

Let's Help Our Students

A Faculty and Staff Resource Guide

No. 1 in a Series

Supporting Student Well-Being at George Mason University

Supporting Student Well-Being at George Mason

At George Mason, we are committed to the success and well-being of our students. We recognize that students face many challenges that can impact their mental health and overall well-being.

This guide is designed to help faculty and staff recognize when a student may be struggling and respond with compassion and care. It provides practical strategies and campus resources to support students' mental health and well-being. Together, we can cultivate a community where every student feels supported, valued, and empowered to thrive.

Let's Understand

College student mental health remains a pressing concern, with nearly 47% of students screening positive for depression or anxiety in 2023–24, yet fewer than half receiving counseling support (Healthy Minds Network). Stress is widespread—76% of students report moderate or high stress, and 77% say mental health challenges have negatively impacted their academics. Many students also report persistent feelings of loneliness, sadness, and disconnection, which can make it challenging to stay motivated and focused. We see the same trends at George Mason.

Many faculty and staff are concerned about their students' mental health and want to help. A 2024 Healthy Minds survey of higher education professionals found that over 50% reported that students' mental health had worsened since they began their careers (HigherEd Today, 2024). While 83% of staff reported feeling comfortable discussing mental health with students, this level of concern underscores the importance of equipping faculty and staff with the necessary tools to offer support and make effective referrals.

Encouragingly, campuses (including George Mason) are expanding support systems, such as [peer programs](#), telemental health services such as [TimelyCare](#), and [online learning tools](#) for

faculty and staff who are interested in supporting students. With awareness and access to resources, faculty, and staff can play a vital role in supporting student well-being and success.

Sources:

<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2024/10/28/new-report-sheds-light-on-college-faculty-and-staff-mental-health>

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mental-Health-Higher-Ed-Stats.pdf>

Let's Be Aware

Recognizing the Signs

We all want to help. Yet, most students don't feel comfortable telling their instructor when their mental health is affecting their ability to complete coursework.

At George Mason, we're working together to build a culture of warmth, patience, and well-being where students feel safe opening up. In many cases, struggling students won't approach you first, so check in with them frequently and look for any signs that a student may be in distress.

Academic Signals

- Ongoing absences, calling in sick, or repeated tardiness
- Decline in classroom engagement or quality of work
- Assignments or other classwork that include disturbing content and/or themes of despair, hopelessness, suicide, violence, death, or aggression
- Missing work, multiple requests for extensions, or grades of "Incomplete"

Physical Signals

- Appearing ill or fatigued
- Drastic change in appearance, from clothing and makeup to weight gain/loss
- Marked change in mental state and/or apparent intoxication
- Unusual/out-of-context behavior

Inter/Intrapersonal Signals

- Short-tempered or on-edge
- Speaking out about feeling distressed, overwhelmed, worthless, anxious, etc.
- Open expressions or subtle signs of hopelessness
- Acting out of character
- Peers expressing concern about a student
- Implied or direct threats of harm to self or others
- Self-injurious, destructive, or reckless behavior

Don't Forget About Yourself

In supporting students, it's easy to overlook your own well-being. Faculty and staff also experience stress, trauma, and uncertainty, and it's important to care for yourself, too. Many of the same strategies we recommend for students apply to you as well.

Don't hesitate to talk with a trusted colleague or supervisor about any feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, or distress you may be experiencing.

For well-being resources specifically for faculty and staff, visit [Mason Employee Relations](#) or [Patriots Thriving Together](#).

Let's Start the Conversation

What Can I Do to Support Our Students?

It's not always easy for students to open up, but acknowledging that we all face challenges can be a meaningful starting point for honest conversations and a psychologically safe space. So, talk to students, set a tone of openness and acceptance, and be real. Let students know that you are open and available to talk about well-being.

Share Your Experiences.

Part of students feeling alone and "less than" is the sense that "everyone else has it all together," so be vulnerable and let students know that you struggle too.

Offer Time and Space.

Be supportive and approachable, understanding that some students will be more comfortable connecting one-on-one. Whether it's office hours, Zoom meetings, or a text chain, set aside time to talk to students privately if you can.

Provide Safety.

Students may have a history of trauma or struggle. Keeping that in mind will help you create a safe, supportive space for your students.

Let the Student Steer the Conversation.

Meet your students where they are and follow their lead as they open up.

Be Positive.

Students look to you for comfort, guidance, and leadership. Sharing positivity, hope, and even humor can help to ease a stressful burden.

Taking Care of Underserved and Marginalized Student Populations

Well-being and mental health are important to everyone. There are underserved and marginalized student populations that have historically been left without access to resources that fully understand their experiences. This can feel lonely and alienating. Work towards building a sense of connection and belonging where each story is welcome and valued. This can be done by being open to listening to their stories, validating their experiences, and showing empathy. Do what you can to guide students to resources that align with their identities.

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) at George Mason provides culturally inclusive care. If students would like to seek resources outside of the university, here are some options to share:

BIPOC Student Resources

[BEAM \(Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective\)](#) Black virtual wellness directory to find Black therapists, doulas, yoga teachers, and mediators throughout all 50 states.

[AYANA Therapy](#)

Online mental health therapy for marginalized and intersectional communities.

[Inclusive Therapists](#)

These therapists center their services around the needs of marginalized populations, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the LGBTQ+ community, neurodivergent folx, and people with disabilities.

Let's Take the Next Step

Help Students Find Support

Consider yourself a front-line worker when it comes to student well-being. Get familiar with and take advantage of Mason's many mental health and well-being resources.

Connect Students with One Another

Peer support is critical, so take advantage of opportunities to facilitate connections between students outside of any specific crisis or issue. Encourage interactions outside of the classroom where you can.

Share Tools and Research

Part of not feeling alone is knowing that other people are experiencing – and managing – the same challenges. Share the research and tools from this resource at your discretion.

Let's Empathize

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. Jack.org's "Be There" initiative offers a simple five-step process (with examples) to help guide the conversation:

Say What You See

"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 are having a hard time. I am here to support you if you want to talk about it."

Show you care

"I care about your well-being, so I just wanted to check in to see how you're doing. I want to know how I can be the most helpful for you."

"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."

"How can I be helpful?"

Hear Them Out

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 was it affecting your life?”

Connect to Help

“Thank you for being so open with me. I want to continue this conversation, and I also want to make sure that you’re getting the help you need. I really think you may find ____ to be a very helpful and comforting resource.”

“Reaching out to ____ for the first time can be a little confusing. Would you like help connecting to ____?”

“I really think ____ can address some of your needs, but sometimes it takes several tries to find a place that is the best fit. For any reason if it doesn’t feel like a match, then ask what other resources may be a better fit for your needs.”

Tip: Offering the name of someone from the resources can help the student feel more comfortable when they reach out.

Let’s Use Every Available Tool

Lead Students to the Right Resources

We’re fortunate that George Mason has a wide variety of resources to help us support our students. Depending on the type of support you’re trying to offer, know you’re empowered and equipped with what you need to help our students.

You’re not expected to have all the answers. Once you’ve determined that the student may require help beyond your capabilities, here are the next steps you can take.

Pinpoint Their Need

Does the student need resources for social connection, specialized professional help, or is this an emergency?

Continue the Journey

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.

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.

Check In

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.

Privacy and Information Sharing

Professionals affiliated with confidential resources will gladly receive information from you about a student's well-being. However, due to privacy laws such as FERPA and HIPAA or professional ethics, some resources are often unable to provide reciprocal information to you regarding the student. This can be frustrating, but these privacy laws are an essential ethical and legal safeguard for student privacy and confidentiality.

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, click [here](#).

Let's Keep the Conversation Going

Consider this guide as your starting point. There are countless ways to support our students, and we are all responsible for contributing our best efforts and ideas to create a culture of well-being and mental health. Just remember:

- Your influence is important.
- Be open, approachable, and empathetic.
- Make well-being part of the learning environment.
- All feelings are valid.
- Connection and community make a difference.
- Share your experiences AND resources.
- We're all creating a culture of well-being and mental health together.

Emotional Support Help

For emotional support, students (as well as faculty and staff) can always call the Emotional Support Line through Mason's Center for Community Mental Health at 703-215-1898.