



University of Toronto

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Responding to University of Toronto Students in Crisis:

Q & A Session with the Coordinator of Student Crisis Response Programs

Q. What kinds of resources are available to a University of Toronto student in crisis?

The University of Toronto is fortunate to have a number of excellent resources for students who encounter difficulties over the course of their academic program. In addition to a full complement of student support services on all three campuses – such as health, counseling, and accessibility services – we also have specialized resources not found at other universities. The Community Safety Office, Student Retention Services, and the Student Crisis Response Programs are examples of resources that address some of the unique needs of a large decentralized institution such as the University of Toronto. Our college system also provides excellent support at the residential and registrarial level.

The Student Crisis Response Programs are designed to respond to a range of student crisis situations, and the Coordinator works with local staff to provide the degree and type of intervention that will assist students in crisis in maintaining satisfactory academic progress and functioning successfully within the campus community. Typically, the SCRP Coordinator deals with three main types of crisis – individuals in personal crisis, individuals with behavioural issues that precipitate a local crisis, and groups of students affected by a crisis situation.

Q. What about students who present with complex concerns?

Most student crises are the result of a number of smaller problems, rather than being caused by a single catastrophic event. For that reason, some students will require the services of a number of campus and community resources in order to effectively resolve their situation. Depending on the complexity of the student's concerns, using a case management approach is often the best way to ensure that a student gets the kind of consistent, comprehensive, and coordinated response they need.

The Student Crisis Response Programs work with campus and community resources to determine the appropriate case management approach for a particular student. This

often requires coordination and collaboration with staff in the student's college, and may also involve referral or consultation with counseling resources, the Community Safety Office, or Student Retention Services.

Q. There is increasing concern about what universities can do to encourage the early identification of troubled students. How do the Student Crisis Response Programs help the university build a campus-wide capacity for identifying and supporting students in difficulty?

Training and education on issues related to students in crisis is an important focus of the Student Crisis Response Programs, as it raises awareness in the University of Toronto community about some of the difficult issues students face.

The educational programming that SCRP provides is designed to reflect the real-life needs and issues of the university community, and is available to interested faculty, staff, and students. For example, the SCRP has hosted two inter-university conferences on student crisis issues – one on ***Making Connections in Student Mental Health*** and another on ***Students at Risk***. These conferences are designed to provide a forum for administrative and teaching staff to bring their best thinking about student crisis issues, to help develop comprehensive and consistent responses across clinical, administrative and academic domains.

The Student Crisis Response Programs also produce a 16-page guide, entitled ***Connections: Identifying and Referring Students in Difficulty***. This booklet is intended to assist staff and faculty in identifying when professional assistance might be beneficial to a student, how to make an effective and appropriate referral, and provides information on consultation and emergency resources available to the University of Toronto community. Numerous requests for this booklet have come from all over University of Toronto, as well as from other universities in Canada and the United States. The booklet is available online at <http://www.sa.utoronto.ca>

The SCRP Coordinator also plays an active role in a number of university initiatives related to student crisis issues. For example, the Coordinator is one of three designated case managers for the Interim Room Program, which provides short-term transitional housing to University of Toronto students facing violence or abuse. The Coordinator also serves on the ODA Accessibility Planning Committee Mental Health sub-committee, and on the Women's Safety Network, an informal but active network of University of Toronto staff, students, and faculty who meet regularly to plan and implement initiatives related to the promotion of women's safety on campus.

Q. What support is available to students affected by a campus emergency, such as the tragic incident in Blacksburg, Virginia?

In response to the identified need for a systematic on-site response to serious incidents affecting the University of Toronto community, the Coordinator of the Student Crisis

Response Programs and the Manager of the Community Safety Office coordinate the Crisis Support Team (CST).

This team works in tandem with the Crisis Management Team, the Emergency Response Team, the Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) Trauma Response Team, and Student Services as part of the overall emergency response plan at the University of Toronto. The Crisis Support Team is designed to supplement existing local resources in the event of a serious event or crisis, and provide immediate on-site support and trauma management to those affected by the incident.

This past year the CST Coordinators were called to respond to a number of tragic events - the death of a student in a street-racing incident, two instances of student suicide, the sudden death of an alumnus on campus, and several assaults on students in a study abroad program.

Q. What can a faculty or staff member concerned about a student do to get help?

The Student Crisis Response Programs Coordinator provides case consultation to staff and faculty with questions or concerns about students in difficulty. Together with staff in Academic Departments, Residences, Registrars, Student Services, and other divisions, the Coordinator works to develop strategies and options that will both support the student and resolve the crisis. Depending on the particular requirements of the situation, the Coordinator may intervene directly to assist a student, and can provide interim case management and follow-up as needed.

Q. Don't confidentiality requirements prevent university faculty and staff from discussing concerns about a particular student?

Although University of Toronto staff employed in roles related to the provision of health care – counselors, psychiatrists, and social workers, for example – have professional and legislative provisions requiring them to maintain the confidentiality of student health records, even they are permitted to make exceptions when there are concerns about the student's imminent personal safety or the safety of others.

Staff and faculty are always welcome to consult with professional counseling staff to get advice and direction about how best to respond to student-related concerns, and counselors are usually very willing to provide general advice even when they are limited in their ability to share specifics (for example, whether or not a particular student is being seen by a counselor).

Faculty and staff should safeguard students' privacy whenever possible, and ensure that information about a student in crisis is provided to other university staff and faculty on a need-to-know basis only. At the same time, it is important for staff and faculty to be clear about the limits of their ability to keep some kinds of information confidential when a student discusses personal concerns. When in doubt, faculty and staff should consult with the University of Toronto policies that deal with disclosure of student information,

with their supervisor, and/or with the student affairs or counseling resources on campus to ensure that the situation is handled appropriately.

Q. What opportunities exist for strengthening the safety net for students in crisis?

Serving the diverse needs of students in crisis requires not only adequate resources and effective programming; it also requires increased sensitivity and capacity among the many individuals at the University who regularly encounter students in difficulty or distress. The Student Crisis Response Programs endeavour to address both of these needs – by offering student-centred programs and centralized resources to fill in some of the identified gaps in service (such as specialized case consultation and case management, and on-site critical incident response), as well as by providing opportunities for local communities to develop their own knowledge and expertise in assisting students in crisis. Some of the SCRP initiatives that support these goals include:

- Continued capacity building through enhanced educational programming for faculty, staff, and students. For example, the SCRP Coordinator is now certified to provide suicide awareness and intervention training using the ASIST model, the most widely-used and well-researched training currently available.
- Continued development of crisis-related educational materials for University of Toronto faculty and staff. For example, a manual for staff and faculty on ***Responding to Student Mental Health Concerns*** is currently in process.
- Enhanced connections with community crisis response agencies and services, such as the Gerstein Centre and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
- Ongoing training and development of the Crisis Support Team, and the refinement of its role within the overall emergency response at the University.
- Collaboration with the newly restructured student life services and programs on the St. George campus.