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.

**Changes in the student**
- Tense, irritable
- Agitated
- Very loud, disinhibited
- Unpredictable or erratic
- Sad, tearful, miserable
- Panicky
- Withdrawn, unusually quiet
- Indifferent or dull
- Poor concentration
- Decline in personal hygiene
- Weight change
- Smell of alcohol or cannabis

**Student or others are indicating there’s a problem**
- General conversations with student cause you concern
- Student directly telling you they have a problem
- Other staff express concern
- Friends, flatmates, family members report concern

**Previous concerns**
- Student has struggled with similar feelings in the past
- Student has reported previous mental health issues
- The University’s Mental Health Service have been involved
- Proctor has been involved

**See, Care, Act**
If you are concerned about a student’s wellbeing:
- Let the student know you can help
- Consult with your colleagues
- Follow the flowcharts on urgent and non-urgent situations of students in distress
- Talk to the Proctor
- Talk to the University’s Mental Health Service
- Don’t carry the responsibility of a student’s distress by yourself
- Keep a written record of actions and decisions
- Make sure you have good support systems in place yourself

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

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.

Are you concerned that the student is at risk of harming themselves or others? Are they:
- At risk of harming themselves in any way
- Expressing suicidal thoughts
- Very disoriented or out of touch with reality
- Have they completely stopped functioning, or
- Are they behaving out of character

No

The situation is non-urgent. Refer to the Non-Urgent situation flowchart.
If you become concerned that the situation is becoming urgent follow the steps on this flowchart.

Yes

Does the student want your help?

No

You still need to make a referral and keep yourself safe:
- During office hours phone the University Mental Health Service on 0800 479 821 and state:
  - Your name and role
  - That the student requires an urgent appointment
- After hours phone the Emergency Psychiatric Service 0800 467 846
- Stay with the student, and deliver them to their appointment or phone Campus Watch on 0800 479 5000 to go with the student if you can’t
- Inform your head or supervisor

Yes

You need to make an urgent referral:
- During office hours phone the University Mental Health Service on 0800 479 821 and state:
  - Your name and role
  - That the student requires an urgent appointment
- After hours phone the Emergency Psychiatric Service 0800 467 846
- Stay with the student, and deliver them to their appointment or phone Campus Watch on 0800 479 5000 to go with the student if you can’t
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Following the referral:
- Check in with the student to see how they’re coping
- Be aware that they may have a range of supports in place and be supportive of those
- Step in and take action if you see them starting to struggle again

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.

Are you concerned that the student is:
- Depressed, anxious, or generally stressed
- Struggling to cope with homesickness
- Lonely and isolated
- Having relationship problems
- Having unexplained study or money problems
- Struggling with low self-esteem, or
- There’s a sudden change in attendance or ability

The situation is non-urgent if there is no immediate risk to self or others. If you become concerned that the situation is becoming more distressing to the student, refer to the Urgent situation flowchart and follow the steps.

Does the student want help?

Keep checking in with the student to see how they are
- Keep checking in with the student to see how they are
- Reassure the student that you will help if they change their mind
- Alert the relevant person/s about the continuing concerns (Duty MHS/Laison)
- If you are concerned about the impact of their behaviour on others, discuss this with your Head/supervisor

Determine who the best person to help is by answering yes:
- Do you feel confident that there’s no risk to yourself or others from the student’s behaviour?
- Are you willing to help / feel comfortable helping?
- Do you have the time and skills?
- Is it appropriate for you to (there’s no conflict with your role)?

Make a referral to a University support service
- Use the student support services chart to refer the student to the appropriate service
- Follow up with the student on their wellbeing

Provide support
- Inform your Head/supervisor
- Listen to the student’s concerns
- Offer practical advice
- Provide reassurance
- Follow up on your conversations with them

If the situation changes, or you feel that you are no longer the best person to help, refer them to appropriate support services.

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