# TAPP: Responding to Students in Distress

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## Brief Summary of the Session

The workshop on *Responding to Students in Distress* facilitated by Megan MacKay covered several critical areas for supporting students who may be experiencing mental health challenges in a post-secondary context. Key highlights included recognizing signs of distress in students, such as physical, behavioural, and emotional indicators, and how to approach them with empathy and active listening techniques. The session also emphasized setting healthy boundaries for self-care and understanding the limits of instructors' role in supporting students. It introduced practical strategies, such as paraphrasing and asking clarifying questions, and explained the process of making referrals to wellness services.

One of the most valuable elements of the workshop was the emphasis on active listening as a central component of support. MacKay stressed the importance of listening not just for content but for understanding the underlying emotions students might be experiencing. This involves not jumping immediately to solutions but instead allowing students to feel heard and validated. This aligns with my teaching philosophy, as I aim to foster an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their challenges.

Additionally, the workshop provided practical advice for boundary setting. This was particularly helpful for me, as I often work closely with students and instructors and understand the importance of maintaining clear professional boundaries. I learned that boundaries not only protect my own well-being but also provide clarity and stability for students who may otherwise push limits unintentionally. MacKay emphasized the importance of communicating boundaries early and explicitly, a practice I plan to adopt more consistently in my role. I see myself applying this through clear guidelines about availability, response times, and the limits of support I can provide in an academic setting.

The workshop also offered insights into making appropriate referrals when mental health support is outside my expertise. Understanding the referral process to student wellness services, along with the confidentiality policies, helps me feel more confident in directing students to the right resources. I now feel better equipped to handle situations where students may require more specialized help, knowing that I can refer them to services like counseling or case management without compromising their trust.

Moreover, the discussion on recognizing the physical, emotional, and behavioural signs of distress reminded me of the diverse ways mental health concerns can manifest. In an online teaching context, signs such as frequent absences, incomplete assignments, or

sudden changes in participation levels can signal distress. These reminders will help me be more attuned to the subtle cues that a student might be struggling with, particularly in asynchronous online courses where face-to-face interactions are limited.

**Applying Theory and Practice**

Moving forward, I plan to integrate this workshop into my teaching practice in several ways:

- I can apply the principles of active listening and empathy when interacting with students, especially those showing signs of distress or struggling with course material. For example, I will make more effort to engage in active listening with students, especially during office hours or in written communication. By focusing on understanding their concerns rather than rushing to provide answers, I can ask open-ended questions to encourage deeper reflection from students and provide validation for their concerns without trying to "fix" their problems.
- I will set clearer boundaries in my communication with students, such as defining specific response times for emails and sticking to scheduled office hours. This will not only protect my time but also provide students with realistic expectations of the support I can offer. Setting clear boundaries, such as specifying office hours and response times, will help manage student expectations while protecting my time and well-being. Finally, I would familiarize myself with referral processes to ensure that I can direct students to appropriate resources when necessary.
- Given my focus on online learning, I will pay closer attention to changes in students' behaviour, especially in terms of engagement and participation. By recognizing the early signs of distress, I can intervene sooner and offer the necessary support or referrals.

These practices align well with my role as an instructional designer and learning technology specialist, where I often support both students and instructors in online learning environments, and these approaches can improve the student experience in those settings.