

Supporting Students While Preserving Yourself: Strategies for 1:1 Interactions

Over the last year and half students have faced unprecedented difficulties and are increasingly disclosing their struggles to faculty, instructors, and supervisors. Providing support to students is an important part of being an instructor or supervisor; however, assisting students through personal difficulties can be overwhelming and contribute to emotional burnout. This resource provides evidence-based strategies for providing emotional support to students in one-on-one interactions while setting appropriate boundaries and preserving your own well-being.

Note: This resource focuses on how instructors, instructional assistants, and supervisors can create a safe and supportive environment for students who disclose personal difficulties during one-on-one interactions. If you are concerned about the safety or well-being of a student, or believe they may be in need of professional care, guidance is available from the Office of Student Affairs: [Supporting Students in Distress](#).

The Cost of Caring

Supporting others can be profoundly rewarding; at the same time, it can take an emotional toll. People whose professional role includes caring for others can experience the following:

- Burnout: A sense of being exhausted or overwhelmed in your job
- Compassion Fatigue: A deep feeling of exhaustion that extends outside of your work into other areas of your life; you may avoid social interactions or feel irritable and guilty
- Secondary Trauma/Vicarious Traumatization: Cumulative result of bearing witness to others' traumatic experiences; associated with profound changes to one's life-view and traumatic stress symptoms like insomnia, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance of triggers.

If you have experienced any of these feelings, you are not alone! These are known occupational hazards that can affect people who are dedicated to supporting others as part of their professional roles. The strategies described in this resource can help you equip yourself with tools to support students in a way that is safe and sustainable. If you feel like you are experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue or vicarious traumatization, support services are available through [CAPS](#) (for students) and [FSAP](#) (for faculty and staff).



Supporting Students: What is Your Role?

When it comes to providing emotional support to students, it can sometimes feel unclear what our roles and responsibilities are. As an instructor, instructional assistant, or student supervisor, your role includes:

- Being accessible and transparent
- Providing appropriate accommodations within the course or program
- Connecting students with [campus resources](#)
- Listening to your students

It is important to remember that we are **not** in a position to provide medical advice, mental health care, or therapeutic services. If you think a student is in need of medical support or counseling, you can direct them to campus services (SHS, CAPS, CARE), or reach out to a UC San Diego [Student Affairs Case Manager](#) for guidance on how to best support the student.

When our students disclose their challenges or emotional hardships, frequently they are simply seeking to feel heard and validated. Listening to our students is an act of care! In the next section we describe some strategies for listening to your students, and providing support and validation in one-on-one interactions.

Strategies for Engaged Listening

In our professional roles as educators and researchers, it's often important that we are experts in our fields and effective problem-solvers. However, trying to apply these traits in the domain of providing emotional support can actually be counterproductive! When a student discloses information about their personal circumstances, it is important to allow *them* to be the experts of their experience. Additionally, students often know ahead of time that you cannot fix their problems; trying to problem-solve or feeling responsible for fixing the student's issues may be doing both of you a disservice. Instead, you can listen deeply, provide a space in which the student feels heard and validated, and use the information they share with you to make appropriate and supportive accommodations within your course or program.

When a student shares emotionally difficult information with us, it can sometimes be hard to know how to respond. Below we explain three strategies for engaged listening that you can use in one-on-one interactions with students: (1) asking instead of assuming, (2) mirroring, and (3) the Clothesline technique.



Description of Strategy	Example
<p><i>(1) Don't Assume; Instead, Ask:</i></p> <p>Emotions are complicated! Students are often feeling things we can't (and shouldn't try to) predict. If a student tells you about a difficult event in their life, avoid making assumptions about how they're feeling - instead, ask.</p>	<p><i>Student: "This week has been hard because my grandmother died on Monday."</i></p> <p><i>Response with assumptions: "I'm sorry to hear that. You must feel really sad."</i></p> <p><i>Response without assumptions: "I'm sorry to hear that. How are you feeling now? What can I do for you?"</i></p> <p>The student might very well tell you they feel sad! But they might also have complicated feelings. Maybe they're stressed because, on top of their coursework, they have to take on the work of cleaning out their grandparent's apartment. If you assume they are feeling sad and respond based on that assumption, they might not feel like they can fully express themselves and leave the interaction without the sense of relief that comes from feeling heard. We can all think of times when we tried to express ourselves and left the encounter not feeling heard or understood. It can be a real bummer!</p>
<p><i>(2) Mirroring:</i></p> <p>Asking open-ended, non-assuming questions can be hard, especially if you're trying to think of them while processing what a student has shared with you. So tip number two: if you feel tongue-tied, try mirroring back to them what they're saying to you. This can help a student feel heard, and keep the conversation open, without imposing your assumptions.</p>	<p><i>Student: "I'm struggling with my mental health and I've started turning in all my work late. I feel terrible about it! I've never submitted work late before but this quarter is so hard."</i></p> <p><i>Mirroring response: "What I'm hearing is that you're having a really hard time because of something many people are going through - mental health struggles. You're worried about submitting work late. Can we figure out a compromise for your work in this class?"</i></p>



(3) The Clothesline Technique:

Sometimes a student shares information that hits close to home, or triggers an emotional response within us. If you're finding your own emotions are distracting you from the conversation, try the clothesline technique. In the clothesline, you acknowledge your emotion, imagine it on a piece of cloth, hang that cloth up on a clothesline, and move it out of the way so you can stay present and keep listening.



Student: "I've been trying really hard to attend class this quarter but it's difficult. My internet at home is so spotty that I end up doing all my work in my car outside Starbucks just to get a wifi signal."

Without the clothesline:

1. You are immediately overwhelmed with sadness for your student. You say:

"I'm so sorry to hear that, it's just heartbreaking. I feel terrible for you."

2. After the call ends, you feel overwhelmed with sadness and start crying.

With the clothesline:

1. Take a deep breath and center yourself
2. Imagine your broken heart on a piece of cloth
3. Hang up the cloth on your clothesline. It's there, you see it, and now you can move it out of the way and keep listening.

"That sounds so difficult! I'm really sorry you're facing this hardship. Is there something I can do to make our class easier for you? I know UCSD has some IT resources for students with internet issues, would you like me to send you some? Regardless, this sucks."

4. Finish the conversation. After you sign off, you can return to your broken heart and treat it with care and attention. Remind yourself that your student shared their circumstances with you for a reason: not to make you feel bad, but because they want you to know how hard they're working to succeed in your class.

Supporting Your Ongoing Well-Being

It is important that we are providing support to others in a way that is safe, healthy, and sustainable for us. Below are some tips for how to support your own well-being in your role as an instructor, instructional assistant, and/or supervisor to students.

- Set clear boundaries and share your boundaries with students. For instance, you may let a student know at the beginning of a meeting that you'll need to wrap up by a certain time. You can also set clear expectations about communication (e.g. "I will respond to emails within 48 hours, or by Tuesday evening if an email is sent over the weekend.")



- If you don't immediately know how to respond to a situation that a student shares with you, it's okay to ask for some time to think before making any decisions. This is particularly helpful when a student asks for accommodations within the class - you can take your time to think about a plan that supports the student *and* is realistic for you.
- If you aren't sure how to support a student, it's likely that there's a resource on campus that can help. If you think a student may benefit from support from a campus resource, ask them if they'd like information and/or a referral. See this annotated list of UC San Diego [campus resources](#) for more information.
- Remember that providing therapy, counseling, and medical advice is **not** part of your role. If you believe a student would benefit from professional counseling services, you can ask if they'd like information about the support available through [CAPS](#). If you are concerned about a student's safety or believe they are in need of care, guidance is available [here](#).
- Lean on your support system and ask for help when you need it! Education Specialists and Graduate Teaching Consultants at the Engaged Teaching Hub are available for confidential one-on-one consultations and can help you navigate challenging situations and brainstorm appropriate support/accommodations for students. You can request a consultation [here](#).

(This handout provides a summary of the Engaged Teaching Hub's webinar Supporting Students While Preserving Yourself. A recording of the webinar is available [here](#).)

