Helping Distressed Students
a guide for University staff
Many people experience emotional and psychological difficulties at some point in their lives. Usually these can be resolved by talking them through with family and friends. Sometimes professional help is needed. Most students will cope well with the stresses of academic life given reasonable support from their friends, family and academic departments. Sometimes they need more than this. If you feel you need to, or are requested to give a student extra assistance, it is important to help within the boundaries of what you feel competent to do.

Helping Distressed Students:  
A guide for staff

This guide has been produced to:

• Help you to recognise when a student may be in difficulty
• Provide advice to help you respond/refer appropriately and effectively
• Remind you of the sources of support within the University
• Raise awareness of issues relating to student mental health

What you can do

• Listen
• Give the student time to talk
• Understand the situation from their point of view
• Be sympathetic and not dismissive
• Help the student to feel contained
• Make appropriate referrals

What you can’t do

• Solve all the student’s problems
• Take responsibility for their emotional state or actions

The health and welfare of all members of the University is everyone’s concern.

This guide gives you advice on dealing with both crises and more everyday situations. It is important to be prepared for emergencies, but you should be aware they occur very rarely and that expert help is available.
How do you know there is a problem?

Trusting your own judgement – check the following

**Is the student’s behaviour causing concern?**
- Is the student telling you there is a problem?
- Is there anything unusual or unpredictable about the student’s behaviour that makes you feel uneasy?
  - This could include unusual or unpredictable responses via email, video/phone call or online blog.

**How does the student seem?**
- Tense/Irritable
- Sad/Miserable/Tearful
- Behaving erratically
- Panicky/Agitated
- Withdrawn, dulled or very quiet
- Poor concentration
- Smelling of alcohol, cannabis
- Very loud/Disinhibited
- Incoherent communications
- Emails/communications at unusual times.

**Is there other information?**
- Has the student declared a mental health problem?
- Are flat mates, class mates or staff telling you something about the student that indicates a problem?

**Is this different from your previous experience of this person?**
- You might see a significant change in appearance (e.g. weight, personal hygiene)
- Behaviours may have changed (e.g. work handed in late, not attending classes, change in online behaviour, lack of communication or excessive and extensive emails)

**Do you need more information from the student?**
- How do they feel?
- Is there something wrong?
- Has there been a similar experience in the past?

**Do you need more information from other staff?**
- Has anyone else noticed a problem?
- How is the student functioning academically?

**Would it be helpful to consult with someone else?**
- Your colleagues
- Line manager or senior colleague
- Student Support Services (see page 4 and last page)
What you should do if the situation does NOT require immediate action

It is NOT urgent if:
There is no immediate risk to the student, or others, although the student may be:

- Depressed, anxious, generally stressed
- Having problems with relationships
- Bereaved
- Homesick, lonely and isolated
- Suffering from low self-esteem
- Having unexplained study or money problems

If the student will accept help

Decide who is the best person to help

If you feel you could help the student you must ensure that:

- You have the time and/or skill
- It does not conflict with your role

You are able to:
- Listen to the student’s concerns
- Offer practical advice
- Provide reassurance
- Show your concern by following up your conversation at another time

If the student will not accept help

You can make it clear that you will help if the student changes their mind

Seek advice from Student Services (see page 4 and last page)

You can monitor the situation

You should alert the student’s Personal Tutor, Supervisor, Student Support Team, or other relevant person, about continuing concerns

If the student will accept help

Are you clear what the student needs? (see page 4 and last page)

If so, refer/signpost directly

If you are unsure then seek further advice from a colleague or speak to the Student Counselling Service (last page)

In all situations

- Make sure that you debrief by talking the situation through with a colleague or the Student Counselling Service (see last page).
- You should make a record of the conversation and store this in a secure way in line with University and GDPR guidelines: https://www.ed.ac.uk/data-protection/data-protection-policy
What you should do if the situation IS urgent

It IS urgent if you believe the student may be at risk of harm to themselves or others, and you are concerned for one or more of the following reasons. The student:

- May be at risk of serious self-harm
- Is violent or threatening violence
- Has completely stopped functioning
- Seems disorientated and out of touch with reality
- Is behaving extremely out of character
- Expresses suicidal thoughts

If the student will accept help

In office hours
Signpost the student directly to their GP and make contact with the Student Counselling Service (last page).

Inform the appropriate person (e.g. Personal Tutor or Student Support Team).

Out of hours
If you have GP contact details or can get them from the student, call their GP. If closed, contact NHS 24 (111) or contact the emergency services and Security on 2222 (internal UoE phones only).

Next day, advise the Personal Tutor, who will check whether further action is required.

If the student is not in the UK contact University Security on 2222 or 0131 650 2257.

If the student will not accept help

In office hours
Student Counselling Service (last page) will offer advice.

If in University accommodation, contact the Residence Life Team for assistance (last page).

Contact the Student’s GP. If unknown or student not in UK call Security on 2222 or 0131 650 2257.

Out of hours
Call the student’s GP, if closed contact NHS 24 (111) or call the emergency services (999) or Security on 2222 (internal UoE phones only). If student is resident in University accommodation contact the Accommodation Security Team (651 2001) who can contact the Residence Life Team.

Next day, inform the student’s GP if you can and the Personal Tutor or Student Support Team.

If the student is not in the UK contact University Security on 2222 or 0131 650 2257.

In all situations

- Try to stay calm
- If the student is at immediate risk to themselves or others contact the Emergency Services
- Engage with the student if possible, but put safety first
- Whenever possible, make sure that you have back-up available
- Make sure that you debrief by talking the situation through with a colleague or the Student Counselling Service (last page)
- Keep a written record
What sort of support does the student need?

Are there support issues arising from a mental health problem?

Is there a clear health problem?

Has the student told you directly about a specific problem, e.g.:
- Bereavement
- Relationship breakdown
- Eating disorder
- Alcohol/Drugs

Is the student very worried about academic matters?

Is there a persistent study problem?

Does the student have financial problems?

Does the student need to talk through things, including the kinds of issues detailed above, with someone who will provide a listening ear?

Student Disability Service

GP or Health Service

Student Counselling Service

School

Institute for Academic Development

The Advice Place

Students’ Association

Accommodation Catering and Events

Chaplaincy/Listening Service

Edinburgh Global

Is the student concerned about their use of alcohol or drugs?

Does the student:
- Experience panic attacks or extreme anxiety
- Work unrealistic hours
- Avoid starting or finishing work
- Have perfectionist tendencies

Is the problem due to loss of motivation or difficulty concentrating? Symptoms could be:
- Signs of depression
- Low mood, low energy
- Difficulty sleeping
- General loss of interest/concentration
- Loss of self-confidence
- Tiredness

Is there a problem of discrimination or harassment or a complaint?

Is there a problem related to accommodation?

Does the student need spiritual support?

Might the issue be related to the student being from overseas?

Remember – friends and family can be a source of support
Roles and responsibilities

Identifying Sources of Support

- It is not always possible to know what the best source of support might be. The student may have more than one problem, or the initial problem may not be the most central.

- What is important in the first instance is to signpost the student to somewhere that is acceptable to them. Further signposting can be made later, if appropriate.

Offering Support Directly

If you offer support yourself, you must ensure that:

- You have sufficient time within the context of your other commitments to do this
- It does not conflict with other aspects of your role
- You have access to consultation
- You seek advice from colleagues or student services if you have persistent concerns.

Other supports available to staff include:
The Chaplaincy Listening Service: [The Listening Service | The University of Edinburgh](https://www.ed.ac.uk/counselling-services/staff)
The Staff Counselling Service: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/counselling-services/staff](https://www.ed.ac.uk/counselling-services/staff)
Remember – you are not solely responsible for a student’s emotional state.

Confidentiality

- Do not disclose personal information about students to anyone outside the University, including parents, without the student’s explicit consent: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/supporting-students/student-mental-health/guidance-communicating-student-emergency-contacts](https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/supporting-students/student-mental-health/guidance-communicating-student-emergency-contacts)
- If the parents wish to contact a student, you can offer to forward a communication or tell the student they have been in touch.
- Treat personal information about students with discretion.

- Do not promise absolute confidentiality and advise the student that you may have to consult a colleague. The Student Counselling Service offers a confidential consultation service to all staff who may wish to discuss their concerns about students in difficulty.

The Advice Place offers a remote contact with the police. Remote reporting allows victims or witnesses of a crime or incident to report it to the Advice Place rather than having to go to the police directly. [Edinburgh University Students’ Association](https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/student-support/sexual-violence)

Guidance is available for supporting students who report sexual violence: [https://reportandsupport.ed.ac.uk/](https://reportandsupport.ed.ac.uk/) and [https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/student-support/sexual-violence](https://www.ed.ac.uk/staff/student-support/sexual-violence)

Guidelines on disclosure of information on students are available: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/guidance](https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/guidance)

If you require further advice or clarification please contact Records Management Section (0131 651 4099).

Further guidelines on disclosure and confidentiality are available: [www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service/staff/supporting-students/student-disclosure](www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service/staff/supporting-students/student-disclosure)

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Student and Other Support Services

Accommodation, Catering and Events: Residence Life
Tel: 0131 667 1971
Email: accom.reslife@ed.ac.uk
www.accom.ed.ac.uk/for-students/residence-life

Edinburgh University Students' Association: Advice Place
(Central)
Tel: 0131 650 9225
Email: advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk or academic.advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk
www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice

Edinburgh University Students' Association: Advice Place
(Kings Buildings Campus)
Tel: 0131 650 5822
Email: advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk

Togetherall
Online interactive emotional support.

SilverCloud
Suite of online CBT programmes.
www.ed.ac.uk/student-counselling/what-is-silvercloud

Breathing Space
Tel: 0800 83 85 87
(Mon – Thu 6pm – 2am
Fri – Mon 6pm – 6am)

Chaplaincy
Tel: 0131 650 2595 (in emergency contact Security)
Tel: 0131 650 2598 (non-semester)
Email: chaplaincy@ed.ac.uk

Student Administration
General Enquiries
Tel: 0131 650 2845
Email: infopoint@ed.ac.uk

Fees and Student Support
Tel: 0131 650 2230
Email: fees@ed.ac.uk

Bursary, Scholarship & Financial Aid Enquiries
Tel: 0131 651 4070
Email: studentfunding@ed.ac.uk

Student Counselling Service
Tel: 0131 650 4170
Email: student.counselling@ed.ac.uk

Student Disability Service
Tel: 0131 650 6828
Email: disability.service@ed.ac.uk

NHS 24: 111
(evenings/weekends/public holidays)
Email: health.service@ed.ac.uk

International Suicide Prevention/Crisis Helplines:
International Suicide & Emergency Hotlines (opencounseling.com)

Befrienders Worldwide
Volunteer action to prevent suicide.

Edinburgh Crisis Centre
Tel: 0808 801 0414
Text: 07974 429075
Email: crisis@edinburghcrisiscentre.org.uk

University of Edinburgh:
Edinburgh Global
Email: mgmt.sway@mlist.is.ed.ac.uk

Institute for Academic Development
Tel: 0131 651 6662
Email: iad.study@ed.ac.uk

Mental Health Assessment Service
Tel: 0131 537 6000

Nightline
Student support and information
Tel: 0131 557 4444
(8pm – 8am)

Samaritans
Freecall: 116 123
Text message: 07725 90 90 90
Email: jo@samaritans.org

University of Edinburgh Security
Tel: 0131 650 2257 (non-emergency); 2222 (emergency – internal UoE phones only);
0131 650 6666 (Pollock Halls)
Email: security@ed.ac.uk

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To provide feedback on the usefulness of this document, contact: disability.service@ed.ac.uk

Available in alternative formats on request from disability.service@ed.ac.uk