

Helping stressed, distressed, and struggling students

A practical guide for staff

The health and wellbeing of our students is everyone's concern. We should all be aware of the signs that a student is struggling, and know how to help.

Most students cope well with the stresses of University life with support from their friends, whānau, family, and academic departments. Sometimes though they need more than that.

This guide has been produced to:

- Raise awareness of student mental health
- Provide guidance for staff who are dealing with stressed students
- Recognise if there's a bigger problem, and be able to respond or make the appropriate referrals
- Remind you of the sources of student support within the University

Stress, distress, mental illness

Stress is the physical, mental and emotional response to a particular stimulus - called a 'stressor'. Stress can be positive or negative, depending on the level of our response. The good side of stress is improved creativity, learning, efficiency at work and, eventually, a higher level of self-esteem that can lead us to be able to withstand higher stress levels in the future. The bad side of stress is often manifested in physical and mental symptoms.

Distress is also something everyone experiences. It is part of normal everyday life, and we all have our mishaps and disappointments. Usually, we can cope with mental distress and work through it ourselves. If the mental distress is more severe, then talking with a friend, parents or a support person can help.

Mental disorders or illnesses comprise a broad range of problems, with different symptoms. However, they are generally characterised by some combination of abnormal thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others. These are pervasive changes lasting for two weeks or more and adversely affect the individual's functioning. Most of these disorders can be successfully treated. The first step is to seek professional help.

What you can do to help a student

- Be available - often a distressed student just needs someone to talk to
- Be empathetic - listen, acknowledge their situation - summarise what you've heard. Some useful phrases are "this sounds hard" or "what you're saying is....", show that you're hearing what they're saying
- Help them feel safe and supported. Some useful phrases are "this situation sounds difficult, let's see how we can resolve this", "it looks like you have a lot going on, I can help you with *this* and *this* today, then perhaps we can make another time to look at *that* and *that*"
- Be specific about what your role is and what you can do. If it gets too difficult, use phrases like "you may benefit from some professional input with this issue, my role is to find you the right person to talk to", or "as your [state your role here] I can help you with [state what you can help with] and the other service will be able to support you further"
- Make appropriate referrals (using the charts in this guide)
- Make talking about wellbeing an everyday thing

What Isn't Helpful

- Being dismissive of a student's situation
- Taking responsibility for their emotional state or actions
- Solving all their problems
- Taking a student home or lending them money
- Replacing the role of a professional clinician if they need one
(*Always maintain professional boundaries*)

Privacy and confidentiality

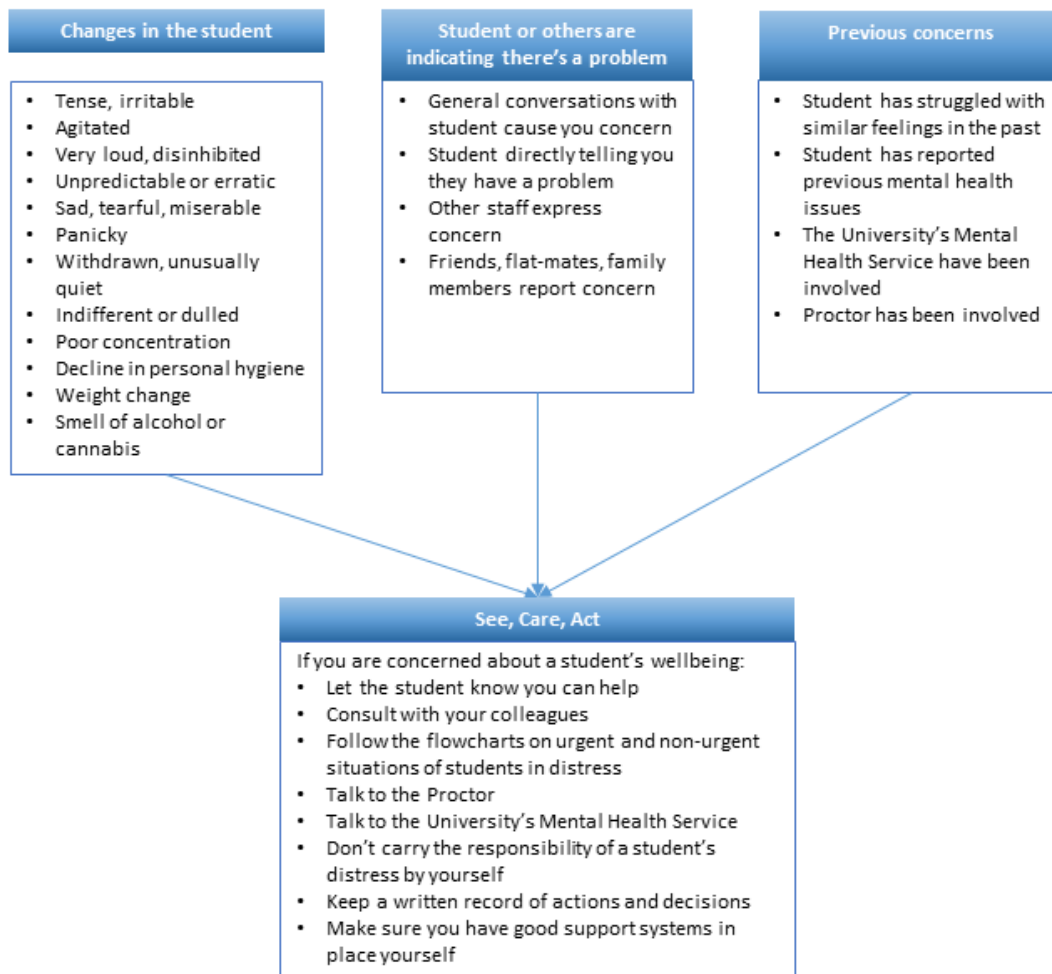
Legally students' personal information needs to be treated as private and confidential and shared only with staff who need the information to help a student:

- Treat all personal information as private and use discretion in using it
- Do not promise absolute confidentiality to a student – advise them that you may have to consult a colleague in order to help them or if they are a risk to themselves or others
- If you need to share personal information clearly explain who you are passing information on to and why
- Do not disclose personal information about a student to anyone outside the University, including parents or caregivers, without the student's consent.
- If a parent or caregiver wishes to contact a student via you, you can offer to forward a message to the student.

Deciding if there is a problem?

If you are concerned that a student is distressed or struggling, then you're probably right. Trust your judgement.

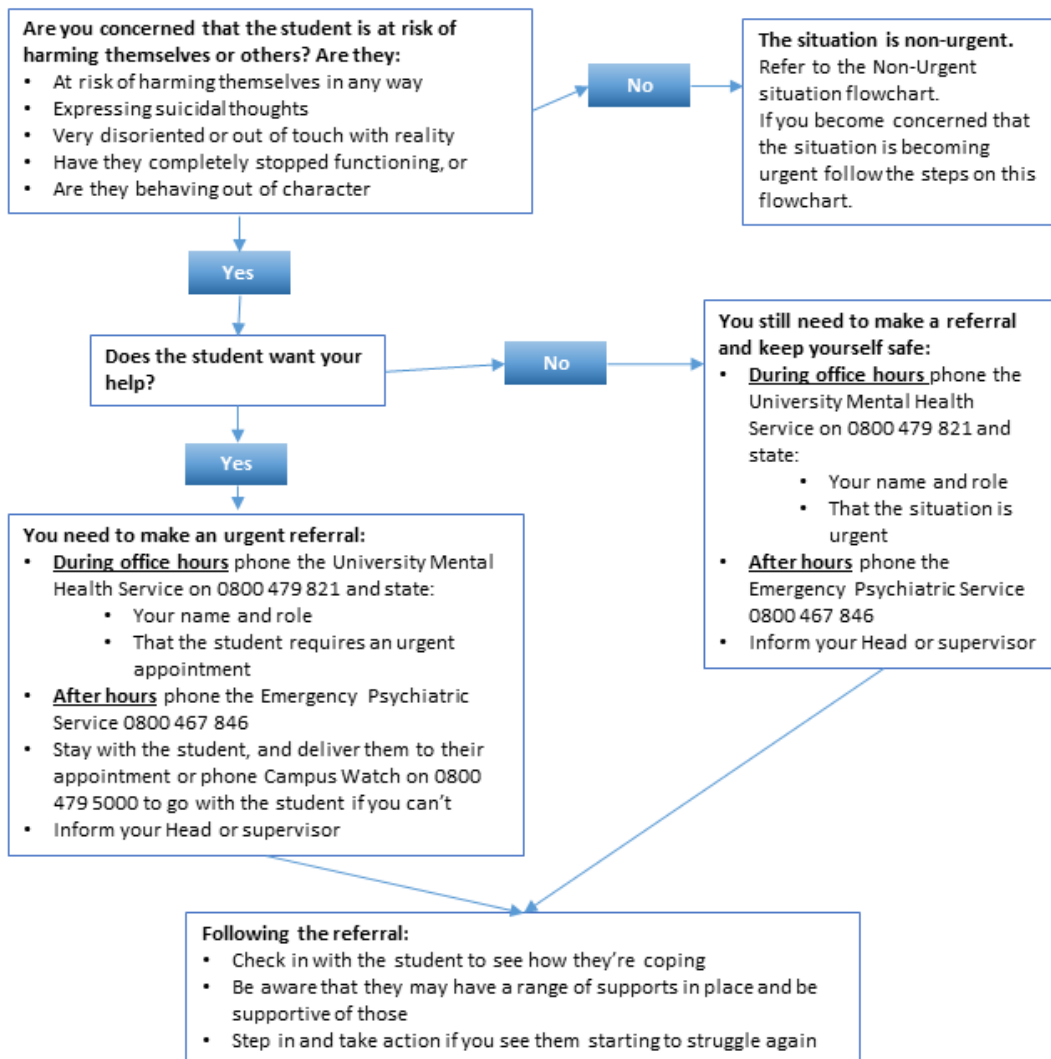
The following indicators can help you decide if there's a problem. Keep an eye out for anything of concern, use the information around you, involve others, and utilise all the support services on campus for students.



Call the police immediately on 111 if you think the student is at immediate risk of harming themselves, is violent or is threatening violence to people or property, or becomes violent at any time

URGENT situations: Who to tell and what to do

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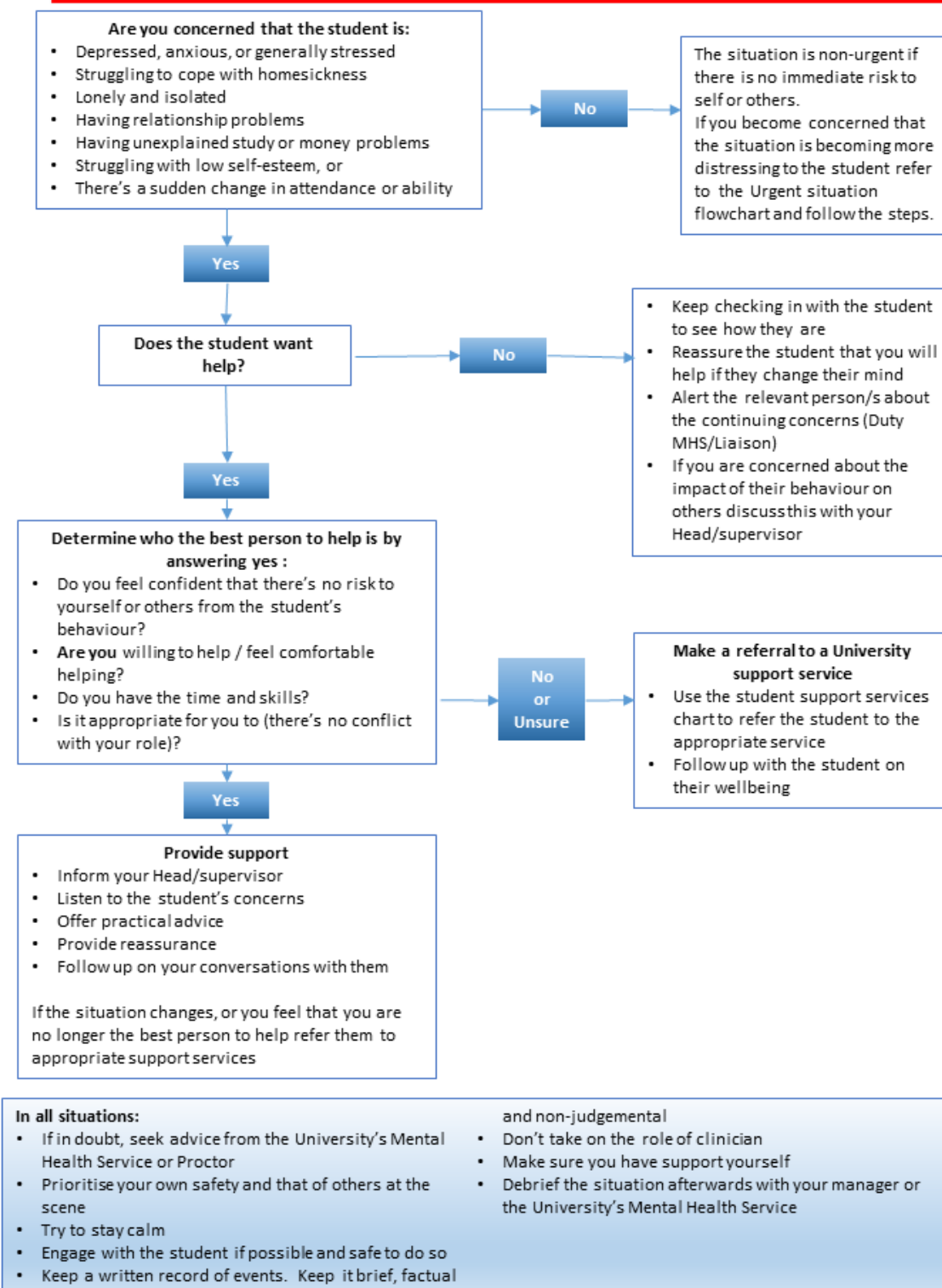


In all situations:

- If in doubt, seek advice from the University's Mental Health Service or Proctor
- Prioritise your own safety and that of others at the scene
- Try to stay calm
- Engage with the student if possible and safe to do so
- Keep a written record of events. Keep it brief, factual and non-judgemental
- Don't take on the role of clinician
- Make sure you have support yourself
- Debrief the situation afterwards with your manager or the University's Mental Health Service

NON-URGENT situations: Who to tell and what to do

Call the police immediately on 111 if you think the student is at immediate risk of harming themselves, is violent or is threatening violence to people or property, or becomes violent at any time



Student support services

