



University College  
of Osteopathy

# Identifying & Responding to Students in Difficulty

## A Guide for Students

Core Documentation Cover Page					
<b>Mental Health Policy: Identifying &amp; Responding to Students in Difficulty – A Guide for Students</b>					
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## IDENTIFYING & RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DIFFICULTY

### A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A number of students will encounter problems during their time at the University College of Osteopathy (UCO) and you may find yourself in a position to provide help or notify staff if a friend or colleague experiences challenging problems. These may be academic, personal or practical and difficulties in one area can often have an impact on other areas of a student's life. Some students may directly approach you to ask for support. 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 and stay at home.
- 1.2 What to do about this will depend on a number of factors:
  - a) the seriousness and urgency of the situation;
  - b) your skill and experience in helping others;
  - c) the amount of time and resources available.
- 1.3 You do not have a defined role in supporting other students but you may notice that something is wrong or be approached by someone with personal difficulties.
- 1.4 This guide is intended to help you to:
  - a) clarify the limits of your responsibility towards others in difficulty;
  - b) work out when and where to intervene and when to refer on;
  - c) identify problems and decide what to do about them.
- 1.5 It also aims to provide some strategies for dealing with more complex and difficult situations.

## 2. SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS IN DIFFICULTY

### A) THE STUDENT SUPPORT MANAGER

- 2.1 The Student Support Manager is a first point of call for students who are experiencing any form of personal, health, financial or welfare issues which may be affecting their studies. Research reveals that up to a third of students have serious, non-academic problems. These include serious illness, bereavement, caring for another member of the family, holding down a job, coping with divorce or separation, drug and alcohol abuse, or other social problems, such as discrimination or housing problems. It is also recognised that 1 in 4 members of the population currently suffer from mental health problems and this is becoming an increasing issue in Higher Education.
- 2.2 The Student Support Manager also provides guidance for students with a disability or long term health condition. They can help students apply for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), which may, for example, include in the award provision for a Mental Health Mentor, for those with mental health problems. They can also arrange for reasonable adjustments such as extra time in assessments and special circumstances to be considered during periods of illness. They can also liaise with a student's health specialist (with consent) regarding their condition. All information is

confidential however students are encouraged to permit disclosure to other relevant staff members so that support arrangements can be implemented.

- 2.3 The Student Support Manager also provides additional support to all members of staff if they are unsure as to how to proceed with a student who is distressed in some way or if the Counsellor is not available.

#### B) THE COUNSELLOR

- 2.4 The Counsellor provides a counselling service available Monday to Friday at various times. There is cognitive-behavioural therapy available to help students manage a variety of issues including stress, anxiety, depression, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorders and psychodynamic counselling for other issues, such as relationship difficulties and bereavement. In the first instance, students and staff should book an initial consultation by crossing-off and initialling ones of the spaces on the timetable to the left of the counsellor's office (room 3.12).

#### C) THE STUDENT LEARNING ADVISOR

- 2.5 The Student Learning Advisor predominantly provides advice and guidance on methods of learning tailored to individual student needs. Guidance may include helping students find an effective way of managing their time and workload which can be particularly helpful for students who are suffering from stress or depression. Given the supportive nature of this role, students will often feel comfortable disclosing personal issues to the Student Learning Advisor. It is important that the student is supported with regards to time management but is then referred on for specific support.

#### D) ACADEMIC TUTORS

- 2.6 Academic Tutors also provide academic support to students and hold a group meeting every term and then aim to meet with students individually twice a year to review their academic progress and therefore may be well placed to notice if all is not well. The expectation is that they will offer direct support on course-related issues, but refer on for other problems that might arise during a review. It is however recognised that students may feel comfortable disclosing more personal information during these meetings and the Academic Tutor Handbook provides guidance as to how to deal with this and limited confidentiality.

### 3. HOW YOU CAN HELP

- 3.1 Listen sympathetically – this may be sufficient.
- 3.2 If more help is needed, encourage the student to talk to someone who has a responsibility for student support. If it is clear that the problem is in a particular area, it may be possible to suggest the appropriate person. If it is not clear, encourage the person to seek advice from a tutor.
- 3.3 If you have serious concerns about the student, you should contact the Student Support Manager.

## 4. HOW TO RESPOND TO DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

- 4.1 You may have to deal with a situation where a fellow student is disturbing others or causing concern. An assessment will have to be done as to what is going on, for example whether the student has simply had too much to drink, is under the influence of drugs or has mental health difficulties. In some situations, more than one of these circumstances may apply.
- 4.2 It is not always easy to know what may be happening if you have no previous knowledge of the student. There may be other people who can provide information, for example, whether this behaviour is out of character or if there have been previous concerns about them.
- 4.3 Situations involving drunkenness or drugs are most likely to occur in the evenings and at night. As long as there is no obvious risk to the student or others, the main focus will be to get the student home safely, possibly with help from their friends or housemates. If neither alcohol nor drugs appear to be the main problem, it will be important to try to obtain further information about the student from their friends.

## 5. SUMMARY OF HOW TO HELP

- 5.1 Deal with any immediate risk to the student, other people or property by taking appropriate action, for example, applying first aid or contacting the emergency services.
- 5.2 If there does not appear to be an immediate risk, make a judgement about what is going on, based on direct observation and any information which can be obtained from others.
- 5.3 If there are concerns about the student's mental health but there does not appear to be an immediate risk, it may be possible to help the student to calm down by encouraging him/her to talk about what it is that is distressing and then suggesting where further help may be obtained.
- 5.4 If the concerns are more immediate concerning the student's behaviour, it may be possible to contact a member of staff who knows the student and who can take responsibility for deciding what to do next.
- 5.5 In an urgent situation contact the Student Support Manager or a Member of the Senior Management Team. Their details are held at reception. If it is not possible to do this and you are not certain of the best course of action, advice can be obtained from the following sources:
- 5.6 During normal surgery hours, you can contact the student's GP, if you know who this is. Outside these hours, telephone the student's GP and this number will automatically access the local out-of-hours service.
- 5.7 If you are unable to find out who the student's GP is, advice can be obtained from the NHS 111 Service (telephone 111). If the situation needs an urgent response contact the emergency services (telephone 999) and ask for an ambulance.
- 5.8 After the immediate situation has been resolved, notify the Student Support Manager with a summary in writing of the concerns and outcome. The Student Support

Manager will maintain a record of such events and liaise with appropriate members of staff as appropriate.

## 6. TWO INITIAL RESPONSES TO A REQUEST FOR HELP

### A) LISTENING

- 6.1 In busy lives listening can often be fairly casual. You may be distracted by course work or other pressures. When we are talking to someone else we can usually tell if the person is attentive. If someone asks to talk to you about a personal difficulty, it is important to try to switch off the other pressures and to listen in a more focussed way.
- 6.2 Make clear how much time is available. This may also help the person to work out how much time he/she needs. If you have an urgent deadline or an imminent appointment, say so and offer time later. In most situations this will be acceptable to the person. It is usually better to offer a specific time, rather than simply to ask the person to come back later, which he/she will often experience as a brush-off.
- 6.3 If the person appears to be very agitated or upset and is unable or unwilling to wait, a member of staff should be contacted immediately.
- 6.4 Try to ensure that the time offered is free from interruptions and that there is a private space.
- 6.5 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.

### B) MAKING AN ASSESSMENT

- 6.6 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 as the basis of a basic assessment. These are questions to reflect on rather than directly to ask the student. You are not expected to diagnose mental health problems!
- 6.7 What is going on? 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?
- 6.8 Does the problem seem to be serious? Is it having a major impact on their wellbeing?
- 6.9 How urgent is the problem? Is the student at risk in some way?
- 6.10 What to do next? Can the situation be resolved by a brief intervention, for example, advice or sympathetic listening? Is it appropriate for you to offer this? Do you have the time and ability to do so? Is specialist help required? If so, who should you refer them on to? Is there a need to act quickly? Is there a need to inform or consult with someone else? If so, who?

## 7. WHEN TO REFER

- 7.1 The term referral is used throughout this guide to describe two approaches:

- a) Talking informally to the student about the services of the Student Support Department and encouraging him/her to make contact;
  - b) Making a more formal approach to the service on behalf of a student by contacting the Student Support Department yourself.
- 7.2 You should refer the student when:
- a) The problem needs specialist help.
  - b) The problem is complex or serious.
  - c) There would be a conflict with your role as a student if you offer support yourself.
  - d) The situation needs more time than you can offer.
- 7.3 It is not always possible to know what the best source of support might be. There may be more than one problem or the initial problem may not be the most central. What is most important in the first instance is to guide the student to the Student Support Department and they will help the student find an outside service that is acceptable to them (if appropriate). The Student Support Team will make a further referral, again if appropriate.
- 7.4 Usually this will be to the Student Support Manager or other support staff listed above); staff in these services will refer on to other sources of help if they think it appropriate. If a student does not want to use one of these services, he/she can be helped to find appropriate support elsewhere.
- 7.5 It is usually best if a student concerned can take the initiative to approach the Student Support Team. There may, however, be times when this seems too difficult for the student. It may then be helpful for you to take a more active role in contacting the appropriate service to make an appointment on his/her behalf.
- 7.6 It may be that once you have been through the processes outlined above, the student tells you that you have been so helpful and sympathetic that he/she would prefer to talk to you than to see someone else.
- 7.7 It is often enough to explain to the student that you are not in a position to offer further help as it isn't appropriate as a fellow student and that you lack the specialist expertise or the time to give ongoing support.
- 7.8 If the student is worried about going to see someone else, it may help to explore this in more detail. For example, a student may be worried about talking to someone involved in assessing his/her work or believe that there would be a stigma attached to seeing a counsellor. If it is not possible to reassure the student, try to suggest an alternative person for him/her to talk to.
- 7.9 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 he/she 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.
- 7.10 You may feel concern for the student and worry that he/she 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 set some limits, otherwise you may end up feeling out of your depth and spending more time than you can afford. This can be done in a positive

way by letting the student know how much time can be offered and making clear the limits to the support that you can offer. It may be necessary to keep reminding the student of the specialist help which is available, such as counselling.

- 7.11 It can be useful to guide the student towards sources of information about his/her specific difficulty. The Student Counsellor has a series of leaflets on issues such as anxiety, depression and managing general and examination stress, which are displayed outside Room 3.12.
- 7.12 You do not have a responsibility to ensure that appropriate help is offered to the student, nor to resolve the problem. It is important to communicate concerns about a student to a tutor or the Student Support Team as appropriate and not to take sole responsibility for the situation.

## 8. RESPONDING TO MORE COMPLEX SITUATIONS

- 8.1 From time to time you may be approached by a student who is concerned about another student. 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 student to seek help directly, either from a member of staff or an outside agency.
  - Make a note of the information and the course of action you took. For example email the student counsellor ([C.Carswell@uco.ac.uk](mailto:C.Carswell@uco.ac.uk)) or the Student Support Manager.
- 8.2 If the student denies there is a problem, it may be helpful to challenge the denial gently by letting the person know that this is not how the situation appears. Let the student know why there are concerns, for example, if he/she has changed in some important way.
- 8.3 If the person refuses to acknowledge the problem, it may still be helpful to discuss the situation with the Student Support Manager.
- 8.4 If there are serious concerns, or if the student's behaviour is causing problems for others, consult with a tutor and the Student Support Team.

## 9. URGENT SITUATIONS

- 9.1 A prompt response is required if there is reason to believe that:
- A student may be at risk of attempting suicide.
  - He/she may be at risk of hurting him/herself or someone else.
  - He/she has stopped functioning academically or in other areas of life, for example, spending long periods in bed.
  - His/her behaviour appears to be significantly odd and either this is not part of a longstanding problem or there may be a longstanding problem which has deteriorated: for example, the person appears highly agitated and out of touch with reality.

- 9.2 In situations where there is an immediate risk, call the emergency services directly on 999.

## 10. RESPONDING TO INDIVIDUALS IN A HEIGHTENED EMOTIONAL STATE

- 10.1 From time to time you may have to deal with a fellow student who is agitated, angry or upset. Drugs or alcohol may be a factor or the student may have made an attempt at harming him/herself. In such circumstances, you may feel a moral responsibility to act in their best interest, especially if he/she lacks the ability to do so.
- 10.2 If there is any injury, ensure that the student receives appropriate medical attention. If he/she refuses, a judgement will have to be made as to the seriousness of the situation, i.e. whether to override the student's refusal and call for an ambulance. In addition, you should consider the following steps:
- 10.3 Allow the student space to discuss what is distressing him/her. If there is only limited time available, there may be a need to provide a brief intervention and offer more time later.
- 10.4 Discuss with the student where he/she can access support in the future to help to avert further crises.
- 10.5 If the student is agitated or angry, it will help to try to appear to be calm and in control of the situation, even if you don't feel that way. It may help to sit down and persuade the student to do likewise.
- 10.6 When the student is under the influence of alcohol or drugs it may not be possible to resolve any problems. It may be helpful to encourage him/her to come back when sober. If the student is creating a disturbance, or if you are concerned about your personal safety, contact the police.
- 10.7 It should not be necessary to spend hours sitting with a student. Give the student some time and then follow this up later, if appropriate. This can often be more useful as it is giving a message that the anxiety/ distress can be managed.
- 10.8 If you think the student is at risk, their GP can be contacted with or without their consent.
- 10.9 Ensure that the Student Support Manager or other staff member is informed about the situation. Where possible, it may be helpful to involve someone else in helping you to deal with the situation.

## 11. WHEN A STUDENT APPEARS TO BE SUICIDAL

- 11.1 In very rare situations a student may indicate that he/she is planning a suicide attempt. It is important to try to ensure that the student gets medical help as soon as possible. How this is achieved will depend on the circumstances.
- 11.2 During GP surgery opening hours, and if the person is willing to see their GP, it may be enough to contact the surgery to explain the situation and make an emergency appointment. Check with the student that he/she feels safe to go alone.
- 11.3 Having someone listen and take him or her seriously may be sufficient containment for the person to get help.

- 11.4 If you do not think it is safe to leave the student alone, contact the emergency services.
- 11.5 Outside surgery hours, urgent medical and psychiatric help can be accessed via NHS Direct on 111 or your local Accident & Emergency Department.

## 12. WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE CONCERNED AND THE STUDENT REFUSES

### MEDICAL HELP

- 12.1 A student's consent for help can be overridden if you think that he/she is at risk.
- 12.2 Contact the student's GP and request an urgent visit.
- 12.3 If the student is actively behaving in a suicidal way, contact the police immediately (by dialling 999). It will help if you can do this discreetly so as not to alarm the student. If possible, and it feels safe to do so, ask a colleague to stay with him/her while you arrange this.
- 12.4 When the risk appears to be less imminent, but a student reveals suicidal feelings, it is important to take the student seriously, even if you have some doubts as to whether a suicide attempt will be made. It will be important to encourage the student to see a GP, or the Student Counsellor, or to obtain some other psychological support that is acceptable to him/her. If the student is unwilling to access help it may be helpful to discuss the situation with the Student Support Manager.
- 12.5 It is important to remember that it is not always possible to prevent suicide. Even when a great deal of care and support is offered, someone who is very determined may still go ahead.
- 12.6 A study of student suicides at Oxford University<sup>1</sup> found that of those who succeeded in committing suicide during the period of the study (1976-1990), of 22 in total 8 were being treated for mental health problems at the time of their deaths. The number of students involved in suicide attempts in the same period was 216. Of these, 21% were receiving psychiatric treatment at the time of their attempts. It is important not to feel personally responsible for the situation. If you have been involved with a student who has committed suicide or who has made a suicide attempt, it may be helpful to talk to the Student Counsellor.

## 13. CONFIDENTIALITY AND ITS LIMITS

- 13.1 When a student discusses personal problems with you, it is important for him/her to feel that you can be trusted not to broadcast the information, unless the student asks for it to be passed on.
- 13.2 You do not have a professional duty to maintain absolute confidentiality, however, and it is important to be able to consult when necessary.
- 13.3 What is important is discretion, which means passing on personal information only on a 'need to know' basis. If a student insists that they need to talk to someone in

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<sup>1</sup> Hawton et al Suicide in Oxford University students 1976-1990, British Journal of Psychiatry (1995), 166, 44-50 and Hawton et al Attempted suicide in Oxford University students, 1976-1990, Psychological Medicine, (1995), 25, 179-188

confidence, there are services which are professionally bound to maintain confidentiality (i.e. GP's and counsellors.)

## 14. WHEN TO CONSULT

14.1 Inform your tutor and the student support team in situations where:

- a) You have serious concerns about a student.
- b) You feel you are getting out of your depth.
- c) You think there may be legal issues.
- d) You are not sure of the best course of action.
- e) You can also talk to someone in one of the specialist services, for example, the Student Counsellor or the Student Support Manager:
  - f) To check where might be the best place to refer a student.
  - g) To talk over the situation more generally.

14.2 Consult with others if you think the student's problems may be serious or if you are uncertain what action to take.

14.3 Be clear about what is realistic for you to deal with yourself.

14.4 Situations requiring immediate action are rare but, if you have any doubts about how to respond, it is nearly always possible to give yourself time by saying that you need to think over what is the best way to help and arrange to see the student again.

14.5 Ensure that you have information about other support services which you can pass on.

## 15. RESOURCES

Alcoholics Anonymous (support for those alcohol problems)

0845 769 7555 / [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

Al-Anon (support for family members and friends of those with alcohol problems)

020 7403 0888 / [www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (for external counselling)

01455 883300 / [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

BEAT (support for those with eating disorders)

0845 634 1414 / [www.edauk.com](http://www.edauk.com)

Cruse Bereavement Care (support for those experiencing bereavement)

0844 477 9400 / [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Depression Alliance (support for those experiencing depression)

0845 123 23 20 / [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

London Nightline (night time telephone support for those studying in London)

020 7631 0101 / [www.nightline.org](http://www.nightline.org)

PACE (support for the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered community)

34 Hartham Road, London, N7 9JL / 020 7700 1323 / [www.pacehealth.org.uk](http://www.pacehealth.org.uk)

Samaritans (24 hour support for anyone feeling low)

46 Marshall Street, London, W1F 9BF / 0845 790 90 90 / [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Relate (support for those experiencing relationship difficulties)

0300 100 1234 / [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

RaPSS (Response and Prevention in student Suicide)

<http://www.rapss.org.uk/index.html>

## 16. MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

16.1 Mental health is not fixed and static but varies for all of us over time. On some days we feel better than others, as also happens with physical health. The two are often linked. Distress is a healthy reaction to some events.

16.2 In differentiating mental ill-health from the normal range of human emotions, the following may be present:

- a) Any unusual or unexplained symptoms, for example, hallucinations or delusions, which do not follow use of any mind-altering substances.
- b) A sudden and dramatic change in behaviour or personality.
- c) A prolonged episode of symptoms, for example, persistent signs of depression or of high levels of anxiety.
- d) A severe intensity: the feelings or symptoms may seem overwhelming or unmanageable
- e) Severe effects: the symptoms interfere with normal functioning.