

Recognizing and Assisting Students in Distress

Guidance for Johns Hopkins
University Faculty and Staff

Fall 2025



JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

RECOGNIZING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

Guidance for Johns Hopkins University Faculty and Staff

Contents

Recognizing a Student in Distress	4
Helping a Student in Distress	5
Referring a Student in Distress	6
Helping a Student Experiencing Sociopolitical or Climate Distress	6
Helping a Student Who Reports Sexual or Sex-Based Misconduct or Other Protected Status-Based Discrimination or Harassment	7
Recognizing a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide	8
Helping a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide	9
Referring a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide	9
Recognizing a Student Who May Be a Danger to Themselves or Others	10
Responding to a Student Who May Be a Danger to Themselves or Others	11
University Mental Health Resources	12
University Sexual and Sex-Based Misconduct, Discrimination & Harassment Resources	13

As a member of the faculty or as a staff member who interacts with students, you may become aware of students' thoughts, behaviors, or experiences that concern you. It is important to “trust your gut” in these situations and take action.

Your kind words, expression of concern, and referral to a competent professional or appropriate authority can make a significant difference in the lives of students, their friends and family, and the Johns Hopkins community.

Mental health on college and university campuses is of critical importance. In recent years, students have faced isolation, personal challenges, and uncertainty about the future, all of which the short and long term effects on physical, emotional, social, and financial well-being cannot be wholly predicted.

We want all students who are distressed, have thoughts of or plans for suicide, or are potentially a danger to themselves or others to receive assistance before concerning behaviors escalate. While you are not responsible for assessing or treating mental or behavioral health issues, you should be able to identify students experiencing distress, know how best to respond, and be aware of appropriate resources that are available to assist you and these students.

There also are situations where you must refer students to the appropriate office and follow up with that office to report the information shared with you. If students disclose to you that they have been subject to sexual or sex-based misconduct, discrimination and/or harassment—whether by another student, a staff person, a faculty member, or a stranger—please remember that all faculty and many staff at the university are designated as [Responsible Employees](#) who are legally obligated to contact the appropriate university administrators about those disclosures.

This document will provide you information on recognizing, helping, and referring a student who:

- is in distress;
- may have been subject to sexual or sex-based misconduct (which includes sex-based discrimination and harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking) and/or protected status-based discrimination or harassment;
- may have thoughts of or plans for suicide, or may be a danger to themselves or others.

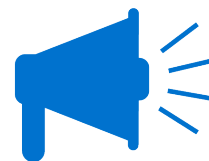
Look for these icons as you navigate this document.



RECOGNIZING



HELPING



REFERRING

See the end of this document for information about [Student Health and Well-Being resources](#) and the wellbeing.jhu.edu website, a single destination for a range of university resources. Please save this document for future reference. These links provide access to the “[How faculty and staff can help](#)” section of the university’s [student well-being website](#) and [emergency assistance webpage](#).



Recognizing a Student in Distress

Some of the more common signs and symptoms of psychological distress observed in undergraduate and graduate students include



BEHAVIORAL



PHYSICAL



COGNITIVE



EMOTIONAL

Notable change in behavior	Sleep disturbances	Slowed thinking	Anxiety
Withdrawal from social supports	Change in appetite	Negative cognitions	Sadness
Substance misuse	Poor hygiene	Difficulty with problem solving	Apathy
Decline in attendance	Stomach aches	Difficulty with concentration	Fear
Decline in performance	Headaches	Memory problems	Guilt
Acting out	Tremors	Confusion	Grief
Irritable/Agitated	Panic attacks	Distressing dreams	Depressed mood
Disruptive/Antagonistic	Flashbacks	Preoccupation with death	Irritability
Suicidal statements	Rapid breathing		Anger
Bizarre or peculiar behaviors	Rapid heartbeat		Feeling isolated, abandoned or lost
Incoherent or rambling speech or writing	Increased blood pressure		Feeling worthless
Laughing inappropriately	Chest pain		Feeling numb
			Shock

The more symptoms or the more severe the symptoms observed, the more likely it is that the individual is truly distressed. It is important to note that students may exhibit stress differently (for example, some students may be particularly likely to describe physiological rather than emotional concerns, such as headaches or stomach distress). Any of these signs of distress may be especially concerning in a student who you already know is struggling.

Reminder:
It is not the responsibility of faculty or staff to clarify the cause of the symptom or request/consider any medical information in connection with the same. Faculty and staff should focus on assisting the student in connecting to the appropriate resources.

REMINDER: While students may choose to volunteer medical information, faculty and staff are not permitted to request such information from a student. It is not the responsibility of faculty or staff to clarify the cause of the symptom or request/consider any medical information in connection with the same. There may be many factors, including mental health concerns, physical concerns, substance use, etc., contributing to the presentation. Rather, faculty and staff should focus on assisting the student in connecting to the appropriate resources.



Helping a Student in Distress

TALK TO THE STUDENT. Let the student know of your concerns, and ask whether that individual feels distressed. Please remember, however, that if you are not comfortable expressing your concerns to the student, your first step can be to consult with the university's mental health professionals, as explained below.

BE ACCEPTING AND NONJUDGMENTAL. Help the student determine what the problem might be, without minimizing the student's feelings or judging the student for feeling distressed.

If a student approaches you to talk, reinforce that choice. Acknowledge your recognition that the person hurts and has sought your help. However, in cases where a student reports or appears about to report a sexual or sex-based misconduct, discrimination or harassment matter to you, let that student know the limits of your ability to keep a report confidential and discuss any reporting obligations you may have in connection with your position.

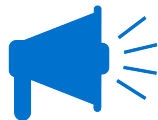
KNOW YOUR LIMITS AS A HELPER AND AS A RESPONSIBLE EMPLOYEE.

All faculty members and many staff members (especially staff who work with students) are Responsible Employees under the [Revised Interim Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedures](#) as well as the [Revised Interim Discrimination and Harassment Policy and Procedures](#). If you are a Responsible Employee, you cannot promise a student that you will keep confidential a matter that you are required to report, and you have an obligation to promptly report any information you learn regarding sexual or sex-based misconduct or other protected status-based discrimination or harassment to the Office of Institutional Equity (OIE). Please email OIE at oie@jhu.edu or the Title IX coordinator directly at titleixcoordinator@jhu.edu if you have a report or a question as to whether you are a Responsible Employee. You can also review the OIE website for [Responsible Employee guidance](#).

If you are unable to provide adequate assistance or do not feel comfortable trying to help individuals cope with their problems, it is important that you indicate in a gentle but direct manner that professional assistance is free and available, and that you will assist the student in finding competent professionals.

While talking to a student on any issue, you may also find that you are unable to provide adequate assistance or do not feel comfortable trying to help individuals cope with their problems. If this is the case, it is important that you indicate in a gentle but direct manner that professional assistance is free and available, and that you will assist the student in finding competent professionals.

KNOW THE RESOURCES THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU. Don't hesitate to contact these resources for consultation if you are not sure how to proceed. All the university resources listed at the end of this document have someone on duty with whom you can consult.



Referring a Student in Distress

Suppose that a student comes into your office and begins to describe problems that are interfering with that person's academic work. At a break in the discussion, you could say: "It sounds as though you have been under a lot of stress lately, are not doing very well, and would like to talk to someone about this. I suggest that you consult with someone at Mental Health Services, as I know they are well-qualified to help and often work with students who have similar concerns. If you would like, I can show you how to navigate to the [MyHealth portal](#), where you can schedule an appointment. How does that sound?"

You would then direct the student to the [MyHealth portal](#) at myhealth.wellbeing.jhu.edu, or for more immediate assistance or a mobile crisis response, contact the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team Access Line at 410-516-9355. A full list of resources can be found at the end of this guide.



Helping a Student Experiencing Sociopolitical or Climate Distress

You may encounter a student from a locale that is currently experiencing or has recently experienced war, civil unrest, or climate distress resulting from a natural or anthropogenic disaster. These issues can cause uncertainty about students' families, finances, or visa status, and general stress. The signs and symptoms of this type of psychological distress are also behavioral, physical, cognitive and emotional (page 4).

If a student is exhibiting signs of immediate distress, contact the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team (BHCST) at 410-516-9355, Public Safety, or 911. The BHCST provides mobile crisis response, with coverage 24/7/365, to Baltimore campuses within the Charles Village, Mt. Vernon, and East Baltimore Public Safety footprints, and consultation for Washington, DC.

Assisting a student in this situation is similar to assisting students in any other type of distress. Very often, what they want most in these situations is to feel heard and to be in the community of those who can provide compassionate support. Talk with them. Be accepting and nonjudgmental. Know your limits as a helper and as a responsible employee and recognize that students may not need or want mental health support. Know the resources available, which are outlined throughout this document and summarized at the end of this guide.

If you are working with an international student who is concerned about their visa status or returning to their home country, connect them with the [Office of International Services](#) and the resources listed on their website.



Helping a Student Who Reports Sexual or Sex-Based Misconduct or Other Protected Status-Based Discrimination or Harassment

If a student comes to you and shares information about sexual misconduct (which includes sexual and sex-based harassment, sexual assault, stalking, and relationship violence) or other protected status-based discrimination or harassment, it is important to be supportive and explain that you will connect the student with the appropriate offices that can help. It is also important to remember that if a student reports one of these issues and you are a Responsible Employee you are obligated by university policy to promptly report it (including known relevant information, e.g., names, dates, times, locations, etc.) to a university official in the Office of Institutional Equity.

OIE takes the lead in speaking with a student regarding options for pursuing a complaint, as well as investigating and adjudicating these matters for students. For all OIE matters, the vice provost for institutional equity and assistant vice provost/Title IX coordinator in the Office of Institutional Equity, can be reached at 410-516-8075 or via email: titleixcoordinator@jhu.edu and oie@jhu.edu. Reports or questions can also be submitted to the general OIE email account: oie@jhu.edu.

Please also be aware that if you are a Responsible Employee, you should tell the student you have to contact OIE about what you have heard (and disclose the names of the students involved), but that this likely will result in OIE e-mailing the student with information and request to talk. You can explain that a Responsible Employee report to OIE starts a direct conversation with the reporting student about their experience, university policy, support options, and their preferences. Even if the student does not wish to speak with OIE or to proceed with an investigatory/adjudicatory process, there may still be supportive resources and safety measures or processes that OIE can facilitate to ensure the safety and well-being of our students.

Please be aware that if you are a Responsible Employee, you should tell the student that you have to contact the Office of Institutional Equity (OIE) about what you have heard and disclose the names of the complainant, respondent, and witness(es). Let them know this will likely result in OIE emailing the student with information and requesting to talk.

If the student discloses to a responsible employee, that employee must follow the guidelines referenced above and further explained in OIE's [Responsible Employee Guidance](#). There are often times, however, that you may have intuition that a student is about to disclose something to you. In advance of that disclosure, you can gently interrupt to inform the student about the following confidential resources. Confidential resources are not required to report discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct to OIE.

Confidential Resources

- JHU 24/7 Sexual Assault Helpline (410-516-7333)
- [Health Promotion & Well-Being](#) (443-927-3548)
- [Mental Health Services](#) (410-516-3311)
- [BHCST](#) (410-516-WELL [9355]) – Mobile crisis response to Baltimore campuses; 24/7/365 telephone consultation
- [We Listen You Decide Page](#) – A full list of confidential resources to share with students
- [University Chaplain](#) (410-516-1880)

If you are unsure which supportive service is appropriate, and for sexual or sex-based misconduct matters, you can direct the student to wellbeing.jhu.edu/youdecide for a comprehensive list of confidential resources or call the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team (BHCST) at 410-516-9355 to speak with a confidential provider. If you would like to consult with a trained professional on how best to proceed in assisting the student, you are also welcome to call the BHCST and speak to them as a concerned faculty or staff member.

Please know that if a student is in physical danger the first priority is to advise the student to get to a safe place immediately and call either 911 or the appropriate Public Safety office for assistance.



Recognizing a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide

Students in serious distress may consider doing harm to themselves. Many suicide attempts are preceded by messages that the person is considering suicide. Verbal messages can range from “I wish I weren’t here” to a very direct “I’m going to kill myself.”

If you would like to consult with a trained professional on how best to proceed in assisting the student, you are also welcome to call the BHCST and speak to them as a concerned faculty or staff member.

Some nonverbal signals include giving away valued possessions; putting legal, financial, and university affairs in order; a preoccupation with death; withdrawal; a history of depression; changes in grooming or hygiene; and a sudden, unexplained lift in mood. Signs and symptoms that someone might be at risk for suicide should be taken seriously, and may require immediate intervention.



Helping a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide

If you are worried that a student may be considering suicide, it is important to ask directly whether that person is thinking about killing themselves. Mental health professionals assess suicide potential, in part, by asking:

- Are you having thoughts of suicide?
- What is your plan for suicide; have you taken any steps to put that plan into action?
- Do you have access to a means, such as pills or a weapon?
- When and where do you intend to carry out the plan?
- Have you ever attempted suicide before? If so, how and when?

While it can be challenging to ask these questions, you need not be afraid. For people who are considering suicide, these questions will not furnish them with new ideas. Most people who are actively having thoughts of or plans for suicide are willing to discuss their plan and are open to receiving help.

Note: Many people consider suicide from time to time in passing. A less specific or less lethal plan (e.g. I guess I'd take a couple sleeping pills sometime) may indicate less imminent risk for suicide, but should still be explored.



Referring a Student Who May Have Thoughts of or Plans for Suicide

Suppose that you have been talking with a student and are so concerned that the student is at risk for suicide that you would feel uncomfortable if that person simply walked out of your office. In such a case, you should indicate to the student that you need to immediately contact the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team for advice on how to be of assistance.

The more specific and lethal the plan, the more recent a previous attempt, and the greater the ability to carry out the plan, the higher the risk for death by suicide.

You should then call the Access Line (410-516-9355) immediately to determine how best to proceed. The BHCST clinician will collect basic information about the situation, your location and contact information.

For crisis situations on the Homewood, Peabody, and East Baltimore campuses, the BHCST clinicians can respond to your location with a specially trained Public Safety officer to meet with the student in-person. The Public Safety officer accompanies the clinician to ensure that the scene is safe, and the clinician takes the lead on talking with the student to do an assessment of risk and develop a safety plan. They may ask you for additional information about your observations, and can spend as much time as needed to facilitate support for the student.

For crisis situations outside of the Baltimore campus footprints, the BHCST can consult with you about the situation and assist with connections to other local crisis resources if necessary.

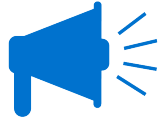


Recognizing a Student Who May Be a Danger to Themselves or Others

Unfortunately, there are cases in which a student may decide to cause injury or even death to others. You should take action to protect the student and others if you become aware of any of the following:

- Physically violent behavior
- Verbally threatening or overly aggressive behavior
- Threatening email messages or letters
- Threatening or violent material in academic papers or exams
- Harassment, including sexual harassment, other protected status-based harassment and stalking
- Possession of a weapon, particularly a firearm

On some occasions, it may be best for the mental health professional to make arrangements to come to your office to meet with you and the student.



Responding to a Student Who May Be a Danger to Themselves or Others

The Student Threat Assessment Team (STAT) at Johns Hopkins University is a universitywide, cross functional threat assessment team designated to assess, manage, intervene, and mitigate potential or identified threats or acts of violence made by a student. The student threat assessment process is a coordinated effort to ensure students, staff, faculty, and visitors to the Johns Hopkins campuses can pursue their academic and personal goals in a safe environment.

The STAT reviews concerns for students who pose or may pose a threat, while concerns related to staff and faculty, residents and post-doctoral fellows are addressed through University Administration and Human Resources.

If you perceive the threat as imminent, contact Public Safety immediately. If the threat is not imminent, you should contact for consultation the appropriate Dean of Students or JHU Public Safety. These department representatives will engage the Student Threat Assessment Team and can also advise on how best to consult with the BHCST for assistance.

If you perceive the threat as imminent, contact Public Safety immediately. If the threat is not imminent, you should contact for consultation the appropriate Dean of Students or JHU Public Safety.

University Resources

Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team (BHCST), 410-516-WELL (9355)

The BHCST pairs licensed mental health providers who have crisis response expertise with specially trained Public Safety personnel to respond to people experiencing behavioral health crises, with coverage 24/7, 365 days a year. This resource is provided to Baltimore campuses within the Charles Village, Mt. Vernon, and East Baltimore Public Safety footprints, and consultation for Washington, DC.

Once you call the access line, share your name, current location, and how to contact you if disconnected. The clinician will ask you to describe what is happening and make a plan to provide support. This often involves a response to your location or where the crisis is unfolding, accompanied by a specially trained JHU Public Safety officer. The clinician leads the response, and the Public Safety officer is there to make sure the scene is safe and ensure that the person in crisis has privacy during the meeting with the clinician.

Mental Health Services, 410-516-3311

Offers counseling, psychiatric services, group therapy, workshops, and online resources to students and learners across the University.

Johns Hopkins University Student Well-Being Website

A single destination for student well-being resources, news, and events available across Johns Hopkins University. Located at wellbeing.jhu.edu.

Resources for Faculty and Staff

A list of useful resources on the student well-being website to help faculty and staff across the university play an active role in creating a culture of well-being.

Student Disability Services

Coordinates academic adjustments or auxiliary aids and other reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.

Johns Hopkins Employee Assistance Program (JHEAP), 888-978-1262

JHU employees, including residents and fellows, and their household family members have free 24/7 access to confidential counseling and referral services for help with stress at work or at home, emotional distress, a difficult life transition, or other challenges. You can reach JHEAP 365 days a year.

University Sexual or Sex-Based Misconduct, Discrimination & Harassment Resources

Sexual Assault Helpline, [410-516-7333](tel:410-516-7333) (confidential)

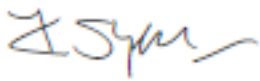
The JHU Sexual Assault Helpline is a confidential service **available 24/7 to all Johns Hopkins University students**. The helpline is staffed by the professional counselors and provides confidential assistance to those affected by sexual or sex-based misconduct. Callers may remain anonymous. All calls to the Helpline are confidential and do not constitute making an official report of sexual or sex-based misconduct to the university.

Office of Institutional Equity (OIE), [410-516-8075](tel:410-516-8075) (non-confidential)

The vice provost and assistant vice provost/Title IX coordinator are responsible for coordinating the investigation and adjudication of all matters related to sexual misconduct and protected category-based discrimination and harassment across all university campuses. In addition, OIE will work with all affected individuals to ensure their safety and promote their well-being, including by coordinating supportive measures such as no-contact orders, academic accommodations, and referrals to supportive resources. They can be reached by email at titleixcoordinator@jhu.edu or oie@jhu.edu.

Additional confidential resources, non-confidential resources, medical resources, and Public Safety and local law enforcement offices are listed in the appendices of the [Johns Hopkins University Revised Interim Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedures](#) and the [Revised Interim Discrimination and Harassment Policy and Procedures](#).

OIE also provides [resources for religious accommodation](#) and for [accommodations and adjustments for pregnancy and pregnancy-related conditions](#).



Kevin Shollenberger

Vice Provost for Student Health & Well-Being



Shanon Shumpert

Vice Provost for Institutional Equity