

# A Guide for Staff & Faculty: STEPS TO SUPPORTING A COLLEAGUE IN DISTRESS

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This guide is intended for University of Guelph staff and faculty members to learn how to support a colleague who is in distress. Read through this guide to learn how to recognize signs of distress and how you can offer supportive assistance.

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## Recognize signs of distress

All employees share responsibility for supporting a mentally healthy workplace and in your role as a staff or faculty member you may be the first person to see signs of distress in a colleague.

This may be an unfamiliar situation to you when supporting a colleague in distress, remember:

- To trust your instincts
- It's okay to ask and express concern
- Be specific about the behaviour that worries you

When recognizing signs of distress look for changes in behaviour (*examples on final page of the guide*) and consider:

1. Severity/intensity of the symptoms and behaviour; and
  2. Duration of the symptoms and behaviour
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## Respond with empathy and concern

You might be uncertain about how to respond and that is okay. You don't need to be a mental health professional to respond to someone in distress. Being there to support your colleague is the most important thing you can do. Remember to focus on the behaviours, show concern, and demonstrate you want to help.

Listen actively, ask open-ended questions, and be aware of your body language and tone of voice.

View helpful strategies for responding, next steps, and resources on the following pages.

## Helpful strategies when responding:

Express concern

"That sounds really difficult"  
"I'm here to help."

"I hear that you are....what will help you right now?"

Listen, Acknowledge, and Reflect

Be direct and specific about the observation

"I've noticed that are... [behaviour] and it seems like you ...[emotion]"

"It sounds like things are tough right now. But it doesn't mean things will always be this way"

Instill Hope

## Refer

Your role is to provide resources and let your colleague know that there is help available to them. Your role is not to treat or diagnose, but to support and refer. Let them know what supports are available to them (see next page).

After responding with empathy and concern, **share resources:**

### 1. Verbally.

*"I appreciate your vulnerability in sharing with me. I'm here to help and there are multiple options for support. Can I share some resources with you?"*  
[verbally mention resources] *"I'll send you an e-mail with these resources including any links and phone numbers, so you have them all in one place."*

**2. In writing.** Send an e-mail with the resources you mentioned verbally. In times of distress, one can feel overwhelmed and may not be able to remember everything mentioned in a conversation. Your colleague can also use this for future reference.

**If a colleague declines your offer of help:**

- Respect their decision. It is up to an individual if they accept assistance and explore supports, except in emergencies.
- Remind them that if they change their mind, they can access supports in the future.

Examples related to signs of distress, when a response is needed, and resources to refer a colleague to can be found on the last page of the guide.

## Check-in with yourself

This may be the first time you have ever had a conversation like this. You may be feeling several emotions and that's normal. After the conversation ends, take a moment to check-in with yourself and how you are feeling. Support yourself as needed because your mental health matters too.

After you've recognized, responded, referred and check-ined with yourself make sure to follow-up with your colleague. You don't need to ask them if they followed through with seeking support or if their situation has improved. You can follow-up on how they are doing emotionally.

*"How are you feeling since last time we spoke? I'm here if you'd like to talk."*

# RESOURCES TO REFER

## URGENT, IMMINENT RISK OF HARM

*"I am concerned about my colleagues safety, or the safety of others. This is an emergency"*

Immediate response required.

### Examples:

- Active thoughts of suicide, with a plan or suicide attempt.
- Behaviour that is violent, destructive, aggressive or threatening to self or others.
- Colleague is confused, hallucinating, or has trouble remaining conscious.



### IMMEDIATELY:

- If you are on campus call the **Campus Safety Office** 519-840-5000 or x52000.
- If you are off-campus or the Campus Safety Office cannot be reached **call Emergency Services: 911**

## HIGH LEVEL OF DISTRESS

*"I am concerned about some out of character behaviour for my colleague and am worried it may escalate."*

Requires a response today

### Examples:

- Deterioration in personal appearance and hygiene, and significant impairment with daily tasks.
- Expressions of severe hopelessness or references to suicide
- Substance use concerns.
- Loss of touch with reality/severely disorganized thinking.
- Physical health concerns.
- Inappropriate emotional outbursts
- Signs of self-harm



### RESOURCES:

- **EFAP:** 1-800-663-1142
- **Here 24/7:** 1-844-HERE247 (1-844-437-3247)
- **Guelph Wellington Women in Crisis, Crisis Line:** 519-836-5710 or 1-800-265-7233
- **ConnexOntario mental health, addiction and problem gambling services:** 1-866 -531-2600 or connexontario.ca
- **Talk Suicide:** 1-833-456-4566 or talksuicide.ca
- **Indigenous Mental Health Counselling and Crisis Intervention:** 1.855.242.3310 hopeforwellness.ca
- **National Indian Residential School Crisis Line:** 1-866-925-4419

## GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN

*"I'm concerned about the general mental health of my colleague"*

Response can wait 24 hours.

### Examples:

- Missed deadlines
- Reduced productivity and/or quality of work
- Absent or late more frequently
- Withdrawal or reduced participation
- Anxiety, fearfulness, or loss of confidence
- Low or irritable mood with change in energy, appetite, sleep, and/or concentration, which is impacting daily functioning.
- Persistent worry, obsessions, agitation, irrationality, racing thoughts.
- Interpersonal conflict.
- Lack of social support.



### RESOURCES:

#### U OF G RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

- **EFAP:** 1-800-663-1142 or visit [homeweb.ca](http://homeweb.ca)
- **U of G Employee Group Benefit Plans:** [uoguel.ph/benefit](http://uoguel.ph/benefit)
- **U of G Accommodation and Return to Work Planning and Follow-Up:** [uoguel.ph/ohwaccommodations](http://uoguel.ph/ohwaccommodations)

#### COMMUNITY RESOURCES:

- **Wellness Resources in Guelph and the surrounding area:** [uoguel.ph/wellnessresource](http://uoguel.ph/wellnessresource)
- **Ontario Find Mental Health Support:** [ontario.ca/page/find-mental-health-support](http://ontario.ca/page/find-mental-health-support)
- **Health Connection Ontario:** call 811 or [healthconnectontario.health.gov.on.ca](http://healthconnectontario.health.gov.on.ca)
- **Ontario Caregiver Helpline:** 1-833-416-2273
- **MediMap:** [medimap.ca](http://medimap.ca)
- **Wellness Together Canada:** [wellnesstogether.ca](http://wellnesstogether.ca)