

TEACHING TIPS: REFERRING A STUDENT TO COUNSELING

As a professor and/or teaching fellow, it is very likely that you will encounter students who would benefit from more specialized assistance than you are able to provide through teaching and/or mentorship alone. Sometimes, this will be a crisis situation, in which case you will follow emergency procedures and take immediate action. Other times, however, this will simply be a conversation with your student recommending that they see someone at their school's counseling service. Below are some tips to keep in mind and examples of things you might say to help you have that conversation. Remember, you are not alone and you can always consult with a mental health professional on your respective campus if needed.

1. **Allow** students to describe their difficulties to you if they want and **listen** carefully (try to avoid using the word "but," e.g., "...but you have so much going for you").
2. **Avoid** labels, judgments, generalizations, and/or dismissive or critical statements such as:
 - a. "What's wrong with you? You've been acting very strange lately."
 - b. "You shouldn't get upset about that...it's no big deal."
3. **Normalize** their concerns and remind them that counseling services are (usually) free, confidential, and non-judgmental. Avoid using the words "therapy," "therapist," "counseling," etc. if you think that would scare them & try "consult," "services," "resource," or "consultation" instead.
4. **Be honest** about your own limitations. Examples:
 - a. "Shira, I know it can be hard to ask for help. I'm really glad you're sharing this with me. Have you thought about looking at the counseling website? I know they offer some really great services and it might give you some ideas about what to do next."
 - b. "Fen, I hear that what we've been talking about is really important to you. I'd like to help you (get some support, resolve, find an answer [use their words as best you can]), but I'm not sure how to do that. There are some good people, though, over at the counseling center. Would you consider seeing one of them?"
 - c. "You know, Sam, lots of students struggle with what you're describing. There are some good people over at counseling services who consult with students about this all the time. I think they might be able to help you more than I can. Would you like me to give you their contact information?"
 - d. "Have you thought about looking at the counseling website? I know lots of students who've met with someone there and have really appreciated it."
 - e. "It sounds like you've been dealing with this on your own for a long time. Maybe it's time to try something different. If you want to, you could make an appointment with someone at counseling just to consult with them and have a little bit longer of a conversation like the one we're having right now. You don't have to commit to anything up front, but it might be worth a try."

5. Often, students are nervous and/or misinformed about counseling. Common stereotypes and stigmas, such as the following, can keep people from getting support that could make a big difference in their personal and academic lives:
- “Counseling is for people who are crazy or mental.”
 - “Counseling is for people who are too weak to handle their own problems. That’s not for me.”
 - “I don’t feel comfortable sharing my personal problems with an outsider. That’s not right.”
 - “I’ve already tried counseling and I didn’t get anything out of it.”
 - “They’re just gonna put me on medication or lock me up.”

Because of these and other common negative attitudes, it’s important for you to **be hopeful, reassuring, and confident** about the power of counseling as a valuable student resource in order to make an effective referral. If they’ve had a negative experience, let them know that it may have been because that counselor wasn’t the right match for them. Be as comfortable with Counseling as a resource on campus as you would be with an office like the Financial Aid Office or the Office of Career Planning & Professional Development.

6. Making an effective referral is not easy. Remember that you can help identify students who are in distress and suggest counseling as a resource, but you don’t have to be that resource yourself. Some signs that you have over-extended yourself include feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by a student’s needs, feelings angry with a student, feeling afraid, having thoughts of rescuing a student, or reliving similar experiences of your own. If you’re experiencing any of these, please speak with a trusted colleague and/or make an appointment with a therapist for yourself (through your school’s on-campus counseling service if you’re a graduate student yourself or through your EAP or personal insurance off-campus if you’re a non-student faculty member).