urge them to practice self-care.



Check-in with individual students you are concerned about and ask directly how their semester is going. If they defer to a default or vague response (e.g., "I'm fine" or "I'm good"), gently push for a little more detail.



Place a "THIS IS A SIGN" symbol on your door if you have an office or permanent classroom, or on your backpack or other prominent location to indicate that you are approachable. Consider including the digital version of the symbol attached to class document such as syllabi.



Share a story about when you needed help while in school, if you feel comfortable. Doing so is a powerful way to show students that seeking help is a sign of strength.

ACTIVELY LISTEN WITH VALIDATE-APPRECIATE-AND REFER (V-A-R)

In many cases, struggling students can be helped through a show of compassion, with active listening and appropriate responses. Consider the following tips for expressing concern for a student or advisee:



Be discreet. Find a place to speak that offers the student some privacy. This increases the likelihood that a student will feel comfortable sharing. However, do not promise confidentiality. As mandated reporters for the university, you will be required to submit a concerns report or call a student affairs professional if the student discloses concerning information.



Focus on observable behaviors. Share with the student what you have noticed. Help the student understand specifically what you are seeing while also letting them know that you care.



Use V-A-R (Validate-Appreciate-Refer) (see graphic on the right) to engage in active listening, express concern and care, and refer students to the appropriate resources.

THREE SIMPLE STEPS (V-A-R) TO ENGAGE IN A HELPFUL CONVERSATION:

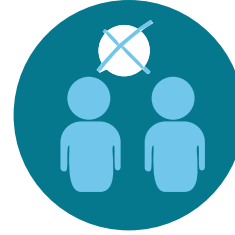
VALIDATE their experience (use phrases like “That makes sense.” and “That sounds difficult.”)

APPRECIATE the student’s courage for being open with you (e.g., “Thank you for sharing with me.”)

REFER them to support services.



Avoid judgment. Try not to express your personal opinion or diagnose the student.



Avoid minimizing the student's situation. Avoid phrases such as, "All my students feel that way;" or "It's fine, trust me, you'll get over it." Avoid comparing the student's situation by looking for something positive in their situation, as in, "Well, at least [positive view on their situation here]."



Keep a reference sheet handy (like the one in this Toolkit) with contact information for The Counseling Center as well as other resources on campus such as academic services, health services, relaxation/meditation classes on campus, campus ministry, and financial resources.



If you are concerned a student may need professional treatment, ask the student to consider speaking to a campus mental health professional. If a student declines support, let them know that you remain ready to help them take that step if or when they are ready. Be sure to report your concern to a student affairs professional (504-920-9900) or by submitting an online concerns report by visiting tulane.edu/concerns or scanning the qr code below:



EMBED COURSES WITH WELL-BEING PRACTICES

You can embed into your courses various practices and expectations that promote well-being. Practical actions include:



Set deadlines for assignments at a time of day that encourages students to get enough sleep (i.e., avoid midnight or late night deadlines).



Start class or take a break between topics with a mindful moment or meditation.



Assign self-care as a homework assignment. For example, you can encourage your students to get at least seven hours of sleep, or unplug from social media for a period of time and to reflect on how they feel afterwards. Emphasize that success is not worth it when we are too stressed or sick to enjoy it.



If a major event has happened on campus, in the community, or nationally that you suspect may be on the students' minds, consider spending a few minutes discussing it before moving on to the lesson.



Try to learn what services are being offered. For example, many health promotion offices or wellness centers offer presentations that faculty can book for their classes on topics such as overall wellness, bystander intervention, self-care, sleep hygiene, and suicide prevention training.

NOTE: It's important to remember that academically high-achieving students struggle, too. In one Active Minds survey of students with a grade point average of 3.4 or above, the vast majority (91%) of participants reported that they have felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in the last year. Embedding your course with practices that promote well-being will also help those students.

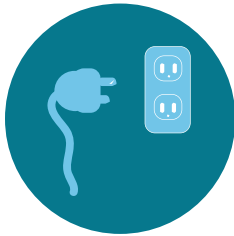
TWO-MINUTE MINDFULNESS EXERCISE FOR CLASSROOMS:



Ask students to take five slow breaths, inhaling through the nose, then exhaling through the mouth. Alternatively, ask students to think about their favorite place. Ask them to describe it in great detail, using their five senses.

REMEMBER TO PRACTICE YOUR OWN SELF-CARE

It's also important to practice what we preach, by modeling the healthy behaviors we want our students to cultivate. Faculty have suggested:



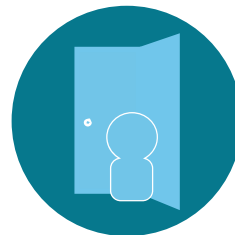
It's OK to not always be available. You cannot and do not need to operate as a 24-hour help desk. Take the time you need to re-charge and preserve your own creativity and autonomy.



Say "no" and set boundaries when needed. Pause and reflect before responding to a request and discern when to say yes and when to say no. Both can be done with heart. It is possible to say "no" in ways that still show care of others.



Prioritize your own well-being. Take the time you need to eat nutritious foods, exercise, play, rest, reflect, stretch, and grow in your life.



Take a 10-minute sabbatical every day. Reflect on what sustains you. Honor your own solitude and silence. Take a break from your devices and experience nature and connect to the world beyond yourself and your work.

If you are feeling down or stressed, find out what benefits and services are available through Tulane's Employee Assistance Program. Services may include individual counseling, couples and family counseling, professional coaching, emotional intelligence coaching, and wellness presentations to teams, departments, and workgroups.

Use Active Minds' V-A-R guide to help navigate a conversation with a student you are concerned with:



VALIDATE

Validate their feelings. Let students know it's ok to not be ok. Validating comments include:

"That sounds difficult."

"It seems like you have a lot going on, it makes sense that you might not be feeling great."

"It's totally ok that you're not on top of your game right now."



APPRECIATE

Appreciate their courage. Let them know that it was a good decision that they shared. Appreciate comments sound like:

"I'm glad you chose to tell me."

"I know sharing what's really going on can be challenging. I appreciate that you did."

"It means a lot to me that you told me how you're feeling."



REFER

Refer them to skills and support. Help them find what will help them at that moment. For some people, professional support is important and for some, healthy coping and resilience skills will help. Referring comments include like:

"Do you feel comfortable sharing this with someone you are close to and keeping me updated?"

"Have you heard of this resource on campus that... [refer to a campus program or resource that supports mental health, coping, and resilience]?"