

# **Helping Distressed Cadets: A Guide for Faculty, Staff and Administrators**

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Faculty, staff, and administrators are often the first to notice when cadets have personal concerns that impede learning and development. Linking cadets with resources can help prevent a crisis from developing or minimize the effects of crises that do occur. This guide covers common questions and tips on identifying distressed cadets, helping cadets, and referring cadets to Cadet Counseling.

### **Purpose of this guide**

At some point, you may be concerned about another cadet at VMI. Expressing concern and helping to link people with resources can help prevent a crisis from developing or minimize the effects of crises that do occur. This guide covers common questions and tips for recognizing when someone may be in distress, being a helpful peer, and referring cadets to the Center for Cadet Counseling.

### **What is Cadet Counseling?**

The mission of the Col. Mike E. “Doc” Monsour Center for Cadet Counseling is to facilitate the personal development of cadets to meet their full academic and personal potential and to promote the health and wellness of cadets by offering services such as personal counseling, health education, crisis intervention, consultation with the VMI community, and a peer counseling/peer health education program (the Cadet Counseling Staff). Our offices are located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of Post Hospital located behind Crozet Hall. All counseling sessions are confidential, free, and provided by professional counselors. Cadet Counseling also maintains a library of self-help resources for cadets and VMI employees.

### **What are signs that a cadet may be in distress?**

A cadet is more likely to need assistance when s/he shows a number of signs of distress, there is a marked change from previous functioning, and the cadet’s behavior is significantly different from peers. The following are signs that a cadet may be in distress, as well as common reasons why cadets seek counseling:

#### Academic Problems

- Lower grades than previously attained
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration (e.g., deadline extensions)
- Avoidance of class participation, excessive anxiety when called on in class
- Disruptive behavior interferes with class
- Decreased motivation, memory, and concentration

#### Social Problems

- Withdraws from family, friends, and peers
- Reports feeling lonely
- Unwilling to communicate with others
- Refers to problems in relationships (with roommates, dating partners, family, etc.)

#### Unusual or Extreme Behavior, Emotions, and Appearance

- Exaggerated emotions that are inappropriate to the situation
- Mood that is depressed, lethargic, irritable, angry, and/or aggressive
- Excessive or irrational worry, anxiety, and/or guilt
- Speech that is very rapid, nonstop, and/or incoherent
- Inability to make decisions, even with time and help in clarifying the situation
- Loss of touch with reality (e.g., sees objects not seen by others in the room)
- Poor impulse control
- Deterioration in personal hygiene
- Dramatic weight loss/gain
- Drug/Alcohol Abuse

#### Experiencing Stressful Life Situations (currently or in the past)

- Death or loss of a family member or close friend
- Serious illness of a family member or close friend
- Recent divorce/separation of parents
- Physical/sexual assault, past abuse
- Financial and legal problems
- History of emotional problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicide attempts)

#### Reference to Death, Suicide, or Harming Others\*

- **Verbal or written reference to suicide as a current option**
- **Verbal or written threat to hurt others**
- **Pervasive feelings of hopelessness or helplessness**

**If you are concerned about a cadet due for any of these reasons, immediate consultation with a professional at the VMI Health Center is critical. If this occurs during a furlough contacting 9-1-1 to determine how to speak to a mental health professional is strongly recommended.**

#### **How can I help a cadet who seems distressed?**

When you are concerned about another cadet, it is best to talk with this person privately when you both have time to talk. Try to listen carefully, be willing to help, avoid critical/judgmental statements, and express your belief that help and hope can be found. Express concern directly by stating specific observations (e.g., “I have noticed that you are tearful in classes and have stopped turning in homework” is better than “You aren’t yourself anymore”). It can be helpful to talk about the courage required to examine oneself and confront problems when needed. Cadets may have a range of reactions when approached about a problem, including relief, embarrassment, denial, and anger. Ask how you can be helpful. Be sure to set clear limits and take care of yourself. Your job is to provide resources and support, not to force someone to do something (***unless it is an emergency***). Remember that it is the responsibility of the cadet to get and utilize help.

### **When should I suggest that a cadet go to Cadet Counseling?**

No one has the expertise to handle every problem. Professional counselors are available to assist cadets in distress and to help determine if a counseling referral is appropriate. Referrals are often helpful in the following situations:

- You feel consumed, overwhelmed, or stressed out by the cadet's problem.
- You know that you do not have the expertise to handle the problem.
- Personal differences interfere with your ability to be helpful.
- The boundaries of your role with the cadet make it unwise to know personal information.
- The cadet acknowledges that there is a problem, but is reluctant to discuss it with you.
- The problem does not seem to get any better over time.

### **How do I make a referral to Cadet Counseling?**

When meeting alone with a cadet, suggest that s/he make an appointment at Cadet Counseling. Be sure to let the cadet know that the sessions are confidential and free. You can also offer to call Cadet Counseling from your office and hand the phone to the cadet to make an appointment. If you think the situation is an emergency, please tell the person answering the phone. Unless the cadet is at risk of harming themselves or others, the decision to seek counseling is a personal choice. Reluctant cadets may find it helpful to come to a one-time consultation session, rather than make a long-term commitment to counseling. Cadet referrals can be made with the Cadet Counseling in person (M-F, 0800-1630 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Post Hospital located behind Crozet Hall), by phone at ext. 7667 when on-Post and (540) 464 – 7667 when off-Post. If a non-emergent referral is made to the Cadet Counseling and the cadet is not present during the time the referral is being made, an e-mail outreach extending an invitation to meet will be made by an Institute Counselor. Again, unless the cadet is at risk of harming themselves or others, the decision to seek counseling is a personal choice. After 1630 on weekdays or on weekends, all emergency referrals are made through the Infirmary (1<sup>st</sup> Floor, ext. 7218).

### **What do I do in an emergency?**

An emergency is a situation when a cadet presents a serious likelihood of harming themselves or others. If you are in such a situation, remember to stay calm, get the assistance of others, and try not to leave the cadet alone. VMI Health Center staff is available to assist you in emergency situations (X 7218 or X7667). If you call first, please be sure and convey to the person answering the phone that you are calling with an emergency. If you need to escort a cadet to the Post Hospital you may call VMI Police (463-9177 or 9-1-1), or contact the Officer In Charge or Commandant's Office (ext. 7313) to ensure safety. ***After hours, cadets with emergencies should be referred directly to the Infirmary (X7218), unless the cadet is in need of emergency medical attention, has threatened violence or acted in a violent fashion, or appears to have lost touch with reality (e.g, Is seeing or hearing things that others cannot). In any of those instances VMI Police should be contacted immediately through 9-1-1.*** Over furloughs cadets with emergencies should seek assistance by presenting at the local emergency room at Stonewall Jackson Hospital (458-3300).

***If you are concerned about another individual's behaviors that warrant emergency attention on Post, whether it is a cadet, faculty or staff member, or visitor, Post Police should be notified immediately by calling 9-1-1 or 463-9177. If the distressed individual is not located on Post, law enforcement should be notified by calling 9-1-1.***

**What should I expect after a referral?**

Cadets will meet alone with a counselor who will assess the cadet's needs and ways that Cadet Counseling or another office may be able to help. Since counselors are not legally permitted to give information about a cadet to others without written consent (including whether or not the cadet attended sessions), counselors may not be able to provide updates on the cadet's progress. You may, however, follow up by asking the cadet about the referral.

**What if I need more information?**

You may have a situation where you do not know if you should refer a cadet, a cadet you are concerned about does not agree to seek help, or you are not sure what to do to help a cadet in crisis. Professional counselors are available (ext. 7667) to consult about cadets and available resources at VMI and in the Lexington community. Counselors are also available to train faculty, staff, and administrators in helping and referral skills.