

To the Campus Community:

In an effort to help our students succeed while at Florida Tech, both personally and academically, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and the Office of Student Affairs have prepared several articles for faculty and staff this year. Staff and faculty are in a unique position to have frequent interactions with students. Therefore, you will have the opportunity to be aware of students' needs and concerns, as well as be alert to changes in their behavior that may signal the need for assistance.

We hope that the following information will be useful for you in your work with Florida Tech Students this year. Each month we will address topics relevant to college students such as alcohol use, learning disabilities, academic underachievement, multicultural issues, depression and suicide. Feel free to contact us if there are specific issues that you would like to have explored in this series.

## **Recognizing Students At Risk**

**By Robyn Coombs, Psy.D. & James R. Oelschlager, Psy.D.**

**Counseling and Psychological Services**

### **Did you know that last year at Florida Tech ...**

- ✓ 4 students were hospitalized at the local Emergency Room due to alcohol poisoning
- ✓ 2 serious accidents from alcohol use resulted in personal injury
- ✓ 8 students were hospitalized at the local mental health center, due to severe psychological distress, including suicidal ideation
- ✓ 1 suicide occurred on campus
- ✓ 1 student died from medical issues
- ✓ CAPS experienced a 56% increase in the number of students requesting services
- ✓ Previous Alcohol Surveys revealed that 32% of the freshman class (N=800) acknowledged "high risk" binge drinking on a weekly basis

### **Did you know that at college campuses throughout the United States ...**

- ✓ Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students
- ✓ 6% of college students meet the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol dependence and 31% meet the clinical criteria for alcohol abuse
- ✓ Colleges across the country have reported a large increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities, with the largest percentage of these students having learning disabilities
- ✓ 1 in 4 college women were victims of rape or attempted rape, and 1 in 12 college men admit to attempting to rape someone
- ✓ 25-30% of college women have some form of eating disorder, including bulimia or anorexia

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- ✓ College Counseling Centers have experienced a significant increase in the numbers of students they are treating and the severity of psychological problems
  - ✓ The US Senate is currently reviewing a “Campus Care & Counseling Act” bill to address the growing problem of mental health issues on college campuses

## **Tips To Help Recognize Students In Distress**

### **If the student elicits a need for help ...**

The student may elicit a need for counseling directly or indirectly. Direct requests for assistance are fairly straightforward. Making a call to the support service that is indicated (i.e. Academic Support Center, Counseling & Psychological Services, the Health Center) and having the student establish an appointment is frequently the most direct approach.

Indirect requests for assistance may become apparent by missing classes, showing visible signs of distress such as tearfulness, sudden changes in performance, grades or appearance. In these situations it may be helpful for the faculty/staff to step out of the role of evaluator and become a “concerned mentor.” It is important to recognize that some students may be uncomfortable with communicating vulnerability or emotional factors to their faculty, particularly students from another culture. In addition, it is generally helpful to follow-up with the student at a later date to check-in with them and determine if they made contact with the support service.

### **If the student exhibits unusual behaviors ...**

The student who begins to act in an unusual or atypical fashion may be signaling the need for individual attention. The behaviors listed below might suggest a problem that would require assistance:

- ✓ Withdrawal from typical social interactions or discussions
- ✓ Listlessness, lack of energy, or frequently falling asleep in class
- ✓ Excessive talking or extreme restlessness
- ✓ Unexplained crying or outbursts of anger, and/or unusual displays of irritability
- ✓ Repeated absences from classes, with little or no work completed
- ✓ Impaired or incoherent speech, and/or disjointed or disturbed thoughts
- ✓ Unusual suspiciousness and/or irrational feelings of persecution
- ✓ Irrational worrying and/or expressions of fear
- ✓ Dramatic change in hygiene, dress, and/or appearance

To prevent a misinterpretation or overreaction to the student's interaction or behavior, it may be useful to look for intense and/or multiple displays of what is described above, as opposed to single, isolated occurrences.

### **If the student experiences traumatic events or significant stressors ...**

The student may disclose to faculty and staff significant life events or stressors that result in incomplete work, low-test scores, or poor progress in the course. The illustrations listed below might suggest a potential referral to assist them in coping:

- ✓ Death of a family member and/or a close friend
- ✓ Relationship and/or family difficulties
- ✓ Trauma associated with physical and/or sexual assault, or natural disasters

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- ✓ Chronic or serious medical conditions
  - ✓ Acculturation problems or significant difficulty adjusting to college life

To help support the student during these difficult times, it may be useful to set aside regular “check-in” times, make accommodations/considerations, and/or assist in referrals to campus programs such as CAPS, the Academic Support Center, Campus Ministry, or the Health Center.

### **If the student shows signs of substance abuse ...**

The student may demonstrate behaviors that indicate excessive alcohol and/or drug use/abuse. First-year students are especially vulnerable to problems with substance abuse, due to a changing environment and freedom from the control of their caretakers. Remember, substance abuse is related to lower academic performance, a tendency to drop out of college, and high-risk behaviors. Therefore, it is important for us to be familiar with the behavioral characteristics of substance abuse that potentially affect our students' successful completion of their college careers.

- ✓ Dramatic change in style of dress, grooming or personal hygiene
- ✓ Changes in personality, irritability or unusual displays of temper
- ✓ Weight loss, weight gain, erratic sleeping and/or eating habits
- ✓ Dilated pupils, red eyes, frequent use of eye drops and/or sunglasses
- ✓ Sudden change in attendance, quality of work, grades, discipline issues
- ✓ Repeated requests for special consideration
- ✓ Lying, blaming others for troubles
- ✓ Changes in friendships, spending time with peers who abuse substances

### **When attempting to talk with a student about a personal or emotional situation, it is helpful to:**

- ✓ Talk to the student in a private setting
- ✓ Listen actively, with interest and concern
- ✓ Respect the student's right to their own values and avoid making judgmental or demoralizing remarks
- ✓ Involve yourself to the extent that you are comfortable. Extending oneself can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits
- ✓ Display openness to the student
- ✓ Provide feedback by paraphrasing or briefly summarizing what you see as the main point of the student's message or concern
- ✓ Set aside enough time to talk with the student if you are unable to at that time
- ✓ Consider Counseling & Psychological Services or Academic Support Services as a resource and discuss a referral with the student
- ✓ If the student resists help and you are concerned, contact the Counseling Center to discuss your concerns

*In the next issue, “Alcohol and College Life”*