



Counseling Services

805 565 6003

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Student Requests for Academic Leniency Due to Emotional / Psychological Concerns

Increasingly faculty across colleges / universities are reporting higher frequencies of requests for academic leniency due to report of emotional or psychological concerns. Psychological issues can impede a student's cognitive functioning, and occasionally leniency may be warranted.

When considering academic leniency for an undocumented emotional/psychological concern, you may find yourself in a challenging position to exercise judgment, dialogue with a student, and come to a reasonable decision, knowing that you will never know with complete certainty whether the concern is legitimate or not.

On occasion, a student will experience a crisis that impairs his/her functioning temporarily or that is newly diagnosed. In this case, it can feel as though an additional burden is placed on you as staff/faculty member to determine how much academic assistance a student needs, if a leniency is warranted, and how serious their psychological issue might be. This document is intended to provide Westmont College faculty and staff assistance with responding to these requests. For further information on conversationally responding to and supporting students emotionally, please see the *Responding to Students in Distress* article in mid-February 2016 Student Life Newsletter (also available on the *Fac/Staff Guidelines* section of the Westmont Counseling Center Website).

Considerations when managing requests for academic leniency

Clarify the request when approached by a student – Seek to understand the concern in order to best meet the student's need and generate your response.

- Listen to the student's request and summarize back to him/her.
- Ask questions from a standpoint of care, rather than investigation.
- Speak privately in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern.
- Offer support, including interest, care, and attentive listening
- Listen for factors that indicate possible significant distress
 - Significant distress factors may warrant immediate referral. Please see *Indicators of Possible Significant Distress* below.

- For psychological emergencies (e.g., imminent suicide, manic episode warranting hospitalization, etc.), seek immediate assistance. Refer to the *Emergency Assistance Decision Tree* included in this document.

Develop your approach – There is a range of responses to student requests. Consider an approach that is comfortable to you. Seek to balance care for the student’s emotional health with academic integrity / work ethic.

Ideas to consider when developing your approach:

- Think about mental health as you would physical health, particularly whether you would grant an extension/make up/exception based upon physical illness without documentation or evidence.
 - For documentation, students can present evidence of attendance at the Health or Counseling Center. It is important to know, however, that there will be no functional assessment to determine temporary disability during these appointments. Unfortunately, such brief physical or psychological objective measures do not currently exist.
- Adding a reasonable “cost” to the request. “Costs” for the extensions can empower students in taking ownership and responsibility over the management of their emotional symptoms and other life situations. These costs can be similar to what students will face post Westmont (e.g., call in sick, less days available for vacation leave in the future). Examples may include grade decreases or make up assignments.
- Perhaps add a statement to your syllabus and/or course introduction that explains your approach.

Move the student forward – Assist the student toward a healthy outcome. Some situations may suggest recommending self-care strategies and general coping (e.g., when student feeling overwhelmed, mild anxiety, occasional depressed mood). Others may indicate referral to counseling or disability services (e.g., recent death of family member, prolonged and/or functional deficit from significant anxiety/depression, possible learning disability).

- Mild / brief depressed mood, occasional tearfulness, moderate stress, and other mild distress can be normative in the college experience. The majority of students in these situations can tremendously benefit from the care/concern of staff/faculty member and encouragement toward more effective coping. Many do not require referral to professional care (e.g., Counseling Services).
- Encourage positive action by helping student define the problem and generate coping strategies
- Recommend social support seeking behaviors with friends, family, clergy, church
- For students facing concerns warranting additional support, generate a *Student Concern Notification Form* accessible from the Student Care portion of the Westmont website.

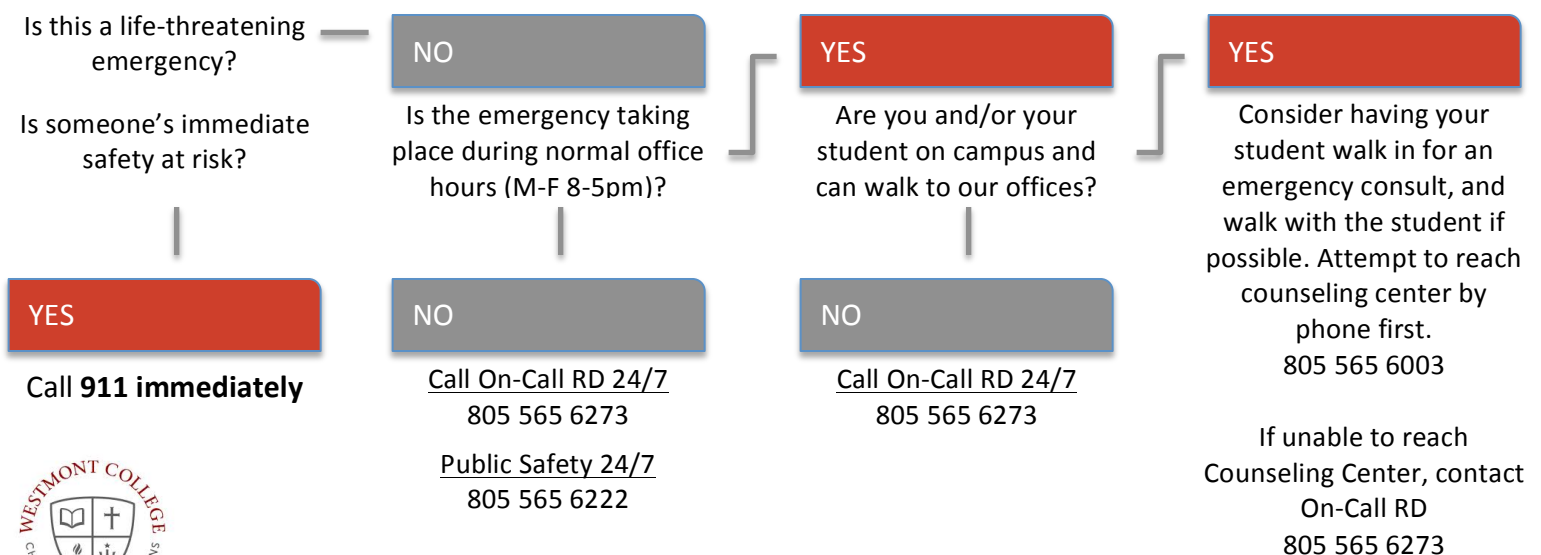


- Consider recommending the student complete a *Request for Counseling* form on the Counseling Center website to evaluate the seriousness of the psychological issue. See *Indicators of Possible Significant Distress* below.
 - Consult with the director of the Counseling Center if unsure: **805 565 6003** or ernelson@westmont.edu
- Encourage the student to meet with academic advisor to explore possible course withdrawal, if necessary.
- Refer the student to Disability Services if it is an ongoing mental health issue

Other factors to consider – Of course, each situation will be different. These factors may assist the process.

- When you are concerned about the validity of the concerns or whether students may be “gaming” (e.g., multiple undocumented requests), refer the student to the Counseling Center and request that the student provide verification of attendance.
 - Say, “The difficulties you are currently experiencing are concerning to me, and I want to make sure that you are receiving care to prevent this from worsening. You can have an extension on this paper, but I would like documentation that you have sought counseling.”
- Reflect on your own experience with the student. Check in with yourself about your emotional response. Consider establishing boundaries with the student if needed.
 - Is the student becoming dependent on me?
 - Do I need to refer the student on to professional care?
 - If in doubt, consult with a colleague or director of Counseling Services, 805 565 6003 or ernelson@westmont.edu

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE DECISION TREE



Indicators of Possible Significant Distress

At times, it may be clearly evident a student is having difficulty coping. Other times, distress may be less obvious. Some indicators of significant distress are:

Problems with academic performance

- Poor performance, particularly if represents a change from prior functioning
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Chronic indecisiveness or procrastination
- Repeated requests for special considerations
- Increased concern about grades despite good performance
- Increased dependence (e.g., excessive appointments with you)

Unusual behavior

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Disruptive classroom behavior
- Impaired speech or disjointed, confused thoughts
- Aggressive or threatening behavior
- Extreme mood changes or excessive, inappropriate display of emotions
- Hyperactivity, irritability, or heightened anxiety
- Prolonged or extreme emotionality
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain with no apparent physical illness/reason
- Bizarre or strange behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality
- Use of mood altering chemicals (e.g. alcohol or drugs)

Traumatic change in relationships

- Death of family member or close friend
- Difficulties in close relationships
- Problems at home with family or roommates

References to suicide or homicide

- Overt (or veiled) references to suicide – spoken or in writing
- Statements of helplessness or hopelessness
- Indications of persistent or prolonged unhappiness
- Isolated self from friends and family
- Pessimistic feelings about the future
- Homicidal threats

