

Johns Hopkins University

Steps to Helping a Distressed Friend: a Resource for Homewood Undergraduates

From the Johns Hopkins University Counseling Center and its Advisory Board

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JHU Counseling Center: 410-516-8278

After Hours Emergencies / Campus Security / Counselor-on-Call: 410-516-7777

Office of the Dean of Student Life: 410-516-8208

JHU Sexual Assault Helpline (24/7 Resource for Victims of Sexual Assault): 410-516-7333



Are you worried about a friend or classmate who is an undergraduate at JHU?

You may want to help, but feel unsure of what to do. Here is some guidance:

If your friend...	You might try to...	If the problem persists or gets worse...	And if things just aren't getting better and you continue to worry...
Seems unusually sad, upset, or depressed	Talk to them, expressing concern and support. Consider encouraging them to visit the Counseling Center. Perhaps even offer to walk them over.	<p>What if the depression doesn't lift? <i>You don't need to figure out a solution alone.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Consider consulting the Counseling Center, or with an RA about what to do. -It might be wise to reach out to your parents, or your friend's parents for advice and support. -Consider reaching out to other peers, to see if they can also offer your friend support. 	At this point, it is best to speak with an RA or with the Office of the Dean of Student Life. Either of these resources can help make sure that your friend is getting the help he or she needs at the Counseling Center.
Is hurting himself or herself (for example through cutting or burning the skin).	<p>Express concern, offer support, and encourage them to see a counselor.</p> <p>Strongly <i>consider enlisting the help of an adult</i> (e.g. your parents, your friend's parents, an RA, the Office of the Dean of Student Life, or the Counseling Center)</p>	<p>If you haven't already, express your concerns to a professional.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The Counseling Center can offer you support and direction, but <i>generally won't reach out directly to your friend, unless he is already a client.</i> -A wise alternative is to talk to an RA or with the Office of the Dean of Student Life. These professionals will reach out to your friend and can <i>ensure</i> he is seen by the Counseling Center. 	<p>If the problem persists, <i>continue to communicate your concerns</i> to either the Counseling Center or the Student Life Office. You may know vital details the professionals don't.</p> <p>It's also important that University professionals know if your friends' distress is negatively impacting your experience at school. <i>School is meant to be a time of growth for you: not one of constant worry.</i></p>

If your friend...	You might try to...	If the problem persists or gets worse...	And if things just aren't getting better and you continue to worry...
<p>Says he is <i>thinking about</i> suicide, but that he is <u>not</u> planning to take any actions that would put his life in danger.</p>	<p>Express concern, offer support, and tell them that for their own safety you are seeking immediate help from an adult.</p> <p>If it's daytime*, ask your friend to walk with you to the Counseling Center.</p> <p>At night or on weekends, ask your friend to call the counselor-on-call while you are present (so you can ensure they actually make contact).</p> <p>If your friend won't do these things, you should call the Counseling Center immediately for advice on what to do.</p> <p>*Mon and Thurs 8:30am – 6pm Tues, Wed and Fri 8:30am – 5pm</p>	<p>What if the problem persists and your friend continues to tell you that they are having suicidal thoughts over the course of the next day(s) or week(s)?</p> <p>In such cases the best course is to do two things:</p> <p>(1) Make calls to the Counseling Center to keep them informed of why you continue to be concerned about your friend's well-being. Do this each time your friend tells you they are thinking about suicide.</p> <p>(2) Speak with the Office of the Dean of Student Life. They need to know that the problem is persisting and can check in with your friend about whether or not he or she is getting the treatment needed.</p>	<p>When it comes to a friend expressing thoughts of suicide, consider each instance an emergency. Don't assume that because they didn't act on their thoughts the last time that they won't the next time.</p> <p>Each time your friend tells you they are having thoughts of suicide, inform an adult at the University. Let a professional determine the level of risk.</p> <p>As noted above, it is important that professionals at the University know if your friends' distress is having a negative impact on your experience at school.</p>
<p>Says she is having thoughts of suicide, and that she feels she is a danger to herself.</p>	<p>At this point the wisest step is to call campus security and explain that your friend is in danger. Campus security will then do <i>at least</i> three things: 1) send one or more officers to ensure your friend is safe and to escort him or her to the hospital if needed; 2) call the Counseling Center for assistance; 3) inform the Dean of Student Life of the situation.</p>	<p>If your friend is an active danger to himself or herself, he or she should be in the hospital. Under no circumstances should you be watching over them to ensure that they don't end their life. If you feel you are in this sort of situation, immediately call campus security and explain the situation.</p>	<p>At this point it is the responsibility of the University (and potentially the Hospital) to ensure that your friend not return to housing, classes or campus until he or she is no longer a danger to himself or herself.</p>

If your friend...	You might try to...	If the problem persists or gets worse...	And if things just aren't getting better and you continue to worry...
Makes an attempt to end his life.	Call 911 immediately and explain the situation. Emergency workers can assess what medical personnel might be needed. After you have called 911, call campus security. Tell campus security that you have already called 911 for help. Campus security will inform the Counseling Center and the Dean of Student Life of what has happened.	A student who has made an attempt to end his or her life almost certainly will require intensive treatment. Typically, this sort of treatment is often so intensive (in terms of time commitment) that it precludes the ability to also be an enrolled student. It's possible this student will enter a period of medical leave of absence, so he or she has time to get better before considering a return to his or her studies.	In all of the above situations, it can be helpful to recognize when you have done all that you can . Take comfort in knowing that your friend has come to the attention of trained professionals. As best you can, try to care for yourself – it's not easy being the support for someone going through such a hard time.

F.A.Q.

My friend is not doing well, but I'm not sure whether he is seeing a counselor? Should I take his word for it? How can I find out for sure?

One idea is to get in touch with the Counseling Center. If they are already seeing your friend, this will be a good tip for them that your friend continues to struggle. However, because the Counseling Center is a confidential setting they cannot confirm or deny whether your friend is in treatment. In general, they also will not be able to reach out to your friend if he is not yet a client. So the other thing you can do is go to Office of the Dean of Student Life with your concerns. The Student Life Office may not be able to confirm whether your friend is in treatment, but they can ensure your friend makes it to the Counseling Center.

What if my friend is being seen by a counselor, but I feel there are important details that my friend isn't sharing with his or her counselor?

This can happen sometimes. You might know important details that your friend isn't sharing with his or her counselor. In such circumstances it may be wise to call the Counseling Center and ask to leave information about your friend.

Can the Counseling Center make my friend meet with a counselor?

No, they cannot! The only people on campus with this sort of power are the Directors of the residence halls and the Student Life Office.

What if I am worried that counseling isn't helping?

Again, in these circumstances it might be wise to call the Counseling Center and express your concerns. The counselor may not even be aware that your friend is not doing well. Your perspective can be really important in these circumstances.

Why do students go on "medical leave?" And will my friend have to leave school if the Counseling Center or Dean learns she is struggling?

A medical leave of absence is an option made available to students that permits them to leave during the middle of the semester to get treatment for an illness. Students who avail themselves of this option are permitted to return to the University without penalty so long as they receive treatment for the condition that necessitated their leave. *The vast majority of students who take a medical leave do so voluntarily.* During a medical leave, the expectation is that a student will get treatment so that they are able to return to school in good health and with the coping skills to allow them to succeed in school.

In rare circumstances the Dean of Student Life may direct a student to take a medical leave of absence. This may occur despite a student's wish to remain at the university during a given semester. This is done only after a careful review of each student's individual situation and treatment needs. Some of the factors which the Dean considers are whether: (1) the student is at significant risk of harm to self or others; (2) it seems the student needs more treatment and support than he or she can receive while at the University, and (3) the student is unusually disruptive to the learning environment of the campus community. It is also not uncommon in these situations that the struggling student is relying on his or her peers for emotional support. When this reliance becomes too great, or is expressed inappropriately (e.g. via pleas for help from friends during moments of despair and suicidality) this becomes an issue for the Dean of Students to address so as to protect the educational experience of those who are trying to support their struggling peer.