

Dear Colleagues:

As we begin a new semester, we are well aware of the difficulties we faced last semester and at the same time are optimistic about approaching our work with renewed energy and a recommitment to creating a safe, caring, and healthy community for all. The tragic loss of three students to suicide during the fall semester calls for even greater diligence as we begin our work this semester. Research shows that when any community experiences suicide, a likelihood of additional suicides exists in that community in the future. Now more than ever, we need to be vigilant in looking out for the safety of our students. We cannot afford to lose any person, especially a young, promising member of our community, in this devastating way.

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) is offering faculty and staff three important sets of resources in this letter. These resources, which offer a beginning point for helping to keep our community safe, include: 1. Warning signs of emotional distress and suicidal risk, 2. Helpful interventions for students who you believe may be at risk, and 3. Dates and times of upcoming training sessions on suicide awareness and intervention.

### **Warning Signs**

We cannot “prevent” all suicides from happening, but we can be attentive to warning signs. Students who attempt suicide often communicate some signs that they are considering suicide. This mnemonic may be helpful in remembering some of these signs: “IS PATH WARM.”

- I Ideation: Listen for any evidence of suicidal thoughts/ideation. Examples include references to “leaving” or wanting to be “gone.” If there is indication that the student may be experiencing thoughts of suicide, ask him/her directly about suicidal thinking (see “Interventions” below).
- S Substance Abuse: Be aware that use of recreational substances, including alcohol (in combination with thoughts of suicide), is associated with higher risk for attempted suicide.
- P Purposelessness: Loss of “drive” or decreased sense of meaning in a student’s endeavors can be cause for concern.
- A Anxiety: The presence of anxiety in combination with depression can put a student at higher risk for a suicide attempt.
- T Trapped: If a student feels that he or she has no good options for resolving a crisis, he or she may be more susceptible to suicidal thinking.
- H Hopelessness: Lack of hope that circumstances can improve is one of the strongest correlates of suicide attempts.
- W Withdrawal: Pulling back from friendships or social interactions is reason for concern.
- A Anger: Signs of agitation or anger are more evidence that a student may be at risk.
- R Recklessness: Impulsive behavior (or speech) are more reasons for concern.
- M Mood Changes: Any emotional change from what is typical can put a student at higher risk.

### **Interventions**

- Engage the student by expressing care and asking about his or her well-being. Relate any concerns directly to the student: “I’m worried about you. You seem down today. How are you doing?”
- When in doubt, do not wait to ask the question, “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” If the answer is “yes” or you sense hesitation, walk the student to CAPS – located in Elson Student Health at the corner of Jefferson Park and Brandon avenues. You can also call CAPS at 434-243-5150 Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., or call the CAPS after-hours service at 434-972-7004.
- If you are concerned about a student, err on the side of making a referral to CAPS. There is no concern too small for a referral to CAPS.
- Utilize resources on Grounds. If you are unsure how to approach a student or what to do, you can call CAPS for consultation at any time (see contact information above). A number of academic and administrative supports also are available for students who are dealing with mental health issues, including the Office of the Dean of Students (434-924-7133).
- Follow up with the student. Checking in with a student in the days and weeks following your initial inquiry is one of the most effective ways to show care and support.

### **Upcoming Training Sessions**

CAPS will be offering three 60-minute training sessions this month on suicide prevention on Grounds:

- Tuesday, January 20, 12 noon, Newcomb Hall, Kaleidoscope
- Thursday, January 22, 4 p.m., Newcomb Hall, Gallery
- Wednesday, January 28, 4 p.m., Nau Hall, Room 101

Each training session will be followed by a 30-minute optional Q&A session for those interested in learning more. Reservations are not required for these sessions. Please just come and encourage your colleagues to join you. Although not required, if you do plan to attend one of these sessions it would be helpful if you could RSVP to Deb Howard at: [ddh2n@virginia.edu](mailto:ddh2n@virginia.edu). Lunch will be provided at the January 20<sup>th</sup> session. Light refreshments will be served at the other two sessions.

In addition to the above scheduled sessions, please consider having CAPS provide a suicide prevention training session for your department or area. The earlier in the semester that you can schedule department-specific training, the better for our students. To schedule a training session, please contact Andrea Iglesias, CAPS assistant director for outreach, at 243-5150 or [ai3y@eservices.virginia.edu](mailto:ai3y@eservices.virginia.edu).

It is more important now than ever that we are vigilant in looking out for our students. Let’s come together to create the caring, supportive, and safe community to which we all aspire.

Sincerely,

Tim Davis and the CAPS Staff