Communicating with Students in Distress

Body Language

It is important that your body language communicates interest and concern. This is done with your facial expression, posture, tone of voice and eye contact.

Active Listening Skills

Students in distress usually want to speak with someone who can both understand and help them. Active listening is a great tool to communicate with a student who wants to feel understood and hopeful. Here are some basic principles of active listening to consider:

- Communicate your desire to hear what is going on for the student.
- Seek information by asking open ended questions like: “So what happened then?”
- If you are not following or understanding what the student is saying, ask them to clarify. For example: “I am not quite sure I understand what you just meant, can you help me better understand.”
- Convey to the student you think you understand their story. For example: “Before you continue, let me make sure I am understanding what you have told me so far”
- Convey to the student your perception of how much they have been impacted by the circumstance. This is often done by using a feeling descriptor such as: feeling angry, overwhelmed, scared, or nervous.
- Active listening is also meant to communicate hope without promise of specific solution. For example: Letting the student know that he/she will have support to deal with the situation and will not have to do it all by themselves, can provide some immediate relief.

Other Helpful Hints Dealing with Student in Distress

- Skill is not enough. It is only when your underlying attitude is one of acceptance, respect, and interest, that this attitude combined with skill will make your response truly helpful.
- Be aware of your negative judgments about the situation.
- Be as specific as you can in terms of what are the next steps.
- Consult, Consult, Consult

University Counseling Services is Available to Help you Help Our Students

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