

# Supporting Students in Distress

## A RESPONSE GUIDE FOR GRADUATE SUPERVISORS

This guide is intended to help create a culture of care and help graduate supervisors identify and potentially assist graduate students in distress. Supervisors should not take the role of counsellor, but supervisors can play a role in recognizing warning signs and connecting students with resources and support.

Recognize	Respond	Refer
<p><b>Observations may prompt you to have a conversation with a student if:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Other students, supervisors, faculty or staff express concern for the student</li><li>• A student says, or writes something that make you think they are showing signs of distress e.g. mentions of despair, suicide or death</li><li>• You have a sense that the student is struggling with something</li><li>• You notice specific behaviours of concern e.g., chronic absenteeism</li><li>• “Does what I am seeing or hearing concern me?”</li></ul>	<p><b>If concerned:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talk to the student privately about what you have seen and express your concern</li><li>• Focus and name the specific behaviour you have observed</li><li>• Be patient and allow the student to speak freely</li><li>• Avoid giving advice</li><li>• If the student is agitated, consider having someone else present or nearby or call campus security</li><li>• In virtual settings, ensure you have the student’s full name, number and location. If needed, remove other students from the online platform</li></ul>	<p><b>At any time:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reach out to <a href="#">Graduate Student Wellness Services</a> to share the concerning behaviour that you have observed</li><li>• Graduate Student Wellness Services is available to consult with supervisors, faculty and staff</li><li>• Graduate Student Wellness Services can work to support supervisors in connecting students to appropriate supports and develop an approach to the situation</li><li>• <a href="#">Student Counselling, Health and Well-being</a> have same-day appointments available M-F 9am-4pm</li></ul>

# Recognize and Respond

Below are examples of some behaviours that you may observe and questions you might ask. If you are unsure, consult with the [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#).

Mild to Moderate Concern	Moderate to Serious Concern	Serious Concern
<p><b>You may have observed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deterioration in academic performance, communication and quality of work</li> <li>• Changes in demeanour e.g. tearful, angry</li> <li>• Increased absences in virtual or in person classes</li> <li>• Low participation in virtual or in person classes</li> <li>• Sharing of difficult or distressing events (e/g., break-up, death)</li> <li>• Changes in dress or grooming</li> </ul>	<p><b>You may have observed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeated requests for special consideration</li> <li>• Significant decline in academic performance</li> <li>• Failure to complete major assignments/exams without warning</li> <li>• Significant changes in hygiene or dress</li> <li>• Changes in social behaviour and difficulty interacting with others</li> <li>• Expression of hopelessness, worthlessness</li> </ul>	<p><b>You may have observed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student missing or cannot be reached without warning</li> <li>• Suspected drug/alcohol use</li> <li>• Behaviour that is destructive, violent or threatening to self or others</li> <li>• Disclosure of a personal crisis</li> <li>• Active expressions or threats of suicide or self-harm</li> <li>• Confusing or illogical communication</li> <li>• Evidence of recent injuries (e.g., cuts, burns, bandages)</li> </ul>
<p><b>You might ask:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I have noticed you have been missing class/lab regularly, and I am concerned about you.”</li> <li>• “How are you doing?”</li> <li>• “Have you been under a lot of stress lately? Can I help?”</li> <li>• “It sounds like you are going through a lot.”</li> <li>• “Is this something you would like help with?”</li> <li>• Online: “would it be helpful to you to arrange a time to talk?”</li> </ul>	<p><b>You might ask:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How can I best support you?”</li> <li>• “I’m worried about you. Can we set up a time to talk?”</li> <li>• “Have you been under a lot of stress lately?”</li> <li>• “Do you feel unable to cope?”</li> <li>• “You are not alone. May I share some resources to support/help you?”</li> <li>• Online: “Can you remain on the platform at the end of class so we can talk a little more?” (or send a private chat message)</li> </ul>	<p><b>You might ask:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’d like to speak with you privately right now.”</li> <li>• “I am worried about your safety, and I need to get support for you.”</li> <li>• “Have you felt that life is not worth living?”</li> <li>• “Have you had any thoughts of harming yourself or others?”</li> <li>• “Are you thinking of harming yourself?”</li> <li>• “We need to get help for you right now and I’m going to make a call.”</li> </ul>

# Refer

Consider the student's responses and make the appropriate referral. It is important to note that students may choose to decline support, unless they are a risk to self or others. Consult with the [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#).

<p><b>Mild to Moderate Concern</b></p> <p><i>May need help within the next week or more</i></p>	<p><b>Moderate to Serious Concern</b></p> <p><i>Needs help in next 1-2 days</i></p>	<p><b>Serious Concern</b></p> <p><i>Needs help now</i></p>
<p><b>If the student's response suggests:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That they are having personal or relationship problems, academic concerns, depression or anxiety....</li> </ul>	<p><b>If the student's response suggests:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That they may have experienced sexual assault or another traumatic event</li> <li>• That they may be having suicidal thoughts</li> <li>• That they are having difficulty coping but there is no urgent concern of harm to self or others...</li> </ul>	<p><b>If the student's response suggests:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student may be at immediate risk to self or others... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>you can offer to treat what is shared with discretion, but it may not be possible to offer full confidentiality if you learn that the student or someone else is at immediate risk of serious harm</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Encourage the student to seek support sooner rather than later:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell the student about <a href="#">Graduate Student Wellness Services</a></li> <li>• Refer them to other support services such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">academic advising offices</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">international student services</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">student accessibility services</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Encourage the student to seek immediate support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact <a href="#">Graduate Student Wellness Services</a> for a consult</li> <li>• Tell the student about the crisis help line Text 9-8-8 the <a href="#">Suicide Crisis Helpline</a></li> <li>• For sexual assault support contact <a href="#">The Centre for Sexual Violence, Response, Support and Education</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call 911</li> <li>• Call or Text 9-8-8 the <a href="#">Suicide Crisis Helpline</a></li> <li>• If you judge that the student is at imminent risk of attempting suicide <b>do not leave them alone</b></li> <li>• In virtual settings, if possible, keep the individual online and gather contact information before ending the meeting</li> <li>• Contact <a href="#">YorkU campus security</a> to direct emergency services</li> <li>• Contact <a href="#">Student Counselling, Health and Wellbeing</a> for same-day appointments M-F 9-4pm</li> </ul>

# Reflect

Distressing situations and conversations can be emotionally draining for supervisors and faculty. Once a supervisor has connected and referred a student to appropriate supports and resources, it is important to take steps for reflection and self care to ensure wellbeing. It is vital to prioritize your personal safety and health needs after supporting someone else.

## Self Care Immediately After the Conversation

- Take any action that feels soothing and decompressing for you
- Practice a few minutes of [box breathing](#): inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4 and repeat).
- Engage in a quick 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise: name 5 things you can see, 4 you can feel, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste.
- Take a break and go outside for fresh air or drink a glass of water before starting your next task.

## Reflection and Emotional Processing Later in the Day

- Journal by writing about what happened, how you felt, and what you learned from the experience.
- Debrief with a colleague or mentor to confidentially discuss the situation.
- Ask some reflective question such as:
  - “What went well in my response?”
  - “What could I do differently next time?”
  - “How did this experience impact me emotionally?”

## Emotional Boundaries and Closure Techniques

- Conclude your day with a brief mindfulness exercise to "close the mental file" on the conversation.
- Set boundaries by reminding yourself that you are part of a support network and not solely responsible for the student's well-being.
- Use self-compassion statements, such as: "I did my best to support the student with care and empathy."

## Self-care and Restoration Within 24 Hours

- Engage in physical movement by going for a walk, stretching, or engaging in light exercise to release any tension.
- Connect socially to share how you're feeling with a friend or partner without breaking confidentiality.
- Try restorative activities like a hobby, reading, or listening to music to recharge.

# Reflection for Supervisors Continued

Self Assessment	Debrief	Self Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make time and take time to reflect on your emotions</li> <li>• “How am I feeling after the situation or conversation?”</li> <li>• Monitor physical, emotional and behavioural signs of distress, stress, and struggling</li> <li>• Be aware of recurrent thoughts of the situation</li> <li>• Note avoidance behaviour</li> <li>• Monitor feeling distracted and preoccupied</li> <li>• Be aware of irritability and insomnia</li> <li>• Contact <a href="#">YorkU Psychology Clinic</a></li> <li>• Reach out to resources such as the <a href="#">Employee Assistance Program at YorkU</a></li> <li>• Read YorkU’s <a href="#">Wellbeing Strategy</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important to note that privacy must still be upheld during discussions <b>unless</b> there is an immediate risk to the student or others</li> <li>• Consider what you learned and how you might handle situations differently in the future</li> <li>• Reach out to FGS’ <a href="#">Graduate Student Wellness Services</a> to debrief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and engage in activities that replenish you</li> <li>• Identify and engage in activities that make you feel fulfilled</li> <li>• Learn and practice controlled breathing techniques to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety</li> <li>• Get enough sleep</li> <li>• Get fresh air</li> <li>• Learn and practice daily relaxation methods</li> <li>• Practice mindfulness</li> <li>• Be active regularly</li> <li>• Resist isolation</li> </ul>