Working with Students in Distress

A Guidelines Document

Counselling and Personal Development Service

Dublin City University

Working with Students in Distress

Introduction

A number of students will encounter problems during their time here in DCU and members of staff may be called on to provide some help and support. The problems may be academic, personal or practical with difficulties in one area often having a negative impact on other areas of the student's life. Some students may directly approach staff members to ask for support while others may be reluctant to ask and try to struggle on but problems may become apparent. For example, a student may appear agitated or distressed, or stop attending lectures, labs etc.

This guide is intended to help members of staff to:

- Clarify one's own role and the limits of one's responsibility towards students in difficulty
- Work out when (and when not) to intervene
- Identify problems
- Decide what to do about them
- It also aims to provide some strategies for dealing with more complex and difficult situations

Signs of Students in Distress

Typical indications that a student is in difficulty and may need help include the following behaviour:

- Sporadic class attendance or protracted absences
- Inability to focus on academic work, loss of motivation, procrastination or over working
- Declining academic performance
- Seeking increasing degrees of support or significant withdrawing from support
- The student telling you or someone else that they have a problem
- Appearing tearful or trying not to cry

- Outbursts of anger or unexplained crying
- Nonsensical or incessant talking
- Finding it difficult to relate to others
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Acting different in some way, for example, unusually cheerful, aggressive, or quiet
- Eating less or more than usual
- Alcohol or drugs misuse
- Talk or evidence of self harming behaviour such as arm cutting or of suicidal ideation or plans
- Exhibiting disturbing or disruptive behaviour

Appearance

- Less care taken of physical appearance
- Poor or deterioration of personal hygiene
- Signs of sleeplessness, tired looking, particularly drawn
- Significant changes in appearance such as loss or gain of weight
- Notable change of smell which may result from increased use of alcohol or non-prescription drugs

Mood

- Loss of interest or exaggerate interest
- Excitable, restless, fidgety, miserable or exhausted
- Mood swings
- A marked change of mood from previous experience of the student
- A lack of response to normally upsetting events
- Expressing feeling worthless and feeling alone

Significant Life Crises

- Recent break-up of a close relationship
- Death or illness of a loved one of significant other

- Parental separation
- A major disappointment e.g. exam failure
- Serious interpersonal conflict or separation from peers, girl/boyfriend or classmates
- Unwanted pregnancy, assault, being bullied, sexual orientation crises, abuse etc
- Legal or disciplinary event
- Accident, illness or material disaster

Other Indicators

- Something about what the student is saying or doing makes you feel uneasy or concerned for them
- Other students, staff or relatives telling you there is a difficulty
- A history of mental health difficulties is evident

How can you help when a Student is in Distress?

1. Listening

Remain calm. Sit and really listen to what the person is saying. Show empathy and understanding. Take the person's concerns seriously. Give them the opportunity to tell you how they are and what is troubling them. Notice the signals of distress.

Express your concern. Tell the person that you are concerned about his or her well-being. Reassure the person that they can get through this distress and that there are other options available to them.

Offer support and discretion. Do not offer absolute confidentiality. If a person for instance, confides to you that he or she is thinking of harming themselves or another, do not feel obligated to keep this information confidential.

In certain situations (at the initial stage or meeting the student) it may be important to calmly and sensitively outline how much time is available. This may also help the student to work out how much time he/she needs. If there is an urgent deadline or an imminent appointment, say so and offer time later. In most situations this will be acceptable to the student. It is usually better to offer a specific time rather than simply to ask the student to come back later, which he /she will often experience as a brush off.

If the person appears to be very agitated or upset and is unable or unwilling to wait, a brief meeting should be offered immediately, if

possible, to be followed up at a specified time soon afterwards. Alternatively the student could be directed to someone who can offer time immediately (after checking this out with the colleague concerned).

Where possible, try to ensure that the time offered is free from interruptions.

Listening can be therapeutic in itself and may be enough to help the student work out his/her own way of dealing with the situation.

2. Assessment

When listening to the student, part of the task is to make sense of what is being said and to decide what kind of response might be helpful. It can be useful to focus on the following questions. These are questions to reflect on rather than to ask the student directly. Staff members are not expected to diagnose mental health problems.

a. What are the issues?

What seems to be the main issue? Is the problem as presented by the student the whole story or are there other problems which may not be being directly expressed? Is there more than one issue?

Does the problem(s) seem to be serious? Is it having a major impact on the student's well-being? How urgent is the problem? Is the student at risk in some way?

How would you describe the level of distress that the student is experiencing? (High, medium or low)

b. What to do next?

Can the situation be resolved by a brief intervention, for example, advice or sympathetic listening?

Is it appropriate to your role to offer this? Do you have the time and ability to do so? Is specialist help required? If so, from whom? Is there a need to act quickly? Is there a need to inform or consult with a specialist service or line manager or appropriate other?

3. Action

Having support from you may be sufficient, however do establish the main problem areas and/or outline to the student the sources of support that are available.

If the student is willing to accept the required specialist help, encourage them to seek assistance themselves or agree that you will refer them. If they are going to seek help themselves, it is good practice to ask them to let you know how they get on and/or to follow this up with the student in order to satisfy yourself that they are receiving the assistance they require. The service they go to may not be able to confirm that the person has attended unless they have the students' permission to.

If the student is reluctant to seek help, ask the student why this is the case. Let the student know why there are concerns, for example deterioration in the quality of the academic work, the degree of distress they are experiencing, the impact life events are having on them etc. Reluctance to seeking professional help may relate to a previous negative experience or misconceptions that information will be passed on to his/her

lecturers and/or family. If you explore the reluctance you maybe able to resolve the concerns.

In addition, dispel any myths that surround seeking professional help. Explain that seeking a counsellor does not mean that s/he will spend weeks on a couch! Encourage the student to schedule 'just one' appointment with a professional and evaluate it from there. Suggest that to get help is a positive sign of personal strength.

In a crisis situation or where you think that a student may need additional support to make that first appointment with a specialist service, you may, if appropriate, want to accompany the student to the service and help the student to set that appointment up or to be seen immediately.

Unless it is an emergency situation, a student has the right to refuse support. The student may simply need time to think about a referral. Make a follow-up appointment with the student or offer an open invitation to come back to you. When you see the student again, ask how s/he is and reiterate that support is available if s/he wants it. Refusal to seek professional help does not mean that you must provide help that is outside your area of expertise.
However, it may be that the student recognises that s/he has a problem but does not want help or denies that they have a problem. In either case, it is important that you gently but firmly outline your concern and repeat your offer to obtain help. If this is again refused, reiterate your concern and ask the student if they don't take this step do they think their situation will improve?

If you are concerned about a student and need to consult a professional then contact the Counselling Service (and/or the Health Service depending on the nature of the problem) about the situation without necessarily disclosing the identity of the student. It is important to keep the student informed of what you intend doing.
In high risk cases the student may need to be identified so it is important not to give an undertaking of absolute confidentiality. It would also be advisable to discuss the situation with your line manager as well as making a written note of what has transpired. If a student in crisis is refusing help and a member of staff has informed their line manager, contact the student again, preferably the next day when things may have calmed down and the student may be more receptive.

What if the student doesn't want to be referred but wants to continue to talk to you?

Having revealed personal difficulties, the student may wish/expect to continue to receive further support from you and ask for quite a lot of your time. If s/he is unwilling to be referred to someone in a more appropriate role, you may experience quite a lot of pressure to provide this support directly. You may feel concern for the student that they are not getting the professional help they need and/or worry that s/he may feel rejected if you do not offer support. It can also feel flattering to be sought out in this way. It is however; important to get some limits otherwise you may end up feeling out of your dept and spending more time that you can attend on one student. This can be done in a positive way by letting the student know how much time can be offered and setting the limits to the support that you can offer.

Record Keeping

It is good practice to keep a record of discussion(s) with students and any action taken. This should be filed appropriately, in order to keep personally sensitive information secure and should always be written with awareness that the student has the right to seek access to any records kept about them.

If concerns are raised by others

From time to time staff may be approached by students who are concerned about a friend. Concerns may also be raised by colleagues who do not have a formal support role. There are a number of possible courses of action.

- Use your own observation of the situation to help you to decide if/when to intervene
- Encourage those who approached you to persuade the person to seek help directly, either from you or another appropriate person. It may help to provide them with some relevant information. (See Counselling and Personal Development website as a source for this information).
- Talk to the student yourself, either by enquiring generally about his/her wellbeing or with the agreement of those who approached you, let him/her know that concerns have been expressed
- Make a note of the information and the course of action you took

What information do I elicit and record (where possible) when a student is in distress?

- Student's full name and ID number
- Name and year of programme of study
- Mobile number and/or home contact number
- Contact address (semester and/or home)
- Who is the student living with?
- Note the signs of distress showed by the student.
- Note how the student described their situation/problem.
- Who has the student spoken to and/or normally talks to when upset (friends, relatives, parents, staff member etc).

Acknowledgements

‘Identifying and Responding to Student in Difficulty’
Nothingham University Counselling Service 2000

‘Guidance on supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties’
University of Hull

‘Mental Health Policy’
Kings College London

‘The Mental Health Initiative’
A resource manual for mental health promotion and suicide prevention in third level

‘Responding to Student Mental Health Issues “Duty of Care” Responsibilities for Student Services in Higher Education’
Good Practice Guide 2001