

Assisting Students in Distress

A Guide for University Staff



Student
Counselling
Service

2010



1. How to recognise when a student may be in distress.

As a staff member of the University who has regular contact with students, you may at times notice that a student appears to be in some distress. Some of the possible indicators of distress that you may come across include:

- Direct approach from a student stating that they are distressed
- Concern expressed by friends about a student
- Sudden changes in behaviour e.g. withdrawal from normal activities
- Sudden changes in emotions e.g. tearfulness, irritability, acute anxiety, expression of hopelessness about the future, exaggerated emotional responses
- Sudden change in academic performance e.g. lower grades, unexplained absences from classes, loss of motivation for academic work or participation in class
- Repeated requests for special consideration e.g. deadline extensions
- Being unusually demanding of staff time
- Appearing very emotionally dependent on staff
- Disruptive behaviours e.g. aggression
- Regular signs of substance use e.g. smell of alcohol or drugs
- Inability to communicate clearly e.g. disjointed thoughts, personal content in essays that would be raise concerns
- Obvious loss of contact with reality e.g. talking about hearing voices or expressing concerning beliefs
- Talking about harming self
- Talking about harming others

2. How to be supportive of students in distress

It is not the responsibility of staff members to be able to resolve a student's personal problems. However, in many cases, a distressed student may be helped significantly by being offered practical or low-level emotional support by a staff member. Some of the actions you might consider include;

- Offer to meet with the student in a private and calm setting (unless you feel it is inappropriate or unsafe to do so)
- Make clear to the student how much time is available for the meeting
- State your concerns openly in a non-judgemental way e.g. "I'm concerned about you and would like to try to help"
- Listen to the student's account of his or her situation in a non-judgmental way
- Remember how important listening is (being listened to and feeling understood may be enough to resolve some issues)
- Try to assist the student's identification and articulation of the main issue and decide, together if possible, on the most appropriate way forward. This may involve offering practical support such as a deadline extension or advice about how to complete an academic assignment. In more serious circumstances the situation may require organising or facilitating a referral for professional support (see below)
- If necessary and appropriate arrange to meet the student again to ensure that assistance has been sought and received.
- Know the limits and boundaries of what you can offer (your expertise is in your role in the university and you are not expected to be an expert in dealing with major distress)
- Always consider checking out your concerns with one of the psychologists or counsellors in the Student Counselling Service. It can be helpful to get another impartial perspective on the psychological meaning and significance of the signs a student is demonstrating.
- If you are concerned or if you feel that the student requires more than you can offer explore options for further support for the student e.g. that the student would seek an appointment with a student support professional or an appointment with outside health professional or talk to his or her parents and obtain family support.
- Get support yourself if required e.g. discuss your concerns with a colleague or access staff support service (see below)

3. When to make a referral to professional support services

One of the most important aspects of assisting students in distress is to recognise when the student may require the help of a professional and to assist the student in accessing the relevant support. Some indicators of the need for professional support include:

- The student explicitly requests a specialist service such as psychiatric, counselling or medical input
- The student acknowledges the problem but is reluctant to discuss it with you
- The student talks about issues that indicate that they or someone they know may be at risk of harm e.g. considering suicide, self-harming or other behaviours
- The student is clearly experiencing a personal crisis e.g. is obviously very distressed or unable to function normally
- The student presents with complex or serious issues that are outside your own areas of knowledge and obviously require ongoing health input e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, serious alcohol or drug abuse, gambling difficulties, physical health problems, addiction, family difficulties, past trauma, financial problems etc.
- You have been attempting to help the student with no real signs of progress taking place and you don't know how to proceed
- You are feeling overwhelmed by the level of dependence the student is developing on you
- You are feeling overwhelmed by the issues being presented. This may be because you are unsure about how to deal with the problem, you are under significant pressure yourself, or the problem is too close to your own experience and has painful resonances for you. For example, a family situation that is similar to a problem that you yourself have had to deal with such as a recent bereavement. In these situations it can be difficult to maintain appropriate distance from students' problem in order to be helpful to them

4. How to assist reluctant students in accessing professional support

Some students may be reluctant to accept a referral for professional support. If this is the case, but in your opinion the student would benefit from professional support, you may want to consider the following:

- When a student expresses concern about accessing a professional support service you should offer them the opportunity to discuss their reasons for this as in doing so you may be able to deal with their concerns.

This may be something simple that can easily be resolved such as anxiety about making appointments or it may be more complex and need further consideration.

- It is important that you openly discuss your reasons for wanting students to access further support. This may be because you are worried about them, feel that you need the advice or opinion of someone else or because you think that a student's academic potential is being thwarted by his or her distress.
- Encourage the student to recognise that to get help is a positive sign of personal strength and not a sign of weakness and that students attend student counselling for very many reasons for additional, confidential support when issues arise for them.
- Some students may be reluctant to talk to a counsellor or doctor but may be willing to talk to a student adviser or a chaplain. It is important to discuss the various support options available to them
- It is important to give the student details of the services available for use now or later. For a list of the services provided in UCD see www.pleasetalk.ie. You may also direct the student to the UCD Student Counselling Service website at www.ucd.ie/studentcounselling. This also lists a number of outside support agencies that the student may wish to consider accessing (see External Support Services link)
- Students have the right to refuse further support and the right to decide not to attend any of the UCD Student Support Services. Sometimes students may agree to seek support and then get anxious about it. They may change their minds about going to see someone so it can be helpful to offer to meet with them again to discuss the issue further and see how they are getting on
- It is important that staff do not carry the weight of guilt or worry if students refuse to avail of the options offered to them. Staff also need to mind their own health and well-being and having offered assistance and a number of options, the responsibility for the next step is the student's *unless* in situations of known extreme risk when confidentiality has to be breached and services contacted in the best interests of the student and other students on campus (see limits of confidentiality below)
- If you feel that a student is at risk of harm to self or that others may be at risk, then it is important that you explain that this is the reason for wanting them to access professional support and that even if they decide not to do so that you will need to speak to a professional about your concerns (see limits of confidentiality below).

5. How to recognise serious distress

Staff members are not expected to be able to diagnose or treat mental health problems. However, on occasions a staff member may come across a situation whereby a student's distress may be at a serious level requiring *urgent* professional intervention. Some indicators of serious distress include:

- Talking about harming self
- Talking about harming others
- Expression of sudden extreme or overwhelming emotion e.g. upset, agitation, anxiety, anger, aggression, confusion
- Sudden and dramatic changes in a student's emotions e.g. tearfulness, irritability, acute anxiety, expressions of hopelessness about the future, exaggerated emotional responses, suspiciousness
- Sudden and dramatic changes in a student's academic performance e.g. lower grades, unexplained absences, loss of motivation, inability to cope with academic demands
- Inability to communicate clearly e.g. disjointed thoughts, odd, unusual or personal content in essays that would raise concern
- Obvious loss of contact with reality e.g. talking about hearing voices, persecutory ideas, extreme suspiciousness, fear of being plotted against, that there are conspiracies against them, that other people can hear their thoughts or generally expressing intense beliefs that appear to be without justification and that concern you
- Obvious inability to cope with day to day activities
- When such extreme moods, emotions, beliefs or behaviours arise it can, however, be helpful to talk to students about other things, for example, if they are eating, sleeping, or if they have any somatic complaints or feelings of being very anxious as students sometimes feel more comfortable having the focus on these aspects of their distress rather than their more extreme emotions. This kind of discussion can also often encourage a student to get these aspects checked out and can be a conduit into getting the help required
- Gentle, kind expressions of concern are almost always reassuring.

6. How to respond to serious distress

In situations where you recognise that a student is in serious distress, it is important that you assist the student to access the appropriate professional support as soon as possible. You should do this if at all possible in collaboration with the student. If you are extremely concerned you should contact one of the University student support services for further advice (see below).

- Ask the student who else is aware of problems / distress
- If the student indicates that they are attending a professional (e.g. Psychiatrist, GP, Counsellor)
 - Ask if any professional is aware of level of distress
 - Ask when next appointment is booked
 - Ask if he/she is prepared to make an earlier appointment
 - Ask if he/she would like assistance in making appointment
- If the student is not attending a professional or indicates that nobody else is aware of current distress
 - Ask if the student is prepared to see a professional and if so offer to help to make appointment
 - Contact the UCD Student Counselling Service or UCD Student Health Service to discuss your concerns
- If the student does not agree to see a professional and you are concerned about the situation
 - Explain that you are concerned about their distress and that you will need to contact somebody with your concerns (see limits of confidentiality below) and ask the student who they would prefer you to contact e.g. family member, family GP, Student Counselling Service, Student Health Service
 - If the student can not decide who to contact, consult with your Head of Unit and decide how to proceed.
- If in any doubt seek advice from the Student Counselling Service or Student Health Service
- Get support yourself as these situations can be unnerving.

7. Confidentiality and its Limits

When dealing with students in distress, it is important that the student feels that they can trust the staff member they are confiding in and that their difficulties will be dealt with in a professional, discrete and respectful way. In many situations where the problem is not of a serious nature this will mean that the student's concerns remain private and are not discussed with anyone else. However, in situations where somebody is at clear risk of coming to harm (either the student or someone they are talking about) it is not possible for any professional, including staff members, to maintain confidentiality and you should follow the guidelines below;

- Never promise a student complete confidentiality
- If the student appears at risk of harming him/herself or others or indicates that someone else is at risk of harm (e.g. a child) explain that you will need to contact someone else with your concerns even if the student doesn't wish for this to happen and that you are doing this to help the student because you are concerned
- Discuss the situation with your Head of Unit or another appropriate senior colleague and decide who to contact e.g. student's family, family GP, Student Counselling Service, Student Health Service
- If in any doubt contact the Student Counselling Service or the Student Health Service for advice

8. How to access UCD Student Support Services

UCD provides a range of different support services for students and all of these can be accessed by direct phone contact. If you are in any doubt about making a referral to one of these services, the best course of action is to pick up the phone and contact one of the services directly for advice. In situations of urgency you should contact the Student Counselling Service or the Student Health Service for advice.

- Student Counselling Service 716 3133
- Student Health Service 716 3133
- Student Advisers www.ucd.ie/advisers/
- College Chaplains 716 8372
- Disability Support Service 716 7565
- Students Union Welfare Officer 716 3112

9. Looking after your own well-being

It is important that you recognise your own personal and professional limits in supporting students in distress and that you do not take on situations that are outside your own area of competence that may cause undue stress to you. However, you may at times have to deal with situations that lead to you feeling exhausted, overwhelmed or upset. It is important that you acknowledge and recognise these feelings and in many cases you will be able to deal with them by employing your own usual coping strategies e.g. exercise, relaxing activities, speaking to colleagues etc. However, if these coping strategies do not appear to be resolving your feelings, you may want to consider accessing some professional support for yourself. The University offers a free, confidential, staff support service which you may consider accessing (see www.ucd.ie/hr/policies/).

- Employee Assistance Programme
Free phone number: **1800 300 061 (IRL)**
0800 243 458 (U.K. /N.I.)