



# How to Identify and Refer a Student in Distress

If you're interested in learning more about supporting students' mental health please visit: [www.smu.ca/counselling](http://www.smu.ca/counselling)



**Saint Mary's  
University**

**The Counselling Centre**

Email: [counselling@smu.ca](mailto:counselling@smu.ca) | Phone: 902-420-5615

# Situations Requiring Prompt Intervention

## Direct or Indirect Reference to Suicide

Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to suicide should be taken seriously. Warning signs might include:

- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and/or helplessness.
- Thoughts that the world, family and/or friends would be better off without them.
- Feelings of strong guilt or self hatred.
- A desire to die or references to suicide.
- Giving away possessions, writing letters etc. Doing things that feel “final”.



**“I just can’t  
take it  
anymore”**

**In the event of a suicide attempt call 911 and Security’s Emergency Line at 902-420-5000.**

## Other Concerning Behaviours

- Threats of physical violence/harm or actual acts of physical violence/harm to self or others.
- Difficulty settling (i.e. experiencing heightened emotions and struggling to calm).
- If you suspect a student is overdosing or experiencing alcohol poisoning.

**For threats/acts of physical violence or potential overdosing/alcohol poisoning call 911 and Security’s Emergency Line at 902-420-5000. For other situations Security’s Non-Emergency Line may be appropriate at 902-420-5577.**

## Sexual Violence

If a student discloses recent or historical sexual violence, including harassment, consider connecting them with:

- SMU’s Sexual Violence Advisor - Dee Dooley at [dee.dooley@smu.ca](mailto:dee.dooley@smu.ca) or [www.smu.ca/svsc](http://www.smu.ca/svsc) for more information.
- Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) - registered nurses provide 24/7 response and immediate care for all individuals who have experienced sexual violence in the last 7 days. Call 902-425-0122 to connect.
- Avalon Sexual Assault Centre - provides services for all individuals 15 years and older who have experienced sexual violence including counselling, education, support and advocacy. They can be reached at 902-422-4240.

## Your health and wellbeing matters!

You may want to consider completing an Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) incident report following events such as those listed above. Any questions regarding reporting can be directed to [valerie.wadman@smu.ca](mailto:valerie.wadman@smu.ca).

Witnessing and possibly intervening in situations such as those above can also impact your mental health. Consider seeking support. Faculty can contact the Union Office at [unionoffice@smufu.ca](mailto:unionoffice@smufu.ca) or 902-496-8090 to explore options. Staff can call the Employee & Family Assistance Program at 1-800-384-4765. Anyone can contact Wellness Together at 1-866-585-0445 to speak to a counsellor.

# Other Situations Requiring Attention

## Changes in Mood or Behaviour

- Isolating or withdrawing.
- Lack of interest.
- Low energy.
- Irritable.
- Flat or numb.
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention.
- Increased dependency on others.

## Unusual Behaviour or Distortions of Reality

- Communication difficulties (i.e. issues forming sentences, rapid fleeting speech, incoherence).
- Paranoia or suspiciousness.
- Irrational thoughts or disorganized thinking.

## Disordered Eating

- Binge eating.
- Purging or other compensation behaviours like laxative use, excessive exercise.
- Rigid rules about food.
- Restrictive food consumption.
- Preoccupation with weight, how they look etc.

## Learning & Academic Difficulties

- Decline in performance or quality of work.
- Low motivation.
- Lack of concentration and/or focus.
- Difficulty understanding concepts.
- Time management concerns.
- Procrastination.
- Missing classes, deadlines etc.

## General Signs of Distress

- Change in personal hygiene or dress.
- Weight loss or gain.
- Under or over sleeping.
- Physical symptoms (nausea, headaches etc.).
- Changes in relationships or social behaviour.
- Increased emotionality or lack of emotion.
- Under or over reacting for situations.
- General avoidance.
- Maladaptive coping (excessive substance use, risky behaviour, self harm etc.).

### Consider the following referrals:

The Counselling Centre  
counselling@smu.ca or 902-420-5615

Good2Talk  
1-833-292-3698

Wellness Together  
1-866-585-0445 (adults), 1-888-668-6810 (youth)

### Consider the following referrals:

The Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team  
902-429-8167, 1-888-429-8167 (toll-free)

Nova Scotia Early Psychosis Program  
902-473-2976

### Consider the following referrals:

Eating Disorders Nova Scotia  
info@eatingdisordersns.ca

Student Health Clinic  
902-420-5611

### Consider the following referrals:

Student Success Centre  
studentsuccess@smu.ca

The Writing Centre  
studio@smu.ca

### Consider the following referrals:

The Counselling Centre  
counselling@smu.ca or 902-420-5615

Community Mental Health and Addictions  
Central intake - 1-855-922-1122

# How Can You Help?

Participate in the opportunities on campus to learn more about supporting students' mental health. The suggestions below are discussed as part of the Mental Health Series (Mental Health 101, 202, 303 and International Student Mental Health). For more information or to register please visit: [www.smu.ca/counselling](http://www.smu.ca/counselling) or you can email [counselling@smu.ca](mailto:counselling@smu.ca).

## Approach

**"I haven't seen you around lately. How are you doing?"**

Be curious about the observed behaviour that concerns you. State specifically what you've noticed and ask an open-ended question or make a general statement to give the student an opportunity to talk about what might be happening for them. The more private and safe the setting the more they may share.

## Listen

**"It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed."**

Listen to understand more so than respond. Summarize and reflect back the student's sharing to show you heard them while giving them an opportunity to correct any errors. Remember we communicate our listening non-verbally, as well.

## Support

**"I appreciate you talking to me. How can I be most helpful?"**

Thank the student for sharing with you and ensure they know that asking for help is a sign of strength. Offer hope where possible but don't make promises you can't keep.

## Refer

**"There are resources available I can tell you a bit about. Would that be okay?"**

Share information about the resources available and ensure they know you are not simply passing them off. Rather, directing them to the best possible support. If you're unsure of what resource is best, we'd recommend providing information on several, such as those included in the Free Resources for All Students card. This card has options for on or off campus support, 24 hours or limited availability services, virtual or in person delivery, peer or professional based formats and self directed learning.

## How to Make a Good Referral

- Be up to date on the resources available, including locations, contact information, how to access etc. Seek more information about resources if you're unsure.
- Only speak positively about resources and answer questions to the best of your ability.
- Give students options and choice in the process.
- Be with the student while they contact a resource, if they're hesitant, or contact a resource on their behalf, with their permission. Note that many services are self refer so the student needs to be an active participant at some point in the process.
- Remind students that many services (particularly those in the Free Resources for All Students card) are free of charge.

## If a Student Refuses a Referral or Information

- Respect their decision.
- Invite them to reach out to you again in the future if they want to talk about their options further or offer to follow-up at a later date to check-in.
- Provide take away materials (paper or virtually) for them to review later.

# Free Resources for Students

## Therapy Assistance Online (TAO) Self-Help:

Online mental health library with interactive modules to help students understand and manage how they feel, think and act. Also includes progress measures, self assessment tools and guided mindfulness exercises.



## Good2Talk:

Professional counselling, crisis support and information and referrals about mental health services available 24/7. Call 1-833-292-3698 or text Good2TalkNS to 686868.



## Tranquility:

Internet-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy program that includes online modules, interactive tools and one-on-one virtual coaching (through text messaging and/or weekly video or phone sessions) for up to 26 weeks for individuals with mild-moderate anxiety and depression.



## Togetherall:

Safe and anonymous online peer community moderated by mental health professionals available 24/7 for individuals 16 and older to get mental health support.



For more information on the above resources visit [www.healthymindsns.ca](http://www.healthymindsns.ca)

**Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team** - 24/7/365 telephone response for crisis support call 902-429-8167 or 1-888-429-8167.

**Peer Support** - One on one drop-in support offered by trained upper year students available Sept-April yearly. Email [peer.support@smu.ca](mailto:peer.support@smu.ca).

**Wellness Together** ([www.wellnesstogether.ca](http://www.wellnesstogether.ca)) - 24/7/365 resources for students enrolled in a Nova Scotia post secondary institution (even while out of the country) including:

- Professional counselling - 1-866-585-0445 (adults) or 1-888-668-6810 (youth)
- Courses, apps, articles, self assessments, videos and more