

discussion guide

Overview

Thank you for choosing *At-Risk for College Students* as a part of your college's training material.

After students have completed the course individually, it is beneficial to gather them and elicit a discussion of their experiences and the material covered. This guide was designed to help you facilitate that conversation.

A group discussion allows for a collaborative and reflective exchange of issues, concerns, and problems posed by the training, drawing from each participant's experience. The objective of such a dialog should be to confront any remaining confusion around approaching and referring friends that you believe might be at risk.

Group Discussion

Experiences with the training will naturally vary from user to user due to the choices available in the simulated conversations. For example, students may have embarked on completely different conversational paths with the same student. As a result, it can be expected that students will express not only a variety of opinions but also report certain variability with their experiences.

Used as either a springboard or a roadmap, this document seeks to provide some guidance on how to best utilize students' experiences and to facilitate an engaging and valuable group discussion. The discussion should emphasize the three major concepts presented in the training: Identify, Approach & Refer. Note that the group discussion can take many forms, and you may want to stray from this guide and follow the interests and experiences of the participants; this is an acceptable and equally valuable approach to enhancing the impact of the training.

This discussion should take about one hour. The discussion can occur immediately after training (for example, with a computer lab set-up and all participants completing the training together), or at a later date.

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Preparation

Below is a checklist to use in preparation for the discussion.

- Facilitator Training: You've taken the training and are familiar with its contents.
- Participant Training: Participants can take the online training simultaneously (immediately prior to discussion) in a computer lab setting; be sure to provide headphones (or request participants bring their own). Alternatively, participants can take the online training on their own prior to the discussion.
- Location: Consider choosing a location you feel is most conducive for a group discussion, possibly where participants can sit in a circle and see each other as they share answers. The discussion can also potentially occur during a regularly scheduled group or meeting, once all participants have completed the online training individually.
- Computer Access: You may want a location with a computer, so you can bring up the training during the discussion (if you are sufficiently familiar with the material). Alternatively, you may want to have available the Powerpoint slides provided for outreach about this training (in "Spread the Word").
- Local Resources: Print out copies of your list of "Local Resources".
- Campus-Specific: Learn the answers to the following questions about local mental health resources, so you can share them with the group. The mental health services or counseling office on your campus should be able to provide you with the answers.
 - Is there a mental health service provider located on campus? How do you get there by walking?

 - Are there resources for crisis counseling (emergency/urgent mental health support) on campus? If not, what resources are available in the community?

 - Are emergency (same day) appointments available on campus or is there a waiting period?

 - Is there a cost for on-campus mental health services?

 - What are the school's policies regarding whether a student's family would be notified?

 - If a student seeks mental health support, will their instructors be notified?

- Review: Look over the rest of this document so you can be familiar with the questions you'll be asking the group and get an idea of what sort of questions and concerns may arise during the discussion.

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Discussion Questions: Identify

Let's start by looking at how to notice when a friend needs help. As you saw in student profiles of Jesse's friends, there are some important signs of distress to become familiar with. Before we move ahead we should address this term – “distress” – that is used in the course. “Distress” is used broadly to suggest causes for concern. Signs of distress could include seeming overly anxious or stressed, being sad or depressed for a long time, thinking about suicide, intentional self-harm, issues around food and eating, and excessive alcohol or drug use.

What is most important is that you know what to look for, how to talk to a friend you're worried about, and where to refer your friend for more help.

- Question: Out of Jesse's friends, Travis was the one who caused Jesse the highest concern. Do you agree that Travis's behavior was the most worrisome, and why?
- Question: What behaviors made you want to initiate a conversation with Travis, or any of Jesse's other friends? Alternate: If you had been able to initiate a conversation with one of Travis's other friends, how would you have initiated that talk?
- Question: Do the signs of concern you saw in Jesse's friends remind you of issues you have seen before?
- Question: Do you think it's easier or more difficult to notice extreme changes in the behavior of your closest friends? Do you think that as a friend it is your responsibility to notice worrisome changes? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions: Approach

The second skill that was practiced was talking to a friend you are worried about. First, you should pick a time and place where you have privacy, and do your best to approach your friend without making him or her feel defensive.

- Question: Have you ever had a friend for whom you had concerns and decided not to approach? If so, can you share why?
- Question: In the course you reviewed several tips for bringing up sensitive topics with friends. Which seem easy and which ones seem harder for you? *For reference, these tips are: Using “I” statements to soften your sentences, asking about specific, observable behaviors, avoid making judgements, avoid using negative labels, and avoid giving advice.*
- Question: If you have had concerns about a friend in the past and approached them, what worked well for you? How did you decide to approach him or her? What happened?
- Question: Are there particular kinds of challenges that are more difficult for you to bring up with a friend? Describe the scenarios you would find most challenging and those you might find less so.

Discussion Questions: Refer

The third and really important skill is knowing where you and your friend can go to for help.

- Question: How do you decide if you think a friend's issues are too great to be handled on his or her own?

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- Question: How comfortable are you suggesting your friend see a counselor? What should you keep in mind when expressing your concern?
- Question: How comfortable would you be walking with your friend to the counseling center? What other approaches could you take?
- Question: Do you know what the mental health resources available at your school are?

At this point in the discussion, please refer the group to the set of “Local Resources” you've printed out; they should also be available from within the online course. These should include a list of campus and community resources, with relevant names and telephone numbers.

In preparation for this discussion, you became familiar with information about local mental health resources by answering a number of questions. Review these questions and share the answers you learned with the group.

- Question: Is there a mental health service provider located on campus? How do you get there by walking?
- Question: Are there resources for crisis counseling (emergency/urgent mental health support) on campus? If not, what resources are available in the community?
- Question: Are emergency (same day) appointments available on campus or is there a waiting period?

Wrapping Up

Now that you've facilitated a discussion of the concepts in the training, it's time to bring the discussion to an end and address any lingering questions or concerns students might have.

This is also a good opportunity to allow them to briefly share what they most gained from the training and how it connects to their real-lives.

- Question: Do you feel confident in your abilities to know when a friend needs help, talk to him or her, and help connect them to outside help if needed?
- Question: Is there anything else that would help you feel more confident in your abilities to talk to friends in distress?
- Question: If you had to state one thing you took away from this experience, what would it be?

Summary

You've all probably known someone who, at some point in time, has experienced some kind of distress. Issues like anxiety, depression, excessive drug use, and eating concerns are all relatively common on college campuses. You can make a great impact by paying attention to your friends' behavior, especially extreme behaviors or dramatic changes. As a friend, you are also in a unique position to address these concerns, as you're usually one of the first ones to notice that something's wrong. You might also be one of the first people that a friend would turn to. Knowing how to notice signs of distress, how to talk to a friend you think might be experiencing distress, and how to seek additional help when it's needed, are invaluable skills that can make a huge difference for someone you care about.