

# creating a culture of caring

faculty resource

Practical Approaches for  
College and University Faculty to Support  
Student Wellbeing and Mental Health



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and University Educators

## about

Active Minds is the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental health promotion and education for young adults. Active Minds has a presence on more than 800 college, university, and high school campuses, and is powered by a robust Chapter Network nationwide.

Active Minds also hosts the nationally acclaimed Healthy Campus Award and produces frequently cited mental health educational resources such as V-A-R for a widespread audience. The organization is dedicated to ending the silence and saving lives by changing the conversation about mental health.

To learn more, visit [www.activeminds.org](http://www.activeminds.org).

The Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) believes that all college students deserve an extraordinary education and that faculty members play a critical role in their success. In partnership with institutions of higher education nationwide, ACUE supports and credentials faculty members in the use of evidence-based teaching practices that drive student engagement, retention, and learning. Faculty members who complete ACUE courses earn certificates in effective college instruction endorsed by the American Council on Education.

ACUE's Community of Professional Practice connects college educators from across the country through member forums, podcasts, and updates on the latest developments in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

To learn more, visit [www.acue.org](http://www.acue.org).



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# acknowledgements

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# introduction

## *Helpers, not clinicians*

Student mental health is a growing issue on college and university campuses. National data sources, including the Healthy Minds Study, show a high and rising prevalence of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidality, and other concerns in student populations over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Approximately one in three students meet criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem. This translates to nearly 7 million students nationwide.

Researchers are still examining potential contributing factors to the rising prevalence of mental health issues. While the causes are less clear, the solutions are better known:

- Campus policies and systems that provide comprehensive, campus-wide support to students
- More resources for wellbeing and mental health
- A culture of support and care
- Individuals in all corners of the campus community equipped and ready to support struggling students.

A 2019 survey by the American Council on Education (ACE) found that 82 percent of college presidents agreed or strongly agreed that faculty on their campus were spending more time addressing student mental health concerns than three years ago.<sup>2</sup> Some institutions are training faculty to identify students who need help and are providing faculty tools to make referrals to appropriate services. Other institutions are supporting mental health or suicide prevention taskforces, involving faculty in work to create a comprehensive definition of wellbeing and prioritizing faculty mental health alongside student mental health.

These developments are welcome, but we must not lose sight of faculty members' primary responsibility to students: effective teaching that leads to meaningful learning. Faculty are experts in their disciplines and, for most, mental health is not their field. Although faculty cannot (and should not) be expected to replace the role of mental health professionals, they can take actions as helpers, not clinicians, to support struggling students.

This report provides practical approaches that faculty members can implement in "the everyday." By doing so, faculty can contribute to the creation of caring campus communities and productive learning environments that help students thrive and, when needed, seek professional help.

# recommendations

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Most mental health issues emerge by age 25.<sup>3</sup>
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.<sup>4</sup>
- The college years are a critical time to intervene to save lives and reduce the negative effects of mental illness on lifetime educational attainment, social relationships, earnings, and more.<sup>5-9</sup>

## #1: NORMALIZE THE NEED FOR HELP

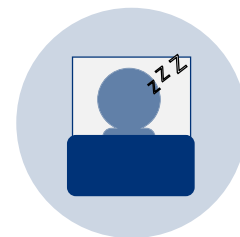
Mental health issues are common, especially among college students. The number one thing students say they value most in a professor is **approachability**.<sup>10</sup> There are a variety of ways you can indicate to your students that you are a safe person to speak to:



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



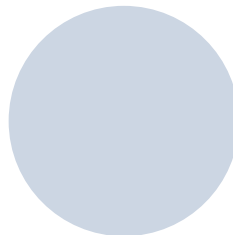
Include mental health resources on your syllabi along with the more typical academic and tutoring resources available to students. See a sample statement on the following page.



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 (i.e. "I'm fine" or "I'm good"), gently push for a little more detail.



Place an Active Minds' Here For You sticker 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 sticker 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.

## SAMPLE SYLLABUS STATEMENT:

“Consider including a statement like this one below to help normalize help-seeking for mental health and ensure students have the resources they need.”

Any student who is struggling for any reason and believes this may impact your performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students at (XXX)XXX-XXXX for support. Furthermore, please approach me if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable me to provide any resources or accommodations that I can. If immediate mental health assistance is needed, call Student Counseling and Psychological Services at (XXX)XXX-XXXX.

## WARNING SIGNS:<sup>11</sup>

If you see any of the following warning signs in students, it may be time to check-in with them about how they are doing, using the tips on the following page.

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.”

*“I appreciate when professors remind students of available student health services around stressful times during the course, since I think most students may not refer back to those sections on the syllabus after the first week.”*

– student survey participant

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

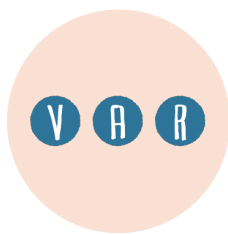
In many cases, struggling students can be helped through a show of compassion, with active listening and appropriate responses. Consider the following tips for expressing concern for a student or advisee:



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 your institution likely has specific policies about reporting requirements to convey your concern to Student Affairs or other staff responsible for student health and safety.



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:

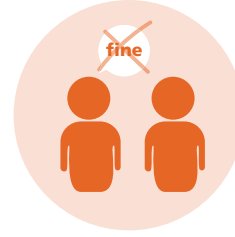
**VALIDATE** their experience (use phrases like “That makes sense.” and “That sounds difficult.”)

**APPRECIATE** the student’s courage for being open with you (i.e. “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]."



Create and keep handy a reference sheet (like the one in the Addendum) with contact information of the campus counseling center (or local resources if your campus does not have a counseling center), as well as other resources on campus such as academic services, health services, relaxation/meditation classes on campus, campus ministry, and financial literacy resources. You may find that your campus student services office already has such a reference sheet you can use.



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 your campus Community Assessment Response & Evaluation (CARE) or Behavioral Intervention Team.



## REPORTING CONCERNS TO THE CAMPUS CARE OR BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAMS

Many colleges and universities lead cross-departmental CARE (Community Assessment Response & Evaluation) committees that meet regularly to review reports from students, staff, and faculty who are worried about a student. The team will work collaboratively to share information and provide support to the campus community.

***Always follow your college or university's specific protocol for reporting concern and referring students to support.***

It's also important to remember that you are not on your own. If you are concerned about a student, consult with a counseling center for guidance. If you believe the immediate safety or well-being of a student to be at risk, you should follow the emergency protocol established by your institution. This likely requires you to engage your campus Counseling Center, Behavioral Intervention Team and/or Dean of Students. And if you think a student is suicidal, stay with the individual until he/she/they is safely in the care of responding professionals.

*"Often, I don't need anything from my professor. It just helps to be able to share what's bothering me with someone who is supportive and understanding."*

– student survey participant

*"It's helpful when my professors communicate with us often on a less formal basis to ease tension and provide a sense of 'togetherness.' It helps me feel less alone in the class and that my professor is there to help me with the challenges of the class."*

– student survey participant

## #3: EMBED COURSES WITH WELL-BEING PRACTICES

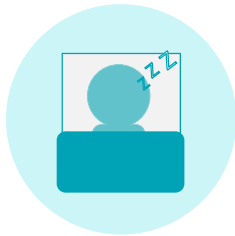
You can embed into your courses various practices and expectations that promote well-being. Practical actions include:



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.<sup>10</sup> Embedding your course with practices that promote well-being will also help those students.*

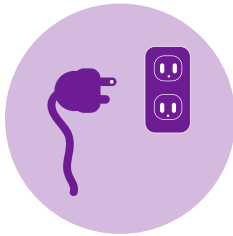
### TWO-MINUTE MINDFULNESS EXERCISE FOR CLASSROOMS:



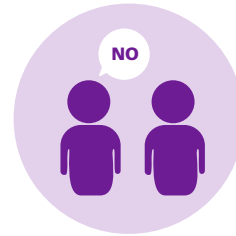
Ask students to take five slow breaths, inhaling through the nose, then exhaling through the mouth. Alternatively, ask students to think about their favorite place. Ask them to describe it in great detail, using their five senses.

## #4 REMEMBER TO PRACTICE YOUR OWN SELF-CARE

It's also important to practice what we preach, by modelling the healthy behaviors we want our students to cultivate. Faculty have suggested:<sup>12,13</sup>



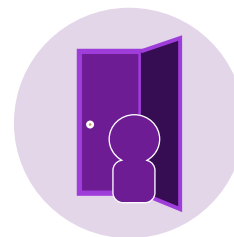
It's OK to not always be available. You cannot and do not need to operate as a 24-hour help desk. Take the time you need to re-charge and preserve your own creativity and autonomy.



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 your university or campus' Employee Assistance Program. Services often include individual counseling, couples and family counseling, professional coaching, emotional intelligence coaching, and wellness presentations to teams, departments, and workgroups.*

## conclusion

Depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts are on the rise among college students. Many counseling centers, when they exist on campus, are overwhelmed by the demand for their services. More than ever, students need the support of their entire campus community to provide caring, compassionate support so that students can cope with everyday mental health challenges and seek immediate assistance when needed and without embarrassment. Next to a friend or counseling center, struggling students most want to talk to a faculty member or an academic advisor. Faculty do not need to be mental health experts to offer help. By following the student- and faculty-informed recommendations within this guide, faculty members can take immediate action to support students' wellbeing and academic success.

## additional resource

For information about how universities across the country are effectively prioritizing the mental health and wellbeing of both students and faculty, learn about various institutions of all types and sizes that have been awarded the Healthy Campus Award for their efforts at [activeminds.org/award](https://www.activeminds.org/award).

# addendum: sample response protocol

This addendum to the recommendations is intended to be a sample guide you could reference in the absence of any formal guide on your own campus.

This sample response protocol is courtesy of the California State University System’s “Red Folder Initiative.”<sup>14</sup>

<b>SITUATION</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
The student’s actions are dangerous or threatening to themselves or other people.	<b><i>Call 911.</i></b>
The student shows signs of distress but I am unsure how serious it is. My interaction has left me feeling uneasy and/or really concerned about the student.	<b><i>Call your campus’ Behavioral Intervention Team.</i></b>
I’m not concerned for the student’s immediate safety, but they are having significant academic or personal issues and could use some support or resources.	<b><i>Refer students to an appropriate campus resource.</i></b>

## potential signs of distress:

- Sudden decline in quality of work and grades
- Repeated absences
- Disclosure of family problems, financial difficulties, depression, grief or suicidal thoughts
- Excessive fatigue or sleep disturbance
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Making implied or direct threats to harm self or others

## common campus resources:

- Campus Behavioral Intervention Team, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Counseling and Psychological Services, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Academic Services, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Health Services, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Campus Gym/Recreation, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Campus Ministry, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Financial Literacy Resources, phone: \_\_\_\_\_
- Food Pantry/Services, phone: \_\_\_\_\_

## 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]?"*

# citations

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