



UGA Programs and Activities Serving Minors

Youth Mental Health Guidance for Program Staff

Overview:

Mental health challenges and crises in youth have risen in recent years. From anxiety to depression to life-threatening conditions, young people sometimes need immediate support from adults in their lives. For the thousands of youth who participate in UGA-sponsored programs, that adult could be a program leader or staff member. The goal of this guide is to help program staff recognize signs of a young person dealing with a mental health issue and provide guidance on actions for staff to take in that situation.

Possible Signs of a Youth Mental Health Issue:

Program leaders and staff should be vigilant for signs of a youth experiencing a mental health challenge. Some signs may be hard to see. Engaged staff may recognize some of the common signs of a developing mental health issue before it becomes a crisis.

Common signs* or behaviors of a youth dealing with a mental health issue may include:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Seriously trying to harm oneself, or making plans to do so
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or fast breathing
- Involvement in many fights or desire to hurt others
- Out-of-control behavior that can hurt oneself or others
- Not eating, throwing up, or using laxatives to make oneself lose weight
- Worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still that puts the youth in physical danger or causes problems in the program
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Drastic changes in the youth's behavior or personality

* Signs are adapted from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/how-to-talk/educators>.

The above examples are only a sample of possible signs; there may be others. Staff should be continually engaged with youth participants and raise any concerns to program leadership.

Actions to Take

Crisis Response Actions:

If a youth is in immediate danger of harm to self or others or unable to keep self-safe due to behaviors or altered mentation (psychosis), take these immediate steps:

1. Call 911. Let emergency services know you are dealing with a mental health issue and request a mental health responder if available. Have two or more staff remain with the youth until first responders arrive and relocate other youth to a safe place, if possible. First responders will evaluate the situation and provide professional guidance on actions that need to be taken.
2. Remain calm. This will help staff think clearly about the situation and will help reduce the youth's anxiety.
3. Notify program leadership. Program leaders should actively assist with evaluating the situation and ensuring the youth gets the support they need. Program leaders should make reports to department or college leadership in accordance with requirements.
4. Call parents/guardians. Program leaders should inform parents/guardians about the situation and actions that the program is taking. As needed, parents/guardians may be asked to come pick up their child from the program to ensure they get the support they need.

Non-Crisis Response Actions:

For less immediate situations, staff should engage with the youth. Let them know you hear them and want to help. Steps* to take may include the following:

- a. Find a way to speak privately to the youth with two or more staff present.
- b. Tell them what you are observing that makes you concerned.
- c. Ask open-ended questions about how they are doing.
- d. Let them know you are here to listen and connect them to support if they need it.
- e. Share resources and ask if they need support or help in accessing them.
- f. Provide all relevant information to program leaders.
- g. Provide information to parents/guardians as needed.

* Steps are adapted from the Jed Foundation Faculty Guide to Supporting Student Mental Health, <https://jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JED-Higher-Education-Faculty-Guide-1.pdf>.

Additional Resources:

Mental Health America: <https://mhanational.org/im-looking-mental-health-help-someone-else>

Jed Foundation: <https://jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JED-Higher-Education-Faculty-Guide-1.pdf>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/how-to-talk/educators>

Program leaders can also contact the UGA Director of Compliance for Programs and Activities Serving Minors for assistance at programsforminors@uga.edu or 706-542-7255.

*Developed by working group from representatives from UGA Center for Continuing Education & Hotel, Georgia 4-H, University Police, University Health Center, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, and Franklin College
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