

Caltech

ORANGE FOLDER

A Guide To Student Support at Caltech

Updated: January 2026

Message to the Caltech Community

Purpose

Students may face academic, personal, or emotional challenges during their time at Caltech and may not always recognize when they need support. As a member of the Caltech community, you play an important role in noticing when a student may be struggling and helping them connect to the right resources.

The Caltech Orange Folder serves as a practical guide to help you recognize signs of distress, respond with attentiveness and empathy, refer students to appropriate campus resources, and build confidence in your ability to offer support.

Student Privacy and Confidentiality

When communicating with a student, it is important to use the language “private and discreet” rather than “confidential,” as you may be required to share certain information with those listed in this document. Consideration for student privacy should always be given before information is shared.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) permits communication about a student in connection with a health and safety emergency. Observations of a student’s conduct or statements made by a student are not protected by FERPA. FERPA permits disclosures of information in health and safety emergencies.

Recognize:

Any one of the following indicators alone does not necessarily suggest the student is experiencing distress. However, together they may indicate that the student needs or may be asking for help.

Academic

- Drop in work quality or performance
- Frequent absences or missed commitments
- Disorganized or inconsistent work habits
- Disruptive or challenging classroom/lab behavior
- Repeated special consideration
- Academic integrity concerns
- Unresponsive to outreach or feedback
- Excessive demands on time or attention
- Concerning themes in writing or speech
- Strained relationship with advisor

Psychological

- Shares personal or family difficulties
- Shares recent mental health/medical diagnosis
- Mentions financial, legal, or safety concerns
- Strong or unexpected emotional reactions
- Frequent tearfulness, panic, or anxiety
- Verbal hostility or intimidation
- Displays paranoia or delusional thinking
- Peers express concern for the student

Physical

- Noticeable change in appearance or hygiene
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Persistent fatigue or low energy
- Signs of intoxication or hangovers
- Appears disoriented or “out of it”
- Slurred, rapid, or disconnected speech
- Behavior that seems erratic or unusual

Safety

- Mentions or implies self-harm or violence
- Displays anger, hostility, or aggression
- Writes about despair, rage, or self-injury
- Engages in physical violence or threats
- Stalks, harasses, or intimidates others
- Sends threatening or disturbing messages

Trust your instincts. When something doesn't feel right, reach out. You don't have to handle your concern alone—consult with the CARE Team or another campus resource for support. (see page 8)

Respond:

How you respond to a student in distress can set the tone for how they will seek help. The language below is not a script, but suggestions to guide you in challenging conversations with students.

Say what you see:

Be direct. Let the student know that you've noticed a change and that you want to talk privately (unless there are safety concerns)

"I wanted to check in. I've noticed ___ and wanted to see if you were open to talking about it, or if I can help you seek out resources on campus."

Show you care:

Warmth and trust can be built by the words you use and the tone of your voice. What you say and how you say it makes a difference in how a student articulates their experiences.

"I just wanted to check in to see how you are doing."

"I want you to know that I am here to support you."

"How can I be helpful?"

Hear them out:

Be there to listen rather than solve. As an active listener, be fully present and ask open-ended follow-up questions.

"Wow, I'd like to hear more about that."

"I'm so sorry. What's that like for you?"

"That sounds really hard, how is that affecting you?"

Know your role:

Set clear boundaries and connect students to those who can meet their needs. You are the bridge. Remember you are not a confidential resource but honor their privacy as best as possible.

"I'd like to get you connected to some resources"

"I may need to share information with the CARE Team in order to best support you. You are not in trouble, I just want to make sure you have what you need to be well"

Connect to help:

Determine whether the student needs immediate assistance, specialized professional help, or social support. If they're not in crisis, they may still appreciate being connected to resources or simply knowing someone will follow up.

"Thank you for being so open with me. I want to make sure you're getting the support you need. I really think you may find ___ to be a helpful resource."

EMERGENCIES AND ACUTE CRISIS SITUATIONS

Immediate response is required in situations where a student/person of concern is in such significant emotional stress that their ability to function is seriously impaired or they pose a threat to themselves, others, or property

Whether or not the person of concern is a student, immediately call Campus Security at x5000 or (626) 395-5000 when:

- There are high levels of irritability, including unruly, aggressive, violent or abusive behavior
- There is a serious or imminent threat to harm another person, themselves, or property
- You suspect a person has ingested a substance or has engaged in self-harm behavior that is life threatening

If the person of concern is a student, immediately call the Counseling Center at x8331 or (626) 395-8331 when:

- Impaired speech or garbled, disorganized, or grandiose thoughts
- A student is exhibiting bizarre or strange behavior that is obviously unusual or inappropriate to the situation; e.g. talking to “invisible” people
- Student makes overtly suicidal comments; e.g. referring to suicide as a current option

Immediately call the Staff and Faculty Consultation Center at x8360 or (626) 395-8360 when:

- The psychological emergencies described above do not involve a student

TIPS FOR DE-ESCALATION

- Be empathetic and non-judgmental
 - Focus fully on the person; what they're feeling may be very significant to them.
- Respect personal space
 - Maintain 1.5–3 feet of distance from someone who is escalating.
 - If you need to enter their space, explain why to reduce fear or confusion.
- Use non-threatening, nonverbal communication
 - Keep your tone, facial expressions, and body language calm and neutral.
 - As tension rises, people respond more to nonverbal cues than words. (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice).
- Keep your emotions in check
 - Stay calm, professional, and composed. Your demeanor influences the outcome.
 - Show confidence and control to help the person feel safer and more at ease.

- Focus on feelings
 - Listen closely for the person's underlying message and emotions.
 - Use supportive words to show understanding and encourage a positive response.
- Set limits
 - Give clear, simple, and consistent boundaries when behavior becomes disruptive (ex. "It's difficult to talk with you when you are yelling, please lower your voice")
 - Speak calmly and offer positive choices first, as upset people may struggle to process complex messages.
- Choose wisely what you insist upon
 - Offer flexibility and options to prevent unnecessary conflict.
 - Decide which rules are firm and negotiable.
- Allow silence and time for reflection/action
 - Use silence for thinking and processing emotions, giving time for calm reflection
 - Stress increases when a person feels rushed. Allowing time can bring calm to the situation and allow for better decision making.

Refer:

Identify whether the student needs immediate support or attention.
Review the options below to guide the student to the appropriate resource.

When you think...

The student's conduct is clearly reckless, dangerous, disorderly, or threatening of *immediate harm* to self or others in the community.

React

On-campus (24 hours): x5000

Off-campus (24 hours): (626) 395-5000
or 911 if necessary ****see below****

When you think...

The student shows signs of distress, but it is not clear how serious it is. I feel uneasy and very concerned about the student.

Consult

Undergraduate Deans Office: (626) 395-6351
Graduate Studies Office: (626) 395-6346
Student Wellness Services: (626) 395-8331
Center for Student Success: (626) 395-1344
More resources listed on page 8

When you think...

I am not concerned for anyone's immediate safety, but the student is experiencing academic or personal difficulties and *could* use some support.

Refer

Remind the student of on-campus resources available and submit a CARE referral online for coordinated follow up at: www.caltechcares.caltech.edu

****In an emergency, contact Campus Security at the number listed above before calling 911 whenever possible. Security officers can respond immediately, know the campus better than outside responders, and will coordinate directly with additional emergency services at the same time if needed.****

Campus Resources

Campus Security:

- For emergencies, contact Campus Security at (626) 395-5000 or 911 if off-campus.
- For non-emergencies, contact Campus Security at (626) 395-4701

Student Wellness Services: (626) 395-6393

- Student Wellness Services is committed to supporting the health and emotional well-being of Caltech students. Services are available to all eligible enrolled Caltech students and are NOT dependent on enrollment in any insurance plan.

After-Hours Crisis Support (Available 24/7): (626) 395-8331

- Press "2" and stay on the line
- Call for consultation with a counselor and provide as a crisis resource to students outside of Counseling Service's regular business hours.

Center for Student Success and Accessibility Services:

- cass@caltech.edu
- CASS seeks to equip students with the tools, guidance, and support they need to thrive - academically, personally, and beyond. (accommodation requests and accessibility services, CARE Team)

Equity and Title IX Office: (626) 395-3132

- Addresses issues of unlawful discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, national origin, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and other individual characteristics protected by federal and state law.

Staff/Faculty Consultation Center: (626) 395-8360

- The SFCC is staffed by skilled mental health professionals with extensive experience in assisting employees and their families to balance the complex demands of work and personal life.

Caltech Connect:

- Caltech Connect is an award-winning 2-hour interactive suicide prevention training. It's offered each term to interested faculty, staff, postdocs, and students. The current training schedule is always available at CaltechCares.caltech.edu in the 'Training' section.

Together, we are Caltech's network of care.

Every student deserves to feel safe, supported, and connected. Keep this resource list close—and use it. When we recognize, respond, and refer with care, we strengthen our community and make student success possible.

Community Resources

Crisis Support (24/7):

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988 for immediate mental health support.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
- Trans Lifeline: Call (877) 565-8860 for peer support from trans community members.

Treatment & Recovery Resources:

- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Helpline: Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for information and referrals to mental health and substance use

Nearest Hospital:

- Huntington Health Hospital: (626) 397-5000, 100 W California Blvd, Pasadena, CA 91105

Nearest Psychiatric Hospital:

- Las Encinas Hospital: (877) 579-8140, 2900 E Del Mar Blvd, Pasadena, CA 91107

Additional Referral Options

Wellness Checks

When a student has been unresponsive for an extended period, or you have immediate concern for their safety or well-being, reach out to Counseling or Campus Security to explore options, or initiate a wellness check for possible high-risk situations.

The goal of a wellness check is simple: to confirm that the student is safe, to reestablish contact, and to ensure they know that Caltech cares about their well-being and has resources available to help.

On-campus (24 hours): x5000

Off-campus (24 hours): (626) 395-5000

Counseling Services: (626) 395-8331

Important Notes:

- Wellness checks can be initiated by any concerned member of the community
- For students in residential housing, checks will be conducted by Residential Life Coordinators (RLCs) and campus security
- For students off-campus, wellness checks will be conducted in partnership with local authorities

CARE Team

CARE Team Referral Process:

1. All submitted referrals are reviewed within 24 hours, during normal business hours.
2. Details of the concern are shared with the CARE Team, and a case manager is assigned.
3. Outreach to the student (if needed) is initiated based on the concern and other campus partners are included as appropriate.
4. The assigned case manager continues to support the student as needed, and/or facilitates resolution.

Important Notes:

- CARE referrals can be anonymously submitted
- Individuals who submit a referral will likely not be involved further in the CARE process or notified of outcomes, due to student privacy.
- As a reminder, the CARE referral process is *not* for emergency situations or concerns.

Submit a Referral: www.caltechcares.caltech.edu

CARE Team: careteam2@caltech.edu