

Distressing Content in Student Work

Content that could be viewed as troubling arises frequently in students' academic work. Students may express their level of distress through assignments.

The following are possible distressing issues students may share:

- Disclosing personal trauma or abuse
- References to depression or suicide
- References to violence or death
- Disturbing or excessively graphic sexual content
- Stated threats or plans of violence
- Bizarre or incoherent content
- References to an eating problem or self-harm
- Disclosing problems with alcohol or drug abuse

Distressing content may simply indicate a creative or dramatic style, but may also suggest:

- Possible risk to themselves or others
- Attempts for attention
- A "cry" for help

Responding to Extremely Distressing Content

Specific threats or plans of violent acts on one-self or others necessitates **immediate** attention and response. It is imperative to seek support in managing these situations with administrators at RWU for proper assessment and planning.

People you can notify include, but not limited to:

- Dean of your School
- Dean of Students (401-254-3161)
- Vice President of Student Affairs (401-254-3093)
- Public Safety (401-254-HELP)
- Counseling Center (401-254-3124)

For concerning content without immediate threat, it may be appropriate to respond in writing or to set-up a meeting with the student.

- Acknowledge the content with empathetic comments like, "That must have been hard for you."
- Invite discussion with comments like, "Do you have someone to talk with about this? If you would like to talk, stop by after class."
- Follow additional guidelines listed in responding to less distressing content.

Responding to Less Distressing Content

Consider meeting with the student to explore their inspiration for the distressing work while also thinking about the student's behavior in class. Students can often be influenced by particular work, which manifests in their assignments. It is imperative to be direct when asking about distressing work..

Some guidelines include:

- Be specific and direct when exploring your concerns, like "I noticed in your essay you wrote about experiences you have had with cutting yourself and feeling alone. Is this something you continue to experience?"
- Express in a direct, yet concerned manner a recommendation for meeting with a counselor.
- If the student agrees to the referral, with the student present, call the Counseling Center to make an appointment.
- If the student is not ready to schedule an appointment, encourage seeking help and provide information about the Counseling Center.
- Indicate your concern for the student's wellness by following-up with the student at a later date.

Reminders

- ◆ If you feel threatened or uneasy do not meet with the student alone and seek consultation from a Staff and/or Faculty as needed.
- ◆ Use your resources. You are not expected to provide counseling or make decisions alone.
- ◆ Respond to distressing work because early intervention and referral can prevent more serious problems.

Emergencies

- ◆ To reach the on-call counselor during daytime hours, call 401-254-3124. **If the situation calls for immediate response ask the receptionist to interrupt the counselor.**
- ◆ After hours or weekends, call Public Safety (401-254-HELP) and they will appropriately assist your concern. If a counselor needs to be reached, Public Safety will assist you in the process.

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Roger Williams University

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