

## Chapter 4

## BUILDING RELATIONAL SKILLS

Building Effective Communication through Listening,  
Interviewing, and Referral

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*Effective communication is based on a thorough understanding of oneself and others. After self-evaluation in which they acknowledge their own biases and honestly look at their own behaviors, advisors can focus on the advisee's agenda with an openness that encourages students to share. Advisors who pay attention to advisee words, mannerisms, and feelings can express empathy and ask appropriate clarifying questions to learn about their students' situations. Through the rapport they establish via their attentiveness and interviewing skills, advisors can offer referrals and support to those who present both typical and challenging problems. An advisor checklist for effective communication skills can help in identifying specific areas for advisor development.*

Effective communication does not come naturally. It must be learned. Communication begins as soon as an advisor greets a student in the waiting area, before either has said a word. It should convey respect and warmth. Advisors new to the field are often tempted to offer students what they have received in training: lots of information. With experience, advisors learn that students are best served by advisors who listen intently to their concerns and ask clarifying questions. The experienced advisor thus enabled can appropriately assist students by offering tools students can use or referring them to others who can assist them.

**Listening**

Listening is an active and complex process. Effective listening involves awareness of both self and others.

*Self-awareness*

Self-awareness includes awareness of one's own physical and emotional states, physical behaviors, and personal biases.

*Physical state.* An advisor's physical state might manifest itself in the following thoughts:

- "I have a headache."
- "My eyes itch because of allergies."
- "My posterior is numb from sitting too long in this chair."
- "I am starving! When do I get my lunch break?"

These unpleasant physical states can show on a person's face, behavior, or voice tone: frowning because of a headache; eyes watering from allergens; fidgeting after being seated too long; lack of focus due to hunger.

*Emotional state.* Advisors may feel scared, nervous, happy, sad, excited, or angry. These emotions are unlikely to be related to the advisee; however, students may perceive an advisor's emotions as personally directed toward or in response to them.

For example, in my first year in advising I experienced an encounter with a colleague that left me angry. I will always remember the poor student who came to me after the encounter! He apologized for every question he asked. Even though I kept saying, "No, you're fine," he sensed my anger and frustration (even though I thought I had hidden it). Finally, I stopped talking, apologized, and explained that he had accurately recognized my emotional state. I told him that my anger had nothing to do with him but was the result of an incident that I was having trouble putting out of my mind. I promised to give him my undivided attention for the remainder of his appointment. From that moment, we were able to address his agenda rather than mine.

Denial is one of the worst enemies of an advisor. If unable to acknowledge his or her own internal state, the advisor has no chance of ameliorating the effect(s) it may have on communication with students.

*Physical behaviors.* Physical mannerisms may have a positive or negative impact on communication. Positive physical behaviors include

- smiling when greeting a student;
- maintaining good posture, which promotes breathing and alertness and suggests positive interest;
- making eye contact;
- using facial expressions such as smiles and head nods; and
- maintaining an open posture (without crossing one's arms or legs), which communicates openness.

Mannerisms that are distracting or bring a negative response should be avoided. These may include

- looking at one's watch;
- fidgeting;
- distracting behaviors like pencil tapping, rubber band snapping, and so forth; and
- answering the phone while with a student.

The advising session should be an oasis for students where their thirst for information, acceptance, and understanding is quenched. The advising office is one place the student should be able to relax and let down her or his guard; a place where the student is welcomed rather than tolerated, accepted rather than evaluated, and stimulated to grow rather than encouraged to stay the same.

*Personal biases.* The advisor's goal is to listen without judgment, but no one is perfect. When advisors recognize their own preconceived ideas or biases, they stand a better chance of keeping those ideas from interfering with their relationships with advisees. If advisors ask students to look at themselves honestly, they must be committed to examine their own thoughts and feelings with honesty. The limits of an advisor's self-understanding may also limit his or her understanding of students' feelings and experiences. Furthermore, advisors cannot change attitudes and behaviors that interfere with student success if they are unaware of their own biases and idiosyncrasies. For example, when advisors hear a description of themselves from several people (students, colleagues, supervisor), even if they do not agree, the advisor owes it to her or himself and advisees to consider the possibility that the information is accurate. Excellence in advising comes from minds open to new ideas about advisors as well as about students.

### *Other-Awareness*

Other-awareness, or awareness of the student, is a second component of listening. Before the student says a word, advisors are aware of the student's physical presence: height, weight, age, ethnicity, dress, and cleanliness. They are also aware of their own reaction to these characteristics. Advisors should also be aware of students' facial expression, muscle tone (whether they are relaxed, tense, nervous), and body position (are they leaning forward, looking down, turned away?). To check for mixed messages, an advisor should note not only the student's words but whether those words match the nonverbal information presented.

A student may have a preconceived idea about the advisor for similar nonsubstantive reasons. Advisors should not take these incidents personally.

Empathy is a powerful aid in understanding. When individuals put themselves in another's position, they can understand more easily how the other person may feel. Advisors have responsibilities to others in the institution that do not always allow them to satisfy students' requests, but they should be able to understand the frustration, sadness, or anger the student may feel. Maturity and self-confidence enable advisors to appreciate a student's feelings without becoming personally offended or responding defensively.

*Active listening.* In addition to being aware of one's own emotions, biases, and body language as well as those of students, advisors should listen to the content of the student's message. Effective communication is not a passive process like sitting back, half-way listening to a television program while following the story line. Communicating effectively requires alertness, energy, critical-thinking skills, and introspection. Because a listener can process information much more rapidly than a speaker can produce it, advisors are able to organize the information given by students and make a mental list of clarifying questions and hypotheses concerning the student's needs.

This processing advantage can be an obstacle to good communication as well. Advisors whose minds are racing ahead may be tempted to answer the student's question before the advisee has completely stated it. The student must be allowed to finish talking, even if the advisor thinks he or she has heard the same story from other students.

*Clarifying questions.* Asking questions is part of the listening process. Advisors put students' words, tone, gestures, and body language together to guess at the meaning of the communication exchange. The advisor's supposition is only a guess until the advi-

sor checks her or his understanding with the student. Clarifying statements may begin with phrases such as

- “So, what you want is...”
- “Let me see if I understand your question...”
- “What I hear you saying is...”

If the student says, “No. That’s not what I mean,” the advisor has the chance to try again, maybe with a statement such as, “Help me understand.” The responsibility of communication is mutual. The speaker and the listener have equal responsibility. When one stops trying to communicate, the exchange is lost.

### Interviewing

Skill in interviewing can elicit valuable information from students. The simplest situations are those in which the student asks information-based questions: “What does my grade-point average need to be to get off academic probation?” or “What are the prerequisites to the Business Program?” Typical information-oriented training programs equip advisors to handle these types of questions, but new advisors sometimes feel ill equipped to deal with students whose questions fall outside the parameters of their training programs.

For example, advisors may see students who do not have a specific question and may not know why they are in an advising office. Open-ended questions, which require more than a *yes* or *no* response, elicit the best information and help move the conference forward. Good initial questions are

- “How did you happen to come here?”
- “What do you expect will happen here?”
- “What do you hope to accomplish here?”

Complex student situations, such as those in which a student is trying to gain admission to a professional program, is on academic probation, or is maintaining a C average each semester, require advanced interviewing skills. An advisor needs to ask how the advisee made the decision(s) that led to the academic situation. For example, a nursing student who is facing academic probation may need to be asked the reasons for pursuing a nursing degree, the particular aspects of nursing that are of interest, and the reasons that keep the student from excelling in classes. These types of questions give information to the advisor and may be enlightening to the student too.

The student who has no awareness of the basis of his or her difficulty poses an additional challenge

to the advisor. For example, I once had a business major attribute poor performance in classes because her pants did not fit. With frustration, she explained in great detail how she tried different sizes of pants, different styles of pants, but all of them either bound her or fell off of her. I asked if anything in her life had changed since she began to have problems in her classes. A seemingly simple question elicited information about her childhood abuse, abandonment by her mother, and a recent reunion with her mother. The young woman desperately wanted a relationship with her mother but also was very angry and having difficulty setting limits with her mother. Once she voiced her concerns, the student knew she was having trouble focusing on her classes because of her conflicting feelings about her mother. Once she was reassured that she was not judged about her feelings, the student was ready to accept a referral to a community mental health agency to work in-depth on issues with her family relationships.

Strong advising helps students see their situations, options, and themselves more clearly. Through advisors’ effective listening and interviewing, students may understand their own feelings, assumptions, beliefs, and abilities better than before they had the advising relationship. Students achieve this understanding at different rates, depending on their maturity, level of self-awareness, and capacity for accepting responsibility for making their own decisions. Advisors and students can then work together to help students make the best possible choices and progress toward their goals.

When advisors learn to be skillful interviewers with abilities in different kinds of inquiry and in unhurried listening, they offer students the opportunity to grow conceptually and eventually evaluate circumstances to make their own decisions. If the advisor does not question students in a way that stirs their cognitive capabilities, students miss an opportunity to become independent thinkers and masters of their own destinies. Such skill is one of the hallmarks of advising as teaching.

### Referral Skills

Developing good relational skills (i.e., establishing good dialogue with advisees) is evident when academic advisors effectively handle questions or face student situations that are beyond the scope of their own expertise. Referrals are important for two reasons: Advisors cannot know everything, and the trust that allows students to open up in an advising conference can also lead to advisor dependence. Therefore, not only is it best for the student, but also emotionally healthy for the advisor to acknowledge her or his lim-

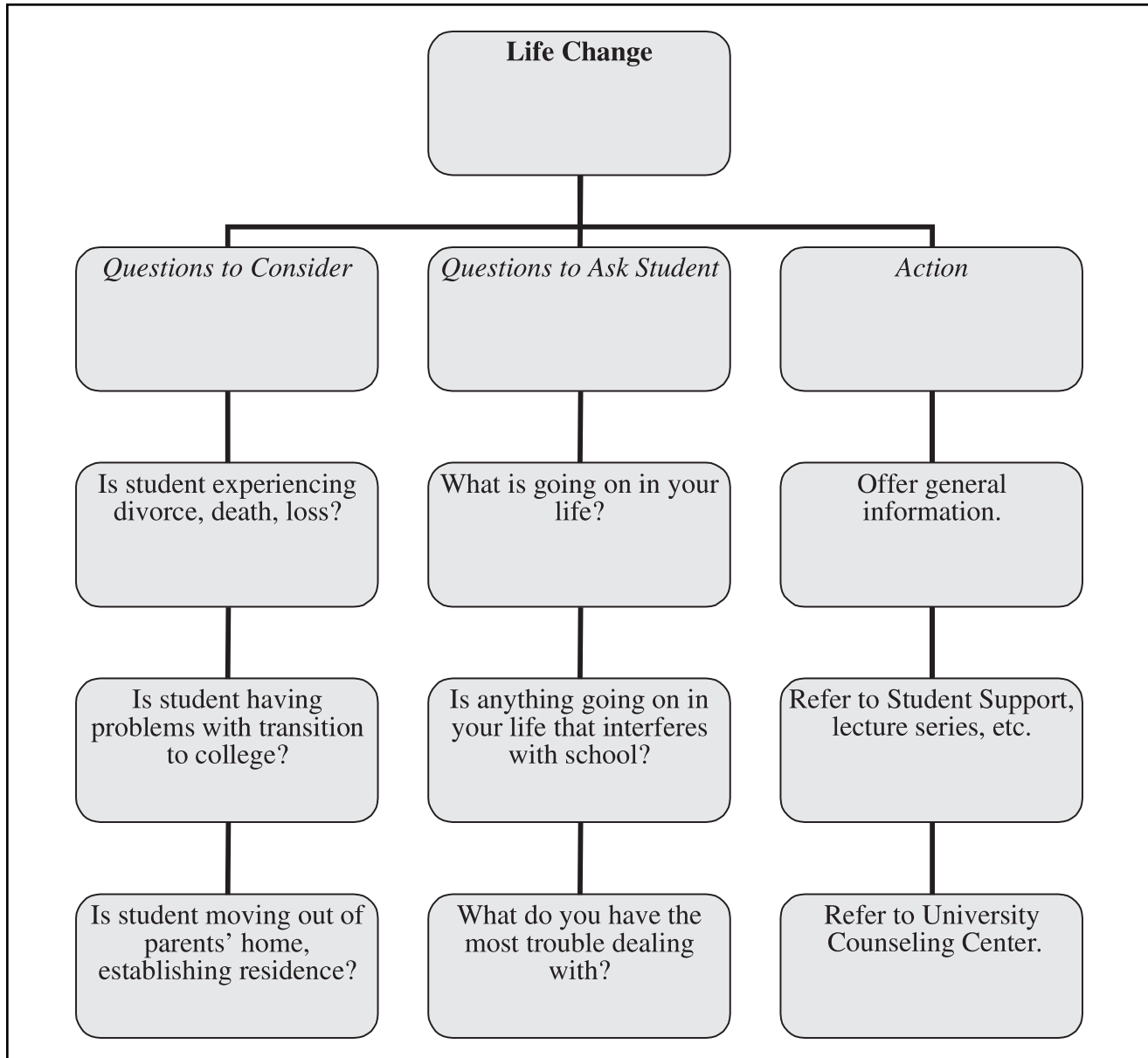
itations and refer students to other resources when appropriate; yet seldom do new-advisor training programs address the art of referral.

Referrals are important to students' development. Students are best served by academic advisors who require that students do for themselves those tasks that they are capable of doing. Bandura (1997) found that individuals who do not believe in their abilities put forth less effort in reaching goals and

are less resilient when they encounter obstacles to goal attainment. This sense of powerlessness in students also leads to dependency. Advisors can be part of an institution-wide effort of empowering students by letting advisees know the resources available and the power of their own efforts.

The four broad categories for referral are academic problems, common life changes (see Figure 5), anxiety, and depression. Of the four types of prob-

**Figure 5** Guide for referring students who are struggling with common transitional issues



*Note.* “Questions to consider” refers to issues advisors should be able to identify when students discuss their concerns. “Questions to ask student” offers examples of clarifying and open-ended questions to help advisors gain a better understanding of the advisee’s problem. “Actions” include recommendations for appropriate referral sources.

lems that require referrals, new advisors are most likely to expect, acquire, and receive training on referrals for academic problems; however, new advisors may not have received the needed information for referring advisees who present with issues related to emotional or mental health.

### *Mental Health Issues*

Most people experience life changes some time in their lives, and while sometimes experiencing anxiety during these transitions, for most the stress does not interfere with their lives. In fact, for some, stress can be motivating. However, for others, coping with anxiety is more of a challenge. By using good interviewing and listening skills, advisors can help students differentiate between anxiety caused by common problems rooted in reality, which can often be addressed by university staff, and anxiety from other causes, which calls for a referral to an appropriate mental health professional.

Test anxiety is a common student experience based in reality (e.g., “I didn’t study for this test and I know I will fail it”); therefore on many campuses, an advisor can direct a struggling student to an office or individual who helps students overcome problems in test taking. However, other anxieties may be caused by psychiatric illness or psychological issues that cannot be addressed by personnel who do not have professional training in mental health concerns. Students with anxiety caused by complex or unusual issues, as well as those who are struggling even after receiving standard service offerings, are best served by a referral to a college counseling center or external mental health agency. See Figure 6 for the referral guide that can be used for students who present with anxiety.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2004), one of the most common mental-health diagnoses of today’s student is depression, which can be a short-term, situational, or long-standing problem. Students who may be suffering from depression, or another mental illness, should receive professional intervention. See Figure 7 for a referral guide to use when advising a person who is experiencing depression.

Depression may be the most common mental health issue advisors encounter, but it is not the only one. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2005), the majority of serious mental illnesses manifest themselves in late adolescence or early adulthood. Along with the common college transition issues, more students are being seen with relationship problems, developmental issues, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and personality dis-

orders. For example, Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton (2003) found that students seen in college counseling centers are diagnosed with more complex and severe problems than were students seen in the 1990s. In 1966, Segal found that 10 to 16% of college students were diagnosed with some kind of emotional disorder. Sixty-three percent of diagnosed students attended community colleges and 37% of them attended 4-year colleges. More recently King (2002) reported that college and university students are arriving on campus with more personal issues, including substance abuse, prior incarceration, abusive relationships, and other challenges that interfere with student success, than did their predecessors.

Academic advisors are often among the first to observe symptoms of mental health problems. Some signs of emotional or psychological distress include the following:

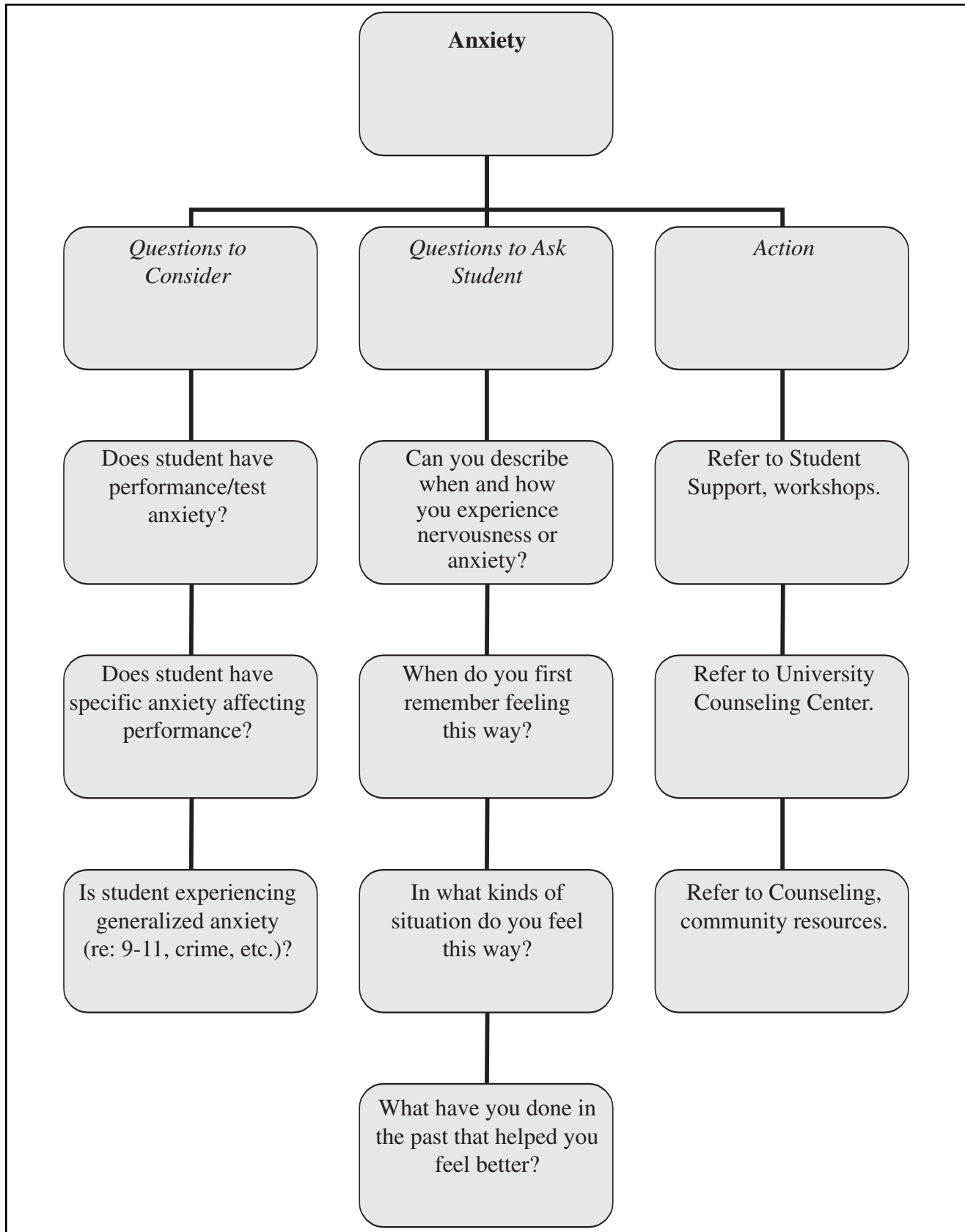
- extreme weight loss,
- evidence of self-abuse (e.g., cuts, burn marks, welts, or bruises),
- evidence of alcohol or drug abuse,
- lethargy,
- withdrawal,
- disorientation,
- problems with concentration,
- a sense of hopelessness,
- anxiety,
- pressured speech (speech that is rapid, almost nonstop, and is difficult to interrupt),
- delusions or hallucinations, or
- preoccupation with thoughts of death.

Advisors are not responsible or qualified for counseling students; therefore, an advisor who suspects that a student is suffering from a mental health issue should always refer the student to a professional mental-health counselor. The first step toward making an effective referral is to listen and establish rapport with the student. By responding as a compassionate listener, the advisor confirms the student’s decision to approach an advisor for help, which may encourage the student to follow up with a referral. Some appropriate responses to a student who presents with a mental health issue include the following:

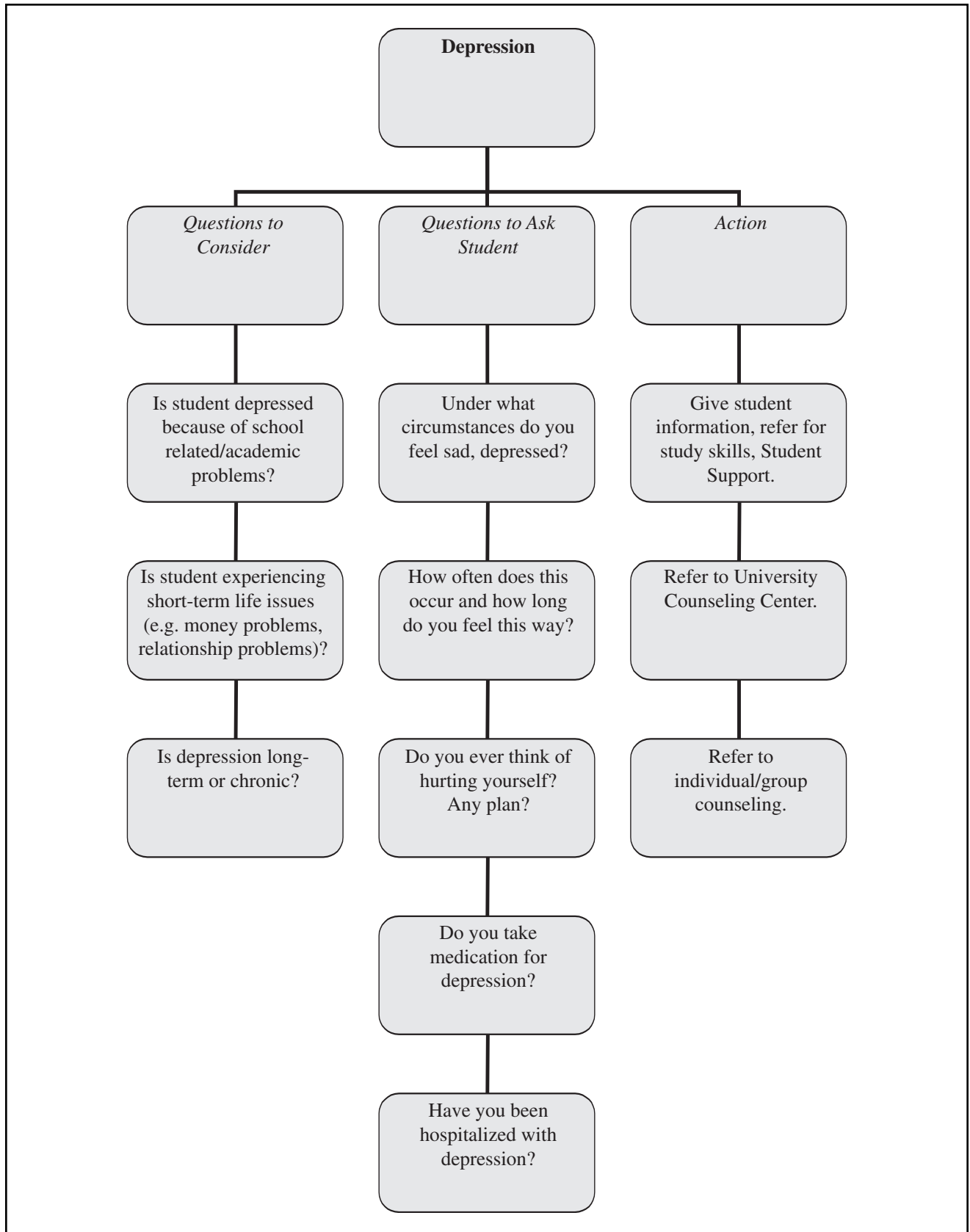
- “I’m sorry you’re having a difficult time.”
- “I’m glad you chose to talk about this.”
- “It is clear that you are struggling with this.”

Advisors may clarify the problem or the area of

**Figure 6** Guide for referring students who are struggling with anxiety



**Figure 7** Guide for referring students who are struggling with depression



distress and share, in the context of the student's disclosure, the advisor's observations about the student's behavior with regard to these issues. For example, by asking "I've noticed that you have lost a lot of weight" or "You seem distracted" advisors can give the student an opportunity to share important information. After telephoning ahead to alert the counseling staff, the advisor may walk a student over to the counseling office. New advisors may want to ask a senior advisor to assist in interviewing a student and making a referral.

New advisors need to accept that the student is responsible for deciding to follow through on any referral made by the advisor. Unless they present a danger to themselves or others, students cannot be forced to seek help, even if such help would be in their best interest. When needed, first responders, such as security, medical, or police personnel, may be called to protect the student or others. Advisors should learn the university procedures for helping students in crisis.

In most cases, the advisor relies on policy statements and his or her best judgment when deciding to refer a struggling student to mental health services. However, an advisor should always refer a student who expresses concern about alcohol or other drug use or reports being abused or committing abuse on another. In addition, any indication of child abuse should be immediately reported to the appropriate Department of Human Services professional.

Regardless of the type of referral, advisors should prepare students for the information they will receive from the provider. By following up with the student, the advisor has another opportunity to reinforce the student's corrective action or to make other suggestions if the student was dissatisfied with the referral.

### **Realistic Expectations**

Because advising is important and has a very direct impact on students, new advisors are often anxious. They ask themselves:

- "What do I say and how should I say it?"
- "What if I don't know all the answers?"
- "What if I make mistakes?"
- "What if my supervisor doesn't like how I work?"
- "What if students are not satisfied with me?"
- "Can I ruin a student's whole life with a mistake I make?"

While advising is important, there is no requirement that advisors must be perfect.

Consulting with a more experienced peer is an excellent way to gather information and learn different styles and approaches to advising. All advisors, new and seasoned, must have the courage to be themselves, accept their own uncertainties, make mistakes, and figure out corrective actions.

Typically, advisors are evaluated by supervisors and by students, but they should reflect on their own relational experiences during the first year and perform a self-evaluation. Figure 8 provides a checklist to heighten advisors' awareness of behaviors and attitudes that affect their work with students. By evaluating their own behavior and effectiveness with students, advisors can continue learning, developing, and growing. With self-evaluation comes the opportunity to fill in deficits and shore up weak skills. Through the communication skills of listening, interviewing, and referring, advisors can impact the lives of students.



**Figure 8** Advisor checklist for listening, interviewing, and referral skills

Advisors can rate themselves on skills for each category. They may also ask a colleague to shadow them (with the student's permission) and offer feedback on these skills.					
<b>Advising Communication Skills</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Almost Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Almost Always</b>	<b>Always</b>
<b>Greeting</b>					
I welcome each student on arrival.					
I make sure my office is comfortable and private.					
I express caring, interest, and acceptance by words and gestures throughout the meeting.					
<b>Listening</b>					
I am aware of my physical and emotional states and how these states may look to others.					
I am aware of my personal biases and the impact of such biases on others.					
I maintain eye contact and communicate involvement with facial expressions.					
I monitor my own mannerisms, so I do not distract students from tasks at hand.					
I pay attention to what the student says and how it is said.					
I put myself in the student's shoes.					
I listen without criticism or judgment.					
I am open to new ideas.					
I give the student my complete attention.					
<b>Interviewing</b>					
I ask the student's reason for the meeting.					
I encourage the student to do most of the talking by asking open-ended questions.					
I use words familiar to the student.					
I avoid information overload.					
I focus on the student's questions rather than having a set agenda that I follow with all or most students.					
Rather than making decisions for students, I explore options with students and let them make informed decisions.					
<b>Referral</b>					
I allow the student to fully tell his or her story before attempting to come up with a solution.					
I acknowledge my limits.					
I ask others for help, if needed.					
I am familiar with campus resources.					
I make sure the person to whom I have referred the student is available, and I walk the student to the appropriate office if necessary.					
I follow up with student.					