



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 46 - When Non-Academic Problems Need Non-Academic Help

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 46: When non-academic problems need non-academic help.

Previously, Adam and I have discussed help such as tutoring and writing centers on campus, but what about when a student needs help that is not academic?

Adam: So, help that is not academic can include: referrals to counseling services on campus or off-campus; advice with how to deal with a work/school schedule that can be overwhelming; housing or food insecurity, which is becoming more and more of a problem on many college campuses; childcare issues; medical emergencies or chronic conditions; being the victim of a crime; dealing with grief; or even something as simple as homesickness.

Dinur: Professors are resources in terms of knowing services on campus. And if we can't help directly, then we can at least point you in the right direction. We're aware of the counseling services, we're aware of health services, you know. Some campuses have food pantries, and if we're aware of them, we can be resources and point you to them when you need help.

Adam: So this episode is aimed both at students and professors in different ways.

Students, we're here to tell you - these are all these different situations that we've heard about. We have heard about all of those situations that I just listed from our students over the years. And we're going to give examples and talk about how we handled those examples.

Professors, listen to us. Figure out how to help your students when they come to you with "my babysitter's sick for the next two days. Can I bring my five-year-old to class?" Because these are issues that, while not academic, are still issues that we do need to deal with in our classrooms and with our students.

So my first example is, I had a student a few years back whose cousin was their roommate. And the cousin committed suicide in a very messy way, using a gun, in their shared apartment, probably around the middle of the semester.

But the student didn't even tell me that that had happened. They didn't tell me that they were their family's point person for cleaning up what had happened in their apartment, arranging for the cousin's funeral, contacting all the family members - and they were doing this on top of a full-time class schedule and a nearly full-time work schedule.

The first thing I heard about it was probably the week before finals week. And at that point they hadn't turned in anything in six weeks and there was nothing I could do to help them, really. What I had to do was recommend that they get a traumatic emergency drop from my class, so they could retake it with someone else the next semester.

So, this student also had an issue that Brené Brown identified in her book *Rising Strong*. And I'm looking at what she said, here, about it. When Brené's mother went into the hospital with a completely unheard-of heart condition - nobody expected her to have it - Brené did what is known as "overfunctioning." And Brené was the oldest child in her family, and she was a known - this is a known problem for firstborns, where they just take over everything. They micromanage, they rescue. This concept comes from Harriet learner's book, *The Dance of Connection*.

And in Brené's book, she talks about how an overfunctioner will do everything they can to avoid looking inward at the problem and say "We just can come out." And they, they make all the to-do lists, and they assign everybody tasks, and they just, they do all the things. They become the manager.

And her younger sisters, on the other hand, would default to underfunctioning - basically letting Brené run roughshod over them and tell them what to do. And she describes a scene from when she had to go to her mother's hospital room. And she's there, and she and her mom, both overfunctioners, are saying, "Okay, what do we need to do? What do you need from home? What can I do? Who do I call? What needs to be done? You know, what do you need us to bring from the house?"

And her underfunctioning sisters were just standing there going, "We'll wait," you know? But then they called her on it. They said, "Brené, you're overfunctioning," and Brené fell apart.

And this student was the same way, where she had just always been the strong person. She had always been the one who managed everything. Her mother was an underfunctioner; her little brothers were underfunctioners. It was her job to step up and take care of everything.

The problem is, there aren't enough hours in the day to deal with a family tragedy *and* a full-time school schedule *and* a nearly full-time work schedule. And they never came to me until, like I said, like the week before finals week. So what we had to do was recommend that she take an emergency drop.

And teachers, if your student is an overfunctioner, they may not let you know about the problem until it's too late. They may feel very ashamed that they are not handling it on their own, without help. They have always been told they're the one who's supposed to help everybody else. And so, finding out that, basically, they need to ask for help, too, is shocking, uncomfortable, difficult and scary.

Dinur: And I've had students who are victims of crimes, including sexual assault. I remember a few years back I was teaching a student, and they came to me in tears. They said that they'd gone to Las Vegas over the weekend, to celebrate either their birthday or a friend's birthday, and someone either in a club or in a casino sexually assaulted them. And they were distraught.

And the first - one of the first things I asked them was, "Did you go to the police?"

And they had, so they had taken care of that legality. And that was good because, one thing to keep in mind is, as professors, we are mandatory reporters. That means that when a student of ours is the victim, we have to report it to the police, if they haven't gone and done so on their own.

Now, it was heartbreaking. And I know it's not unusual, but it's still tough, was this student felt responsible for being a victim? They were apologizing to me saying, "I shouldn't have been there. I shouldn't have -" I forget if it was "done what I was doing" or "worn what I wore" - and I had to try and explain that like the only person who is at fault here is the perpetrator. It's the criminal, it's not her. She's a victim in this.

And in order to try and help her, I made sure to let her know that he could reach me by email if she needed to meet. She knew where my office was on campus. She could either meet with me during office hours or make an appointment, but I just tried to make myself a little bit more available to her, even if there was nothing I could do directly to solve this problem. Just having an ear to help sometimes goes a long way

Adam: And sometimes, in a criminology class especially, I will get students who speak up about their own victimizations, maybe years before. And I will say, "All right, if you could come and talk with me in office hours, if you're comfortable doing that, if not, there is a resource center on campus." And so I direct them to the Women's Resource Center, which has a sexual assault/crisis program to help people.

But yeah, that mandatory reporting thing is really important too. And students who need to talk with us about these problems, be aware that we are mandatory reporters. We are required, by law, to contact the police on your behalf. If you tell us enough information that we are able to say, 'Okay, there's an identifiable perpetrator, there's an identifiable crime, you're an identifiable victim,' and you have the total right to tell us "I'm not telling you anything else, because I don't want you to report."

We still have to report that a student came to us, but you have the right to decide how much of that you want to disclose.

And so, I would strongly recommend, for students specifically, if you have experienced a sexual assault or crime, go to the campus police if it happened on campus, go to the city police if it happened off-campus, go to the Women's Resource Center if there is one on your campus. And that applies whether you're a man or a woman. If you're a man who's been sexually assaulted, the Women's Resource Center is probably the one on campus that's going to have the resources that you need.

Professors, be aware of mandatory reporting, caution your student if they come to you with this kind of a thing and say, "Okay, be aware, as a mandatory reporter, what you tell me, I am required to talk to the police about it. So how much do you want to tell me?" And if they say, "I don't want to talk to you about this," then say, "Okay, then we need to get you with someone who isn't a mandatory reporter. Let's send you to the counseling center." Because the counseling center, because of doctor-client and treater-client privilege, they have the right to say "We're not going to mandatory-report this."

So, other issues that aren't maybe quite as overwhelming as sexual assault or other crimes. I had a student who was food insecure. They were homeless, they were living in a shelter, and they were not getting enough food each day because they were homeless and living in a shelter. So they were also housing insecure. And they just couldn't afford to buy enough food for a week. And living in a shelter, there was no place for them to store it.

Well, recently our campus opened up a food bank for students in that situation, and I was able to refer to the bank for some help. And more and more campuses are putting together things like food banks. I know that there are some campuses in the LA area, for example, that have hired someone who is a "basic needs coordinator." Their job is to make sure that students do not face housing insecurity or food insecurity. So, professors, you might want to look into seeing if there's one on your campus - and if there's not, maybe start a drive to get one started on your campus.

Dinur: Now, less intense, but a lot more common, is students who have overwhelming work schedules, they're either working longer hours at one job or their work schedule changed. So now, instead of working in the afternoon, now they've got to work overnights. Or some take on a second job, and that's in addition to whatever classes they're taking. And they'll try and bear it out; they'll try and tough it out, but their grade starts slipping.

Now, I had a student recently that I'd had had in a previous course and he had done, well not course, but his grades early on weren't very strong in my class. And I knew him pretty well, so I asked him, "Hey, is it something with the way I'm teaching? Is it the material not clicking? What can I do to help you here?"

And he goes, "It's not you. I just started working graveyard shift and I'm exhausted by the time I reach your class."

And so what I do, when I'm told more or less as it's happening, I try and make my due dates more flexible - because I know that this is a situation that is out of their control. They need that help, but I need to be aware that this is a situation that's going on as it's happening. If I'm told weeks or months after the fact, it comes off as an excuse for getting a zero on an assignment, rather than a real time explanation for a challenging situation.

I had a different class, different students. And I remember I had the students turn in, I think a rough draft or an outline of a paper on Halloween, and this was a class with over a hundred students. So this student comes to me maybe the week before Thanksgiving and says, "Well, I have my outline."

And I said, "That's great, but why are you showing this to me now?"

And she goes, "Well, something came up at work the day it was due."

"The day it was due was like three weeks ago. So why are you telling me again now?"

"Well, I thought it would be excused."

It's not excused if I don't know about it when it's happening. You know, it's one thing to tell me, "Hey, something came up at work yesterday. Can I send you the draft now? Or the outline now?" It's another thing when it's three - three weeks after the fact.

Adam: And I had a student, a semester or two ago, who was showing up very late to a once-a-week class, where I basically treated it as two class meetings. You know, we had enough time to have two regular class meetings and there was a 15 minute break. Well, they would show up, like, near the end of the first part of the class. And by that point I had taken roll and they were just not getting credit for half the things that were being done in the class. And when they found out, they came to me and said, "Look, my boss won't let me leave until 5:30 or won't let me leave until five or something. I think I've talked about the student before where, you know, their boss was just keeping them at work for an extra 20 minutes, 30 minutes. But because they took public transport, you know, they weren't, they didn't have a car - they were taking public transportation. And so they wouldn't get on campus until 45 minutes after class had started.

And I said, "Okay, um, is there anything I can do?"

And they said, "Well, they're afraid of people who have degrees. I know that 'cause my boss doesn't have any degrees and they're really, like, insecure about it. We've teased him about it before."

And I said, "Oh, how about an, how about an email signed 'Dr. Sanford' saying that you will be in severe trouble if you're not in class on time from now on? And we'll work on giving you credit for some of the days. You know, we'll get people to vouch that you were there."

And so we did this, and she came to class the next week chuckling. She was there on the first day - before class started - and she came up to me and she said, "Dr. Sanford, I need you to write a letter like that for every single one of my classes because my boss was scared of you."

And I said, "I'm - I'm good with that. That works!"

But then I also had a student who was promoted to - they were promoted to store manager, and before they had been a basic worker, and then they were promoted the store manager. Well, suddenly they had to stay late every single time. And again, this was a once-a-week class. It was a different class, but it was a once-a-week class. Suddenly they just stopped showing up. But they didn't tell me why.

And I really liked the student. I mean, they would come to office hours but they never told me why they weren't showing up and I asked them, you know, "why aren't you showing up?" And they're all, "Well you know, I just forget," or, "You know, I'm just, I'm really busy. And then I look up and it's already halfway through class so I figured what's the point?"

And they didn't pass my class. But they understood why, because they came to me again, you know, in week 13 or 14, you know, before before finals, and said, "So, I got promoted."

And I said "Congratulations!"

And they're all, "Seven weeks ago."

I said, "Is that why you haven't been coming to class?"

He's all, "Yeah, I keep trying to get off early, but if I'm the manager, I can't leave until everybody else's left. And there's always one or two people who stick around and, and I can't make them leave."

And I'm all, "Okay, you should've dropped this class when that happened. Because the work schedule that you have now is seriously interfering with your ability to do things in my class. I don't see how you could make this up."

He's all, "No, man. I already know. I know that I can't make it up. I know that I'm going to fail, but I'll try to take another class with you cause I really like what you teach."

And I'm all, "Okay, I'm glad to hear that. But I really wish you told me because we might've been able to work something out," like Dinur said, you know, with extended deadlines or flexible deadlines or something like that. And because I didn't know, I didn't know that there was a need.

Now, another issue is when a student has a chronic medical condition - and we're not talking about a disability, exactly, just a medical condition that needs constant attention. So while this works as a disability, a lot of times, again, students don't want to talk about having a disability. They want - they don't want to talk about having a medical condition, especially if it's a new one. And college is often a time when students suddenly find out they have Type 1 diabetes. I know of a student who was only 22 and had testicular cancer. He had to go through, you know, all kinds of treatment, including, eventually, surgery because the, the cancer was spreading.

There are students who are young, but they still have heart failure. They might have congenital heart failure, where they were born with it. Or organ transplant patients - and I'll talk about a student who has that problem in a minute.

It's so - when students have chronic medical conditions like this, it's not surprising, I would say, that their attention might possibly be pulled away from academic work and toward taking care of their medical condition. If you have to inject insulin, you know, every 12 hours or every six hours or you know, at random times, that's not going to be something that you could just put off. You have to inject the insulin when you have to inject the insulin. If a student has HIV, they have to take meds on a very strict schedule, because any gap in those meds means the virus could find a way around the meds.

And I recently had a student who was a kidney transplant candidate. And they were responsible - they came in in the first week and they said, "So there might be, I might be absent sometime during the semester."

And I said, "Really? You know what, what's going on?" And you know, 'cause if a student for example, is pregnant and they might deliver in November or they come in and in October or September and say, "So you might've noticed a, you know, there's a baby coming and like due date is like mid October. So I might miss class." Okay, that's pretty obvious. But with this, this kid, it wasn't obvious and I said, "What's going on?"

And they're all, "Well, if a donor becomes available, I have to fly out of state to the donor center. Like, immediately. Like, I have to drop everything."

I'm all, "Oh, you're a donor candidate!"

And they're all, "Yeah."

And in the meantime, because it was a kidney transplant, they were on dialysis. Dialysis is every couple of days and it's very tiring. It wears you out. And so I was able to point them at the campus disability center, so they could get documentation to them, and then get accommodations, not just for my course but for all of their courses.

But be aware, professors, at any given time, several of your students are going to have chronic medical conditions, and those conditions may make it very difficult for them to ask for help. It may make it very difficult for them to do the job. And there may be things like, "Oh, I have to fly out of state to have a kidney transplant." And so, that's nothing you can plan for. You just have to say, "I have to be ready to drop everything at any second, even if I'm taking the final and go get this taken care of." Yes. Okay, understood. Totally. We'll figure out a way to make it happen.

Dinur: And both Adam and I have had students where they've had to bring their kids to class, because childcare fell through. Maybe the babysitter got sick; they couldn't find a sitter. And look, generally, universities don't want that to be an ongoing situation.

In emergencies, it can make a big difference for students who are trying to find babysitters or daycare centers. It can make a really big difference if you're willing to let students bring their kid into class. Now again, not as a regular thing, but as an exception, it's pretty useful.

So, I tend to cuss a lot when I lecture. I cuss pretty freely. And I've told students, when they've asked to bring their kids into class, "re you sure you're comfortable with your kid potentially hearing language that they wouldn't hear until, I don't know, high school?"

Adam: Yeah.

Dinur: And a lot of them laugh and they say, "Yeah, it's fine. I'll bring them to the tablet or I'll bring the phone and headphones. They can watch a video or they can listen to music while we lecture." And that's totally fine with me.

Or some kids have brought coloring books, they brought toys and that way, you know, the kid isn't bored to tears. Their parents might be, but the kid isn't. And it is safe. They're watching, they're being supervised. And again, we've seen the meme of the professor holding the student's baby while the professor lectures, right? Like we are aware that students are people, some of our students have kids, and sometimes, those kids are going to come to class.

Adam: So we've directed a lot of this to professors, but students, do you see that we recognize you have these problems, we see that?

And students, one of the things you might want to remember is, we have hundreds of students every term. And because of that, there's really no way that we know what's going on in each individual student's life unless we're told. And also remember, we're people first too. We're - you know, we have not always been professors. I did not leap from the womb with my PhD. All right? We've all needed help at different points in our lives, just as you might. And while the help needed might not be exactly the same, we've all had times where we felt helpless or powerless and we needed someone to turn to.

And if you see us as your mentor or as someone you trust and you're willing to come to us and say, "okay, I just lost my mom. She just died and I - I'm a wreck" or, "I just got diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and I'm terrified of needles, but they say I have to inject myself every single day, multiple times a day" - the fact that you're willing to tell us that is a huge, huge compliment because it tells us that you're willing to trust us. And we will try our best to make sure that we don't betray that trust.

Now, while we're talking about this, I want to talk about one of my own experiences as a student before we go forward. My father died when I was in my second year of grad school and I had to go to my professors and say, "I can't TA right now. Can I ask one of the other grad students to cover for me for sections?" And they all said yes. And I had to go to my professors who were teaching classes I was taking and say, "could I please get an extension on this paper? 'Cause right now I can't think at all and my mind is just, I can't, I'm not coping with the fact that my father died so suddenly" - because it was actually quite sudden. We did not get a lot of warning.

And all but one of them said yes, and so I was able to focus on that one teacher's thing and get it out of the way. The others gave me extensions until the end of the next quarter, and so I was able to catch up. And then I spent most of that summer just in a state of nervous breakdown because I was just, I, I'd put off my grief and sometimes, yeah, you might have to put off your grief or put off your stress, but allow yourself the time if you can to cope with the stress.

And remember if you come to your professors, most of us will be more than willing to help because we've been there. We know what it's like. It may not have been with school, it may have been with our first job, but we know what it's like to have a sudden big stressor that has nothing to do with class, but that is interfering with our ability to do class. We both know that. And all the professors I've ever met have some story like that too.

Dinur: Now, your best way to approach your professor is to email them. Email is key. But also ask to talk to them privately, either in office hours or outside of it. Don't come up to me cause as we're trying to set up for class or at the end of class and say, "Hey, this thing just happened," because our mind is either trying to get ready for the class at hand. Some of us teach, you know, back to back to back to back classes. So at the end of a class, we're already trying to get prepared and we're trying to think of like "where do we need to go? What are we lecturing about in the next class?" We're just not going to be able to remember.

Adam pointed out that we have hundreds of students each term. There is almost no way that we're going to remember one person, or two people, or five people out of 300 or 400 if not more, saying, "Hey, we have this problem." Email. Because when you email, email stays in our inbox. You have proof you've written it. And it gives us something that we can refer to them and say, "Oh, right, this person had this problem. How do I help them?" You've heard the phrase "Pics or it didn't happen?" Email, or it didn't happen.

Adam: Now, you may have feelings of embarrassment or shame, which make it tough to come forward. Sometimes there's a cultural stigma about asking for help, and it always feels tough to say, "I need help," or "Something's gone wrong in my life and I'm not handling it," but we promise you, your professors, we are not looking to shine a spotlight on you in front of your classmates or the other professors going, "Oh my God, can you believe they need help?" That's not going to happen.

We want our students to be in the best position to learn and succeed. And if something's preventing you from that, we want to try and help you not make it harder.

Dinur: Now, we've geared a lot of this advice towards students, but how can teachers use this? Well, one, be available to your students. You know, we just reminded our students that, as professors, where people first remember that your students are people first and people need help at different points in their lives with different challenges. We're in a position that we can help people. We have that authority, so why not use that position well? Why not use it to help those who need it?

Adam: Also, be aware of cultural stigmas about asking for help. Many students of color have grown up in cultural surrounds that say, "Nobody asks for help. It's weak to ask for help. It's bad to ask for help. Do it

yourself.” Like my student who had a cousin who had committed suicide - that student was convinced, “Nobody will help me anyway, so I’m not going to ask for help and make myself look weak.”

Make it clear that you’re not going to stigmatize the students who do ask for help. If you can, give examples of how you asked for help when you faced these kinds of problems, like when I talked about when my dad died and I was in grad school, I tell my students that story at the beginning of class when I say, “If you need help and it’s not about class, I will listen to you. I have been there. I know what that’s like.” And when you give them an example of your own experience, they’re often much more likely to come to you for help.

Dinur: Be flexible. When you create your syllabus and you put your assignments together, ask yourself, is there a way a student with a childcare failure or a medical emergency can do this later or catch up with the class? If there isn’t, reconsider the assignment. Are you able to extend a due date? Are you able to give an alternate assignment if need be?

The whole idea is, we want our students to learn. We know that there are going to be challenges. We don’t know what they will be, to whom they will happen, or when they will happen. Well, we know that life intervenes and often in inconvenient ways, so why not build in a little flexibility to help students cope with those difficulties or those challenges?

Adam: And finally, get to know your campus’ nonacademic resource centers. Where’s the health center? Where’s the counseling center? Is there a food bank? Where is it? What are the resources that students who faced the problems we’ve been talking about will need? Where are they? How do they access them? Is there an email address? Do we have phone numbers? Do we have locations on campus? Oh, and if a needed resource doesn’t exist on your campus, can you advocate with administration to establish one? Like the food bank that my campus established recently - that was because teachers said, “Look, I’ve got students who are going hungry. They can’t focus on anything I’m teaching them. We need a way to help them.”

Dinur: So that’s what we have for you in Episode 46. If you’re finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We’re always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We’re hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we’d appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 47, when we’ll talk about how to talk to your professors about your grades in ways that will be productive, instead of frustrating.

Dinur: You’ve been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!