

In collaboration with

# What to say: communicating with students who may need additional support

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

Now more than ever, students are in distress. Faculty are often the first to see students in distress, yet may be unsure about what to say or how to reach out to them. This resource is your step-by-step guide to begin a conversation with the student in a way that shows you care. You don’t need to be a therapist, but you can be kind and supportive while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review this resource and consider how you could incorporate these techniques into your role as faculty. For additional information on facilitating discussions contact [CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

### Keys to remember

* That you are motivated by care and concern
* You don’t need all the answers
* There are resources and support for you and the student

### What you notice

A student who used to be an active participant in class discussions has been much more reserved over the last 2 weeks. Recently, they either have their camera off or are turning it on and off throughout the class. They have submitted their assignments on time, but you feel that the quality has decreased, and they are not as thorough as they typically are. In the most recent class, the student had their camera on but looked visibly upset (e.g., seemed very sad, puffy eyes, frequently using tissues to blow nose).

### Making contact

The student may contact you. If that’s the case, proceed down this resource to the next section, **The Meeting**.

If the student does not reach out and you are still concerned about their wellbeing, **reach out**. Doing so demonstrates to the student they are not alone and that you notice them struggling.

**Consider sending an email first rather than asking them to stay after class**. Due to the pandemic and many students sharing spaces with family, they may not be able to stay after or may not have a private space to discuss their concerns. In your email, it is best to be concrete about your observations; remember you have no idea why they may be in distress. Be non-judgmental, curious rather than prescriptive, and focused on their wellbeing.

Consider this sample text:

“Hello, I’m writing simply to check in and see how you’re doing, as I’ve felt that in class you’ve not been participating as much as usual. There are so many sources of stress in life these days and they can have a significant impact on each of us in different ways. I’m not presuming to know what your experiences are or how they are impacting your academic experience, but I was worried about you and wanted to write to offer any support that I could. Would you be open to meeting in office hours to check in?”

The above script:

* is based in care and concern not judgement
* validates the stressors that they may be experiencing and normalizes responses to stress
* avoids presumption of stress / response in their specific circumstance
* ends with care, concern, and an offer for support

### The meeting

#### Step 1: Lead the way

As the person in the position of power, it is important that you begin. It makes a great deal of difference if the person in the position of power makes clear statements acknowledging the stressful reality that many of us are in; this opens the door for the student to agree rather than forcing them to be the ones to first voice their struggles.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. There is so much going on in the world these days, I just wanted to check in to see how you were doing and if there’s anything I can do to help. Just so you know, while I’m here to listen, I don’t expect you to share with me any of your private experiences if you don’t want to. Just know that I’m here to help however I can.”

#### Step 2: Listen

Below is an example of what a student may share with you about their experiences at this time:

They apologize for not being as engaged in class and are worried that they have been a distraction. They are embarrassed that you noticed and apologize again. They share that their parent was recently diagnosed with COVID-19 and their older brother has moved back home due to being out of work. Their parent is recovering but it is a difficult process, and the cramped living situation has everyone on edge.

#### Step 3: Reflect

It is important to be aware of how you are reacting because that will dictate how you respond.

**Self**: How has this student’s story impacted you? Are you resonating with certain parts of their experience? Perhaps you are thinking that this time is hard for everyone? How has COVID impacted your own family?

How are you showing up to this conversation? Your own experiences, beliefs, and stress levels will shape how you understand and connect with the student’s story. For example, if you are experiencing your own distress these days, you may be less able to be there as an emotional support for the student. This may manifest as a rapid referral to therapy even if therapy is not warranted.

**Perspective take**: Pay attention to the student’s behaviors in the conversation. Note their apologetic stance and their nervousness in speaking to you. Do you sense that they feel guilt or shame? Are they embarrassed?

How are they showing up to this conversation? Being able to see things from their perspective can guide your response. For example, consider the courage it takes to speak to a professor about being in distress. Consider the cultural barriers that they may also be fighting through to connect with you in this moment.

#### Step 4: Respond

**Validate:** Before anything else, begin by validating what you have heard and commend them for having the courage and strength to connect with you.

“I really appreciate you taking the initiative to connect with me today. I’m sorry to hear about how your family is struggling right now, and I thank you for sharing about how all that is impacting your ability to connect in class. What is most important to me is that you and your family can stay safe and that you have what you need to recover.”

**Normalize:** Let them know that they are not alone in their struggles and that many others at USC are experiencing loss, having difficulty connecting with work or classes, and experiencing other hardships. If you feel comfortable, consider sharing a story about a time when you recently felt disconnected from your work due to the pandemic. This step of normalizing also allows the student to know that they do not lack resilience but that being distressed by stressful things is a normal psychological response.

**Be curious:** Rather than seeking to solve the student’s problems, ask them what type of support would be most helpful for them. This way, you avoid recommending resources that they do not want to engage in or making suggestions that they may have already tried. Stay curious and direct the conversation to the next steps.

“I wonder what things you have tried already to access support, or if there are supportive people in your life you’ve turned to?”

“Based on what you’re going through and the way it’s impacting you, I wonder if you have ideas about what type of support would be most helpful for you, or what you see a good next step being?”

#### Step 5: Making a plan

In what may be one of the most difficult but important parts of this conversation, it is imperative that you do not force the student into a plan of action if it seems that one is not appropriate. Sometimes, trusting that the student will reach out to their resources as needed is enough.

If the student shares that they feel they are going to be ok, remind them that you’re there for them and they should reach out again if they change their minds.

If the student shares that they are uncertain, help them by breaking down the situation into manageable parts:

**Basic Needs**: “Well, first, I want to make sure you and your family are connected to the support you need. For some, they may need financial support, or help connecting to medical care. Is that something you need help with?”

Suggested Resource: [Campus Support and Intervention (CSI)](https://campussupport.usc.edu/)

A note on CSI: Often, it’s not clear what type of support would be most helpful to a student; often, students themselves are uncertain. CSI is the place to go if you and the student need any type of support connecting to resources. The staff at CSI are there to help a student understand their needs and connect them to appropriate resources.

**When in doubt, connect the student with CSI.**

“Campus Support and Intervention is a place you can call, and I really hope you do. They are experts in this. I’m happy to talk with you to get the help you need. You just need to email CSI at [uscsupport@usc.edu](mailto:uscsupport@usc.edu) and they will get back to you within one business day. If they cannot help you, they know who can and will get you to the right place.”

**Personal Mental Health**: “Also, many people who are struggling these days are seeking help by talking to someone who can listen and be supportive. It can be really helpful to talk with someone. Are there people in your life you can reach out to for support?”

Suggested Resource: Friends, family, religious leaders, counselors

A note on counseling: There are many reasons why counseling is not appropriate (e.g., cultural beliefs, stigma, trust). You may suggest counseling as one of many options, but we advise against framing counseling as the only / most appropriate support at this time.

**Academics**: “Let’s talk a bit about how I can work with you to ensure you are getting the most out of your time in class.”

Suggested Resource: Offer office hours to discuss material

#### Step 6: Follow up

In what may be the most important step, send a follow up email to check in. Even if you and the student did not feel a specific plan was appropriate, an email from you to check in and let them know you are thinking of their wellbeing has a profound effect on the student’s sense of connection, community, and support.

If you have a plan in place, follow up on the plan you worked out with your student. You can Checking in with the following emails can show the student they are not alone, they matter, and there is still support if needed:

“Hi, I just wanted to check in to see how you were doing after our conversation and to let you know that I’m here to help you connect to (RESOURCE) as we discussed if that would be helpful. Please reach out if I can be of further support to you.”

If you are still concerned about the student and their wellbeing, you are encouraged to contact [Campus Support and Intervention](https://campussupport.usc.edu/) (phone number 213-740-0411) for a consultation with their staff. This can be completely confidential: you do not have to give the student’s name or information. Consulting with CSI allows you to ask the lingering questions you have, review the steps you took, and receive helpful recommendations and support as you support the student.