

Supporting Students in Distress



This module is about students of concern.

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Understand the program leader's role
- How to manage student students of concern
- Learn about resources available to you

☰ **Students and Stress**

☰ **Approaching Students of Concern**

☰ **Resources and Support**

❓ **Quiz**



Students and Stress

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Students may face distress abroad

While studying abroad is exciting and enlightening, being outside one's culture and comfort zone, even for a short period of time, can also be disorienting and emotionally challenging. Culture shock and homesickness are common, and the typical stressors facing university students may be amplified abroad.

As a Faculty Program Director (FPD), you will play a role in identifying and supporting students who need help.



It is common for program participants, as well as program leaders, to experience some degree of culture shock while abroad.

Culture shock is a term used to describe the anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) felt when people operate within an entirely different cultural or social environment. It grows out of the challenge of learning about and adapting to a new culture. Culture shock may manifest as irritability, loneliness, stereotyping host country or culture, decreased academic performance, etc.

Though it may feel frustrating and uncomfortable, experiencing culture shock is not a sign of failure. It means you are stepping outside of your comfort zone and truly interacting with a new culture!

Some degree of culture shock is normal, and most people will adapt quite successfully, become more independent, learn a great deal about themselves and another culture, and thrive like never before. However, other participants may experience prolonged or more concerning issues and may require further support.



The Faculty Program Director's Role

Faculty Program Directors are in the best position to recognize, assess, and act as a resource for students in distress, and should be prepared to do so.

Your role is not to diagnose psychiatric illness or to become the student's counselor or therapist. However, **you should know how to recognize a student in distress, assess the situation for risks of harm, approach the student, keep the student safe, and get them to professional care** if it is needed.

The expectation is that you:

1 **NOTICE** when something's wrong. Program leaders must engage with students enough to know their personality, how they typically respond to situations, and how they are coping day-to-day.

2 **TALK** with the student to assess the situation and give reassurance and support. Find a time to have a private conversation when neither you nor the student are rushed or preoccupied.

It is necessary to keep lines of communication open so that students feel comfortable coming to you and trust that you care about them and have their best interests in mind. You must know a student's usual behavior in order to assess whether something has changed, or a student is not "acting like themselves." Genuine, supportive conversations in relaxed settings allow this to happen naturally.

3 **ACT** by providing resources and support to the student, documenting the situation and actions taken, and reporting about the situation as appropriate.

Proactive and early management of stress reactions is effective. Don't wait to intervene until it becomes a crisis.

What to look for:

Academic Indicators

- Deteriorating academic performance
- Continual seeking of special accommodations
- Essays or creative work indicates extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair

Physical Indicators

- Deterioration of physical appearance
- Evidence of significant substance abuse
- Excessive fatigue and/or agitation
- Evidence of self-injury
- Hyper-activity

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators

- Tearfulness
- Mood swings
- Increased isolation
- Irritability
- Confusion, indecisiveness
- Unprovoked anger/hostility
- Change in sleep patterns –insomnia, sleeping too much
- Bingeing, purging, restricting, over-exercising
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- Direct statements about thoughts of self-harm
- A hunch or gut-level reaction that something is wrong

Safety/Risk Indicators

- Written or verbal statement of finality or suicidal tone
- Giving away of prized possessions
- History of suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Self-injuries or self-destructive behaviors

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Approaching Students of Concern

How to approach a student of concern



We are all conditioned when we're asked, "How are you?," to respond automatically with, "I'm fine." But you haven't learned anything about how that person is really coping. So, if you are concerned about a student and they say, "I'm fine", it can help to say, **"I know you said you're fine, but I've noticed that..."**

Point out the specific things about the person's behavior or mood that seem different to you, and pair that with an open-ended question that invites the person to talk. For example:

- "I have noticed that you haven't been joining us in the evenings this week and I'm concerned. How have things have been going for you?"
- "I've noticed you have been awfully quiet lately. What's been on your mind?"

- “You seem pretty stressed. Would you like to tell me what’s going on?”
- “You said you’ve been having trouble sleeping. How are you feeling?”



Your role is to **listen without judgement**. Don't try to problem-solve at first; just make sure the student feels heard and understood. Once they have finished, you can brainstorm together what might be helpful. **Ask the student what has worked for them in the past** when things have been difficult. Are they doing any of those things now? Ask, “What do you need?” and “What can we do to keep you going?”

When talking with a student in distress, you should:

- Remain calm
- Listen, respect, and accept what is shared
- Explain confidentiality protocols. (Remind them you are a Responsible Employee and have reporting requirements. You cannot promise confidentiality, but you can assure them you will respect their privacy. You will only share information with those with a legitimate need to know and who can assist.)
- Avoid false promises
- Trust your instincts
- Encourage help seeking
- Remember you are not a counselor or responsible for their behavior
- Communicate and maintain clear boundaries
- Refer them to resources
- Document & follow-up

DO	DO NOT
Set realistic academic and personal goals before you go abroad	View the experience as an extended vacation
Periodically reassess your goals	Expect to see profound changes immediately
Step outside of your comfort zone in order to learn the local language and culture	Put yourself in unsafe situations or expect to become proficient/fluent in a day
Expect to feel frustrated, angry or down sometimes	Let frustration or anger consume your experience
Talk to others about how you're feeling	Hide away in your room or sleep all day
Talk to your faculty program director if you're having a problem	Think you're the only one struggling or experiencing difficulties

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Resources and Support

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- UNC Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) - 24/7 | +1.919.966.3658
- GeoBlue
- Study Abroad Office and/or relevant school/unit advisor
- Associate Director for Global Travel
- Local host institution or organization
- Local emergency services
- Department of State



GeoBlue's Global Wellness Assist offers remote counseling for no co-pay and is confidential, in addition to in-person appointments with mental healthcare professionals.

Additional Training Opportunity

Mental Health First Aid Course

An excellent resource for learning and getting an opportunity to practice intervening in mental health challenges is the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course. MHFA is based on the model adopted by CPR: that non-professionals can learn to recognize the signs of a problem and be trained to assess and intervene appropriately. MHFA teaches non-professionals how to tell when a person is experiencing symptoms severe enough to require clinical intervention and when a person is able to use self-help strategies and support from others to cope with the symptoms they are experiencing.

The best way to learn these skills is to practice them with a trainer. UNC encourages, but doesn't require, Study Abroad program leaders to take the MHFA course in person. This course is currently available at no cost through the UNC School of Social Work (<https://sswevents.unc.edu/mhfa-training>). The course is also available in the community through the national MHFA organization. Classes are posted at the national MHFA website: mentalhealthfirstaid.org

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Key Takeways

We hope this module has provided you with a better understanding of:

- Your role as the program leader in identifying and supporting students in distress
- Common indicators that a person is in distress
- How to support students of concern
- The resources available to you

CONTINUE

Lesson 4 of 5

Quiz

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Question

01/03

In your role as a Study Abroad program leader, you are expected to:

- Act as therapist or mental health counselor for your students
- Accurately diagnose common mental health problems
- Listen without judgement and provide resources for students

Question

02/03

As a Study Abroad program leader, you should:

- Develop relationships with students that allow you to recognize when a student is behaving uncharacteristically
- Make arrangements to have a student sent home when they seem upset
- Seek immediate mental health intervention when a student exhibits distress

Question

03/03

When you notice that a student is acting in a way that is a change from how they typically behave, that lasts more than a short period, you should:

- Avoid mentioning it so that you don't damage your relationship with them
- Privately let them know that you've noticed this change, that you care about them and are concerned and ask how they are doing
- Notify the student's parents that the student is not coping well in the program



Thank you for completing this module. Please close this window to go to the next module.