

At-Risk Mental Health For Students Discussion Guide

Overview

Thank you for choosing *At-Risk Mental Health for Students* as a part of your university or college programming.

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, drawing from each participant's experience.

Group Discussion

Experiences with the training will naturally vary from user to user due to the choices available in the simulated conversations. 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. 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 web-based learning.

This discussion can be modified to fit your timeframes. Average time is 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 program and are familiar with its contents.
- Participant Training: Participants can take the online program 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 program 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 be facilitated via video-conferencing and chat.
- 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).
- Local Resources: Print out copies of your list of "Local Resources".
- Campus-Specific: Learn the answers to the following questions about local wellness 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.

- What wellness resources are available on campus? How do students learn more about these services?

- 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 you or 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 describe the types of stressors students may experience and signs of concern. Some potential signs of distress 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 ways to connect with and advocate for help.

- **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 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?**
- **Question: Do you have any strategies you use to check-in with yourself on your emotional and mental health?**

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 them 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.

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.

- **Question: Can you think of a situation where you might want to access some of the support services on campus? How comfortable are you accessing those services?**

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

Discussion Questions: Self-Care

It is a skill to practice and build habits that help us thrive. Self-care is about investing in ourselves which means that it isn't one-size-fits-all. There are different kinds of self-care including: psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social. It is helpful to reflect on which practices resonate with you, which practices you do now, and which practices you'd like to add to your routine.

- **Question: The program talked about the difference between self-soothing and self-care. What does that difference mean to you?**
- **Question: What are some of the things you do for psychological and/or emotional self-care.**

Examples of investing in your **psychological** self:

- Take some time away: day trips or vacations
- Take a break from screen time
- Make time for self-reflection
- Check in with your thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
- Engage in individual or group therapy
- Write in a journal
- Read something that is unrelated to academic work
- Try something new
- Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes

Examples of investing in your **emotional** self

- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Give yourself praise and love
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, and places, and seek them out
- Acknowledge your emotions and allow yourself to feel them fully
- Find things that make you laugh or bring you joy
- Express your opinions in social action, letters, donations, marches, or protests

- **Question: What are some of the things you do for physical self-care.**

Examples of investing in your **physical** self

- Eat when you're hungry, stop when you're satisfied
- Eat healthily
- Get regular checkups
- Get medical care when needed

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- Take time off when sick
- Do various stress-relief techniques such as meditation, massage, yoga,
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, or do some other fun physical activity
- Get enough sleep and stick to a regular sleep schedule

Now, let's talk about spiritual self-care. Spiritual self-care is a way to connect with who you are and who you want to be deep down.

- **Question: What are some of the things you do for spiritual self-care.**

Examples of investing in your **spiritual** self

- Make time for reflection
- Spend time in nature
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Be open to inspiration
- Be optimistic and hopeful
- Be aware of non-material aspects of life
- Be open to not knowing
- Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- Meditate
- Sing
- Contribute to causes in which you believe
- Read inspirational literature or listen to inspirational talks or music

Lastly, let's talk about your social self. Social self-care is investing in the creation and maintaining of your close relationships. These are the people in your life who will be there to support you when you need it.

- **Question: What are some of the things you do for social self-care.**

Examples of investing in your **social** self

- Make time to see friends
- Schedule regular dates with your partner
- Call, check on, or see your relatives
- Stay in contact with faraway friends
- Make time to reply to personal messages
- Allow others to do things for you
- Expand your social circle
- Ask for help when you need it
- Share a fear, hope, or secret with someone you trust

Remember that the best self-care routine for you is one you can maintain. No matter how small the changes you make are, they'll still matter. Try out a few different exercises or practices, see what you can fit into your schedule, and what makes you feel best right now. Keep in mind that this is a dynamic process - some exercises might be more helpful at different times in your life than others.

- **Question: Are there any barriers you face to investing in yourself through self-care. What strategies might you use to overcome those barriers?**

Wrapping Up

Now that you've facilitated a discussion of the concepts in the program, it's time to bring the discussion

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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 program and how it connects to their real-lives.

- **Question: Do you feel confident in your abilities to know when you or a friend needs help, talk to them, and help connect to 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

As a friend and fellow student are in a unique position to help your peers. You're usually one of the first ones to notice that something's wrong, and 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. We all face distress sometimes, so making sure that we're there for our friends *and* ourselves sets us all up for success.