

# PROVIDING SUPPORT DURING DISTRESSING TIMES

For George Mason University Faculty and Staff

*At Mason, we're focused on our students' success and cultivating a culture of well-being. Whether these difficulties involved health concerns, personal losses, isolation, race-based violence, or uncertainty about their future, it is more important than ever that we support our students in need. Many students are struggling with numerous mental health challenges and we don't yet know the long-term effects of the pandemic. Therefore, we need to be more attuned to students' well-being needs and show that we care.*

## BE COMPASSIONATE

- Be supportive, gentle, and approachable, understanding that some students will be more comfortable connecting one-on-one. Whether it's office hours, Zoom meetings, or even a text chain, set aside time to talk to students privately if you can.
- Students look to you for comfort, guidance, and leadership. Sharing positivity, hope, and even humor can help to ease a stressful burden.
- Focus on listening. If questions are helpful:
  - "Wow, I'd like to hear more about that."
  - "I'm sorry, that seems like a difficult situation to be in, what is that like for you?"
  - "That sounds really hard, how is that affecting your life?"

## EXPECT TO EXPERIENCE VARIOUS DIFFERENT EMOTIONS

- Many students process their emotions differently. Some may not exhibit any emotions, while others may show anger, sadness, or fear.
- Remind yourself and others that there is not correct way to react or feel.

## TAKE NOTICE OF STUDENT FUNCTIONING

- At Mason, we're facing similar – if not the exact same – challenges as any other college campus. But at the same time, our student community is unique in its makeup, stresses, and struggles.
- The aforementioned feelings, coupled with the loss of connection and the on-campus community, can make it difficult for students to get and stay focused and/or motivated.

## REACH OUT

- Talk to students, set a tone of openness and acceptance, and be real. Address uncertainty and stress. Let students know that you are open and available to talk about well-being.
- Students may have a history of trauma or struggle that's been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Keeping that in mind will help you create a safe, supportive space for your students.
- Send an e-mail or have a discussion in the beginning of class of recent events that impact students and the community. This allows students to feel seen, cared for, validated, and recognized.

## CONSIDER CREATING AN OPEN SPACE

- If you are comfortable, you can create a space for reflection to learn. Your class does not need to be related to the topic.
- You can have conversations in class or during office hours. Take account to the students who may feel triggered by making the conversation optional.
  - “Thanks for taking some time to talk with me. I wanted to have this conversation because I care about how you’re doing and want you to know that I’m here to support you in the ways you need.”

## TRY TO CHECK IN WITH YOUR STUDENTS

- Ask students to see how they are holding up, especially if there is a change of behavior or academic performance.
  - “Hi \_\_\_\_, I just wanted to check in. I’ve noticed \_\_\_\_, and wanted to see if you wanted to talk about it.”
  - “I’ve noticed \_\_\_\_ and wanted you to know that I am here to support you.”
  - “You seem distracted today. What’s going on?”
  - “Hey, it seems like you’re having a hard time. I am here to support you if you want to talk about it.”
- You’re not expected to have all the answers.
- When having a conversation with a student you suspect to be in distress, take your time so you can connect them to the right resources for their needs.
- Pinpoint their need. Does the student need resources for social connection, specialized professional help, or is this an emergency?
- Lead the way. A student in distress may not be comfortable connecting with a resource on their own. Guiding them through the process of accessing a resource increases the likelihood that they will follow through while also making them feel more confident about getting help.
- Follow up to ensure that the student has successfully connected with the resource(s) you recommended.
  - This reaffirms the connection you’ve made as part of their support system and lets the student know that they aren’t being “passed off.”
  - This may also be an opportunity to re-direct the student to a different resource if the original resource wasn’t a good fit.

## MAINTAIN ROUTINE

- During impactful or stressful times, maintaining a sense of routine is very helpful.
- Keeping up with normal curriculum and schedule helps to keep students grounded.
- Be mindful to the students who need more flexibility and accommodate special requests.

## USE YOUR AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) provides consultation services to faculty and staff in mental health education training, how to assist students with problems that affect the learning process, and how to respond to crisis situations. Consultation, adjustment to college, relational issues, and other mental health topics are also available.
- CAPS also provides community education programs to classes or groups on mental health and personal development topics. To ensure our availability, we suggest that requests for presentations be made a minimum of three weeks in advance of the anticipated program date. Please note that during times of high demand, it may not be possible to fill all community education requests.
- To make a community education presentation request, please fill out the form at <https://caps.gmu.edu/community-education-presentation-request-form/>

## WHEN IN DOUBT, DO NOT WAIT- CONSULT AND REFER

- Let the student know that you're not "passing them off" as a problem or burden. Reiterate that you're here to help them and you're not going anywhere.
- A student in distress may not be comfortable connecting with a resource on their own. Guiding them through the process of accessing a resource increases the likelihood that they will follow through while also making them feel more confident about getting help.
- When talking with students, please remember that University employees (except confidential resources in most instances) are required to make reports of certain types of behavior, such as sexual misconduct, crime, acts of discrimination, and concerning behaviors that are potential precursors to future violence. For more information, see [stopviolence.gmu.edu/concern/](https://stopviolence.gmu.edu/concern/).
- Counseling and Psychological Services at Mason partners with the Student Support and Advocacy Center <https://ssac.gmu.edu/> to help address student, faculty, staff, and/or parent concerns about students that may raise safety and well-being issues.
- Please call CAPS at 703-993-2380 on Monday/Tuesday/Thursday/Friday between the hours of 9am and 4:30pm, or Wednesday 12:30pm to 4:30pm, for assistance. After normal business hours and on weekends, you will be directed to "press 1" in order to connect ProtoCall with the student in need. ProtoCall can also provide guidance to faculty or staff on how to support a student in crisis.
- A list of community providers can also be found at <https://caps.gmu.edu/community-provider-search/>
- Other university support services
  - <https://caps.gmu.edu/resources-and-self-help/diversity/>
  - Center for the Advancement of Well-Being: [wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources](https://wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources)
  - Mental Health First Aid: [wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mental-health-first-aid](https://wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mental-health-first-aid)
  - Mindful Mason Moments: [wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mindful-mason-moments](https://wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mindful-mason-moments)
  - Student Support and Advocacy Center: [ssac.gmu.edu/support-request-and-referrals/](https://ssac.gmu.edu/support-request-and-referrals/)
  - GMU Center for Psychological Services: [psyclinic.gmu.edu](https://psyclinic.gmu.edu)
  - Mason Chooses Kindness Toolkit: [kindness.gmu.edu/mck-toolkit](https://kindness.gmu.edu/mck-toolkit)
  - Emotional Support Help Line: 703-215-1898
  - Student Health Services: [shs.gmu.edu](https://shs.gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-2831
  - Student Involvement: [si.gmu.edu](https://si.gmu.edu)
    - [sa@gmu.edu](mailto:sa@gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-2909
  - Center for Culture, Equity, and Empowerment: [cee.gmu.edu](https://cee.gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-2700
  - Graduate Student Life: [gradlife.gmu.edu](https://gradlife.gmu.edu)
    - [gradlife@gmu.edu](mailto:gradlife@gmu.edu)
  - Contemporary Student Services: [contemporary.gmu.edu](https://contemporary.gmu.edu)
    - [offcamp1@gmu.edu](mailto:offcamp1@gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-6563
  - International Programs and Services: [oips.gmu.edu](https://oips.gmu.edu)
    - [oips@gmu.edu](mailto:oips@gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-2970
  - LGBTQ+ Office: [lgbtq.gmu.edu](https://lgbtq.gmu.edu)
    - [masonpe@gmu.edu](mailto:masonpe@gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-2470
  - Veterans: [military.gmu.edu](https://military.gmu.edu)
    - 703-993-1316
  - Women and Gender Studies: [wgstcenter.gmu.edu](https://wgstcenter.gmu.edu)
    - [wmst@gmu.edu](mailto:wmst@gmu.edu)

### Resources:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255
- Crisis Link (NOVA hotline): 703-527-4077
- CAPS: 703-993-2380
- Crisis Link Text: Text CONNECT to 85511
- TimelyCare: [timelycare.com/gmu](https://timelycare.com/gmu)