HELPING DISTRESSED STUDENTS

A guide for Charles Sturt University (CSU) staff
Developed by the Division of Student Services
INTRODUCTION

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. If you feel you need to or are requested to give a student extra assistance, it is important to assist within your skills and competencies. This guide will help prepare you to respond appropriately in the event of a crisis and will be most useful when used in conjunction with the Mental Health First Aid course.

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.

A guide for CSU staff

What you can do:

- listen
- give the student time to talk
- understand the situation from the student’s point of view
- be sympathetic and not dismissive
- make appropriate referrals
- remember that you cannot solve all the student’s problems
- be careful not to take responsibility for the student’s 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 issues and managing crises. It is important to be prepared for emergencies, but you should be aware that they occur only occasionally and that professional advice in regard to emergency situations is available from Security, the Critical Incident Response Group and the Student Counselling Service.

Please note: while some of this content may appear to be more easily applied to on-campus students, the core principles can be applied to all Australia-based students.

Student counsellors

You may also wish to contact the Student Counselling Service for advice on matters of student mental health and wellbeing. Student counsellors work closely with university staff and are available for consultation if you are concerned about a student in difficulty or distress. You can email them at counselling@csu.edu.au

Mental Health First Aid

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) courses provide training in assisting people with a mental health issue or in a mental health crisis. CSU runs these courses intermittently each year. For more information, visit csu.edu.au/division/student-services/useful-information/resources

Campus Security contacts

Install the CSU Safe smart phone app from: csu.edu.au/csusafe
CSU Security: ext. 400

These guidelines are reproduced with permission from the University of Edinburgh: Helping Distressed Students, July 2011. These guidelines are a general set of recommendations. Each person is unique. It is important to tailor your support to that person’s needs.
IDENTIFYING DISTRESSED STUDENTS

IS THE STUDENT’S BEHAVIOUR OF CONCERN TO YOU OR OTHERS?

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?

HOW DOES THE STUDENT SEEM?

• Tense/irritable
• Sad/miserable/tearful
• Behaving erratically
• Change in mood or behaviour
• Panicky
• Withdrawn or very quiet
• Poor concentration
• Smells of alcohol/cannabis
• Agitated
• Very loud/disinhibited
• Talking incoherently

IS THERE OTHER INFORMATION?

Has the student disclosed a mental health problem?
Have other students or staff told you anything about the student that indicates a problem?

IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THIS PERSON?

You might see:
• changes in appearance
• weight loss or gain
• decline in personal hygiene.

Changes in behaviour may include:
• work being handed in late
• a drop in attendance
• differences in participation and interaction with peers.

IS THE STUDENT’S BEHAVIOUR OF CONCERN TO YOU OR OTHERS?

Have you asked the student if they need help?
How does the student feel?
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 performing academically?

WOULD IT BE HELPFUL TO CONSULT WITH SOMEONE ELSE?

Your colleagues, line manager or senior colleague
Division of Student Services (i.e. Counselling, Disability)

YES: GO TO PAGES 4 AND 5.

IS THE SITUATION URGENT?

NO: GO TO PAGES 6 AND 7.
SITUATIONS REQUIRING IMMEDIATE ACTION

If the risk to the student or others is high, contact CSU Security on ext. 400 or access CSU Safe on your mobile. CSU Security will escalate the situation to the Critical Incident Response Group. Contact emergency services by dialing 000 or call the relevant state crisis support line. These numbers are listed on page 8.

A situation becomes urgent if the student:

• may be at risk of serious self-harm
• expresses suicidal thoughts or threatening thoughts towards others
• is violent or threatening violence to people or property
• has completely stopped functioning as normal
• seems very disoriented and out of touch with reality
• reports they have just been sexual assaulted or raped
• is in any other situation that creates risk to the student or others.

In all situations when encountering a distressed student either on campus or online:

Do:

• stay calm
• prioritise your own safety and then that of others
• ensure safe access to an exit if you need it
• if considered safe, engage with the student
• talk slowly, gently, simply and firmly
• be clear on what you can and cannot do
• whenever possible make sure that you have additional support available such as an MHFA-trained staff member
• if you feel comfortable to do so, ask the student if they are having thoughts of suicide or self-harm
• if the student is present and at immediate risk, stay with them until the current risk or crisis has passed
• make sure that you debrief by talking the situation through with a colleague, line supervisor or the Student Counselling Service
• document your interaction with the student.

Don’t:

• trivialise the issue
• try to solve it on your own
• be afraid of tears
• try to change their mind or argue
• become the main source of support if possible
• make promises you can’t keep, especially the promise to keep it secret
• touch or try to restrain the person or block access to an exit
• put yourself at risk or in harm’s way.
STUDENT IDENTIFIED AS AT RISK

IF THE STUDENT WILL ACCEPT HELP

In and out of office hours
- Take steps to minimise risks, explaining the steps you are taking and the duty of care you have to the student’s safety.
- Determine whether the student is willing to speak to an MHFA-trained staff member.
- Encourage the student to speak with CSU’s Student Counselling Service or an outside service (e.g. GP or relevant state support line listed on page 8).
- Contact CSU Security on ext. 400 or using CSU Safe on your mobile phone.
- Contact 000 for emergency support or contact the relevant state crisis support service listed on page 8.
- Contact CSU student counsellors who may be able to offer assistance.
- Contact Residence Life if the student is known to be an on-campus student.
- Encourage the student to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.
- Contact CSU’s Student Counselling Service the next day if the matter is not resolved.
- With permission, follow up the next day with the student’s course director or with Residence Life if the student is known to reside on campus.

IF THE STUDENT WILL NOT ACCEPT HELP

In and out of office hours
- Take steps to minimise risk, explaining the steps you are taking and the duty of care that you have to the student’s safety.
- Contact CSU Security on ext. 400 or access CSU Safe on your mobile phone.
- Contact 000 for emergency support or contact the relevant state crisis support service listed on page 8.
- Contact Residence Life if the student is known to be an on-campus student.
- Encourage the student to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.
- Contact CSU’s Student Counselling Service the next day if the matter is not resolved.
- With permission, follow up the next day with the student’s course director or with Residence Life if the student is known to reside on campus.
IF THE SITUATION DOES NOT REQUIRE IMMEDIATE ACTION

Non-urgent distress
A situation is not considered urgent if there is no immediate risk to the student or others. The student may present as:

- depressed, anxious and/or stressed
- homesick, lonely and/or isolated
- having relationship problems
- suffering from low self-esteem
- bereaved
- having unexplained study or money problems
- having experienced discrimination against race, gender, sexuality or religion.

IF THE STUDENT WILL ACCEPT HELP

Decide who is the best person to help

If you feel you can help, you must ensure that:

- you have the time and/or skill
- it is not a conflict of interest
- you are able to listen to the student’s concerns
- you can offer practical advice
- you can provide reassurance
- you follow up with the student at another time to see how they are coping and if further assistance may be required.

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 the appropriate services within the Division of Student Services.

You can monitor the situation.

You should alert the student’s course director, Division of Student Services staff or other relevant person about continuing concerns.

IN ALL SITUATIONS

Make sure you debrief by discussing the situation with a colleague, line supervisor, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counsellor or the CSU Student Counselling Service. Keep a record of the interaction with the student and their concerns.
Helping distressed students | csu.edu.au/division/student-services

Are there support issues arising from a diagnosed mental health or physical health problem?

Is there a clear mental health problem?

Has the student told you directly about a specific problem (e.g. bereavement, relationship breakdown, eating disorder, alcohol or drugs or a mental health condition)?

Is the student very worried about academic matters?

Is there a persistent study problem?

Does the student have financial problems?

Is there an identified condition that requires reasonable adjustment?

Family and friends are usually a major source of support.

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

Is the student: Experiencing panic attacks or extreme anxiety? Working unrealistic hours? Avoidant? Perfectionistic?

Does the student have difficulty with motivation and concentration? These could be signs of depression, insomnia or general loss of interest/concentration.

Is the student Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and experiencing academic or adjustment issues?

Is there a problem of discrimination against race, culture, gender, sexuality or religion; because of carer responsibilities; or a feeling of harassment?

Is there a problem related to their accommodation if they are an on-campus student?

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

Is the student LGBTIQ?
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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

If the student’s safety is not at immediate risk, refer them to an appropriate support service. If the matter is urgent and the student is at risk, contact 000.

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 professional advice
• you seek advice from colleagues or the Division of Student Services if you have persistent concerns
• you seek advice from the Student Counselling Service if you are unsure how to address a student’s issue or if the student is in crisis
• support for yourself can also come from the Employee Assistance Program (csu.edu.au/division/hr/staff-concerns/employee-assistance-program).

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.

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. Advise the student that you may have to consult a colleague as safety concerns override confidentiality and privacy.

The CSU’s Student Counselling Service offers information to support all staff who may wish to discuss their concerns about students in difficulty.

Campus security contacts

All campuses* – internal dial ......................... 400
– mobile/external ...................... 1800 931 633
* except Wangaratta – Security ............... 03 5725 2767

State crisis support services

New South Wales
NSW Mental Health Line ......................... 1800 011 511

Victoria
NURSE-ON-CALL* .................................1300 60 60 24
* To be called from a mobile phone if not calling from Victoria

South Australia
Mental Health Triage service ................. 13 14 65

Northern Territory
Mental Health Service ..................... 1800 NT CATT

Western Australia
Mental Health Emergency Response Line
Metro ............................................... 1300 555 788
Peel .................................................... 1800 676 822

Rural Link ......................................... 1800 552 002
Mon–Fri: 4:30pm–8:30am
Saturday, Sunday, public holidays: 24 hours

Tasmania
Mental Health Services Helpline ............ 1800 332 388
Interstate callers .............................. 03 6166 6333

Queensland
Health information and advice ............. 13 HEALTH

Australian Capital Territory
Mental Health Triage ....................... 1800 629 354

National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service ............. 1800 RESPECT
Alternative 24-hour support

Lifeline......................................................... 13 11 14
lifeline.org.au
Suicide Call Back Service .............. 1300 659 467
suicidecallbackservice.org.au
Additional Crisis Contacts
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/health-wellbeing/counselling/crisis

CSU support services

Student Central
Submit an online enquiry form at
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/student-central or
browse their knowledge base.
Student Central 1800 ASK CSU (1800 275 278)

Student Counselling Service
Students can make their own appointments via
student.csu.edu.au/counselling

Counselling Self-help Resources
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/health-wellbeing/resources

If you are concerned about a student or are not sure who
to speak with, please contact:

Jon Wilby
Manager, Student Wellbeing | Division of Student Services
Charles Sturt University
Leeds Parade, Orange NSW 2800 Australia
Tel: +61 2 6365 7589  Email: jwilby@csu.edu.au

If you are working with students who need any further information,
they can be referred to the following pages in the Student Portal.

Special Consideration, Academic Advice and Appeals
student.csu.edu.au/study/academic-advice

Academic Literacy, Learning and Numeracy
student.csu.edu.au/study/ALLaN

Careers Hub
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/careers

CSU Outreach
http://student.csu.edu.au/study/skills/outreach

Disability Service
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/disability

Equity and Diversity
student.csu.edu.au/support/equity-diversity

Health Promotions Officer
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/health-wellbeing/health

Indigenous Services
indigenous.csu.edu.au

International Student Support Officers
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/international

LGBTIQ services
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/health-wellbeing/lgbti-ally-program

Mature age students support
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/mature-aged-students

Residence Life
student.csu.edu.au/uni-life/residences

Request for Temporary Accommodation
student.csu.edu.au/uni-life/residences/requests-forms/temporary

Sexual assault
student.csu.edu.au/services-support/health-wellbeing/sexual-assault

csu.edu.au/respect