

# KEEPING STRESS FROM EVOLVING INTO DISTRESS: Managing Student Stress Through Course Design

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## How Distress Manifests in the College Setting

SUNY Fredonia has identified several behavioral, emotional, and psychological signs of student distress. The repeated occurrence of any combination of the following may indicate a student in distress:



### Behavioral signs:

- Academic performance concerns, uncharacteristic changes
- Declining grades or reduced class participation
- Incomplete or missing assignments
- Repeated requests for extensions, incompletes, or withdraws
- Increased absenteeism or tardiness
- Disruptive classroom behavior
- Apparent memory loss or difficulty concentrating
- Cheating, rule breaking, or defiance
- Poor organization skills or trouble with note taking
- Bizarre, aggressive or morbid comments or written content
- Expressions of feeling hopeless, helpless, guilty and/or worthless
- Self-injury or other self-destructive behavior

### Psychological and emotional signs:

- Chronic fatigue, falling asleep in class
- Symptoms of being easily distracted, “spacey,” or a tendency to daydream
- Nervousness or tearfulness
- Marked changes in regular habits or activities
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Signs of intoxication, dilated or constricted pupils, or apparent hangovers
- Poor or declining physical appearance, hygiene, and grooming
- Hyperactivity or rapid, pressured speech
- Extreme boredom, negativism, defensiveness, and secretiveness

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- Comments by others about alcohol or drug use
  - Erratic behavior, sudden mood swings, inappropriate anger, hostility, and irritability
  - Hyper-expansiveness or grandiosity
  - Withdrawal from others or loss of pleasure in everyday activities
  - Talk of suicide or harm to self or others

## Why Make an Effort to Reduce Distress Among Students?

### ***High levels of stress:***

1. Affect students' cognitive capabilities including information processing and memory (Sandi and Pinelo-Nava 2007; Sandi 2004);
2. Inform the mood and mindset that students bring to the classroom (Felstein 2004); and
3. Can lead to student burnout and unnecessary attrition, especially among students of color (Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993).



### ***Being proactive about managing student stress is beneficial for instructors and teaching assistants for several reasons:***

1. A stressful classroom climate often increases the personal stress level of course instructors and teaching assistants (Jennings and Greenberg 2009).
2. Heightened stress among classroom leaders can reduce teachers' ability to empathize with their students, an especially important issue when teaching in culturally diverse settings (Gault and Sabini 2000).
3. Decreases in teachers' ability to empathize with students may eventually lead to compassion fatigue, a form of burnout that is characterized by extreme mental, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion (Schutz and Zembylas 2009).
4. Compassion fatigue can lead to teacher burnout, or overwhelming feelings of exhaustion, frustration and anger that impairs personal and social functioning and may lead individuals to quit their job (Maslach and Goldberg 1999).

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***Taking a proactive stance toward student stress provides classroom leaders with a unique opportunity to help students:***

1. Engage in self-reflection about the ways that stress affects their daily lives including the feelings they bring to the classroom, to course assignments and to interpersonal exchanges with faculty and teaching staff;
2. Become more personally aware of how to manage stress in order to improve academic performance and position themselves to achieve their professional goals; and
3. Develop healthy practices with respect to time management, general work practices and study skills

## **References**

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