

CSE TAs Let's Talk About Mental Health Spring 2025

Context:

This presentation and conversation are not directed at your “normal” work as TAs but is intended as guidance for times when you interact with students who are experiencing emotional distress in the moment, or who have shared information about their mental health and well-being that falls outside of your professional scope and personal/professional boundaries.

Ultimately, **we want students to receive the best possible care**, while taking care of ourselves, working within our scope(s) and being mindful of both our personal and professional boundaries (which can be different for each of us).

What is scope?

- the extent of the area or subject matter that something (or someone) deals with or to which it is relevant. Your job description.

What are personal (ex. personal bubble) and professional (ex. checking email outside of business hours) boundaries? These will be different for each of us, so there are no universal rules, but it can be an important task for you to make the time to take an inventory of what those are for you.

- It is OKAY to state directly!
- (Ex. students asking about your personal life; students asking about your relationships, families, etc.; students asking about your personal identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- **Consent matters** in the professional environment and within interactions with students as well. **You are not obligated to violate or let others violate your personal and professional boundaries.**

How to Help: Talking with students.

Remember: Listen, Express Concern, and Refer!

- Your role isn't to be a counselor; you need only to listen, express concern, and offer referrals.
- **LISTEN** sensitively. Listen to thoughts and feelings in an open, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student is expressing.
- **EXPRESS CONCERN** in behavioral, non-judgmental terms (e.g., “I’ve noticed you’ve missed a lot of class lately and I’m concerned.” vs. “Why have you missed so many classes lately? Don’t you want to do well in this class?”)
- **REFER** them to resources that can help. Reinforce and normalize using resources as part of student success.

Examples of Effective Listening:

Listening sensitively

- “Thank you for telling me about this.”
- “It sounds like you’ve been feeling so bad that you can’t get your work done.”

Expressing concern

- “I’m concerned that you’re feeling so anxious.”
- “I’m worried about how stressed out you’re feeling.”

Referring

- “What kind of help do you need right now?”
- “I’m really concerned about you. The UW has a free service where you can talk to a counselor 24/7. Can I show you how to do this?”

When to redirect, refocus, and/or refer?

When you feel that a conversation or interaction is progressing outside of your scope and/or your personal boundaries. TRUST YOUR GUT!

How to redirect, refocus, and/or refer?

- Remember the scope of your role and your professional AND personal boundaries.
- Utilize the “No... and or but” model
 - You are not expected to operate outside of the scope of your role, and it’s okay to say that directly to students, “I can’t help you with that, but I’m happy to refer you to someone who can.”
 - “That question/this conversation falls outside of the scope of my role, but I’m happy to help you find the person/information you need.”
 - “I wish I was able to help you with this, but I’m happy to refer you to someone who can.”
 - “It sounds like you’ve been really struggling with this...”
 - “Before we go further into this conversation, I want you to know that I am concerned and care about you (if saying something like this falls within your personal and professional boundaries), but this may be outside of what I’m able to help you with...”
 - “The Allen School has a full-time mental health consultant who can help students get the mental health and wellness support they need.”
 - It’s okay to say to the student, “I feel uncomfortable answering that question.”

- Avoid – “I feel uncomfortable with that question” as that could feel shaming or accusatory.

Empathize – Validate – Normalize:

- **Empathize** – Put yourself in their shoes.
 - “I can hear that you’re really struggling with this.”
 - “I can imagine how challenging this is for you.”
 - “I’d feel the same way if this was happening to me.”
- **Validate** – Let them know that you hear what they are saying. **Validation does not mean agreement. You don’t have to agree with them.**
 - “This is causing a lot of strong feelings in you.”
 - “I can see that you are really struggling with this.”
 - “It can understand why you’re feeling frustrated by this.”
- **Normalize** – Let them know that they are not the only one who thinks or feels this way.
 - “A lot of students feel this way.”
 - “I felt this way when I was a student.”
 - “I hear these same concerns from a lot of other students.”
 - “This is a common experience for students.”

Language matters:

- “Manage” instead of “handle” or “deal with”
- “Coping” instead of “fixing”
- “Regulate” instead of “calm down” or “settle down”
- “Challenges” instead of “issues” or “problems”
- “Mental health and wellness” instead of “Mental illness”
- “Refer” instead of “hand off,” “hand off is too similar to “hands off.”
- Avoid asking, “why?” – tends to sound accusatory – instead - “I’m curious to hear more about that.” “Could you tell me more about that?”

Cultural differences

It’s important to remember that cultural differences in communication can include more than just spoken language. It can include non-verbal communication, mannerisms, politeness, expectations about physical touch (handshakes), attitudes, beliefs, including some that could be seen as “sexist, ableist, homophobic, heteronormative, etc.” through different cultural lenses.

How to manage stress and take care of yourself after challenging conversations:

- Prioritize yourself – to the extent that you can and need to (reschedule your next meeting).
- To the extent that you can, take a break. Go outside, move your body, breathe deeply, drink water, eat if you’re hungry or missed a meal.

- Debrief with a supervisor or trusted colleague.
- Chat about something non-work related with a friend or loved one.
- Visit your “happy place,” whatever that may be (cat videos, food pics/recipes, pics of family)
- Connect with your non-work life.
- Re-engage with work when you’re ready.