

Supporting Students Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties – Guidelines for Staff

Promise support but not 'secrecy', as you will have to consult with and inform others if you have concerns for a student's safety or the safety of others.

Note: when alerting the Tutor or Head of Department that you have concerns about a student's safety, all you need to say is that you are concerned about the student's safety or that of others. You do not need to inform them of the details of the student's story if the student has requested that some of the details are kept confidential i.e. abuse. What is important is that the staff are informed of what they need to know so as to discharge their responsibilities and duty of care.

Do not take on a student's problem when it is outside your own level of competence and requires professional support. Your role is to support appropriately and to refer to professional services or staff.

If a student has refused to avail of any of the professional supports, do not be tempted to act beyond your expertise. Boundaries are important for your own well-being and the student's. Your role is to support and refer, not to diagnose and treat.

Do not undervalue the support you are offering by just listening and being available.

Do not be afraid to ask a student if s/he has contemplated ending his or her life. You cannot put the idea of suicide into someone's head.

Get support for yourself by contacting either the Counsellor, Linda Mackin at Ext 1110 or College Doctor through Reception

Additional Tips on Referring Reluctant Students:

When you believe that a student might benefit from professional help, it is best to be honest about your reasons and express your concern about his/her well-being. Sometimes students may be reluctant or shy in accepting a referral, so here are some suggestions/

Second opinion needed: Present the referral as a help to you. Explain that the student's problem is outside of your area of expertise and that you require a second opinion.

Dispel myths about seeking help from professionals: dispel myths that surround seeking help, as this group dislikes being anything but self-reliant. Encourage the student to schedule 'just one' appointment with a professional. Suggest that to get help is a positive sign of personal strength.

Suggest all options: Some students may not feel comfortable about seeing a counsellor, but will agree to visit a G.P.

Explore the student's reluctance: If the student is reluctant to seek help, ask why s/he is not keen on seeing a professional. Possibly it relates to a previous negative experience. Or maybe there is a misconception that, if s/he sees the college counsellor, the information will be passed on to his or her lecturers and family. If you explore the reluctance, you may be able to resolve the concerns.

Honesty about involving others: If you feel the situation is an emergency (you believe there is the possibility of harm to the student or others) and the student will not see the counsellor or doctor, you may need to speak to someone on his or her behalf. If possible, before doing so, gently explain that you will need to speak with a professional and/or the student's family. Give the student the choice about whom you will contact.

What if the student still refuses?

A student has the right to refuse support. S/he may just 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. However, refusal to seek professional help does not mean that you must provide help that is outside your area of expertise. It is a matter for the student to choose whether to accept a referral, and to avail of the supports offered.

<p>Self harm (eg cutting)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute distress • Cry for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not criticise or judge • Ask if wants help • Call for medical help if necessary (heavy bleeding) • Refer to counsellor (Ext 1110) or Doctor (1111)
<p>Suicide Attempt (eg overdose)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have a previous history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call the attendant (Ext 4291) and ask for ambulance • Call doctor and ask for advice while waiting • Keep pill, bottles to show ambulance crew and try to find out what the student has taken • Ask if student wants family or friends contacted
<p>Suicide Ideation (talking about suicide)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask student if they have made any specific plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to Counsellor or Doctor and accompany the student to the service. • If you cannot do this ask another member of staff to do so
<p>Panic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incapacity to act • Intense apprehension/fear • Oral breathing, gasping • Feeling dizzy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firm reassurance • Breathe from cupped hands or paper bag • Breathe in to count of 4 and out to count of 8 • Refer/accompany student to Doctor or Counsellor
<p>Confusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muddled, restless, irritable • May not co-operate • May be disorientated and fearful • May experience hallucinations • May not be in touch with reality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak simply and clearly • Have adequate lighting • Constantly reassure in a friendly manner • Call Doctor (1111) or Counsellor (1110)
<p>Drowsiness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete slowing down of mental/physical function • No spontaneity • Not able to interact • May be a sign of over-dose, alcohol or drug use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ascertain if the student has taken any substances • Do not leave student unattended • Student may hear what is being said, so reassure • Call Doctor (1111) • Call Attendants (4291) and ask for an ambulance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory Loss • May be due to illness • If sudden, likely to be shock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak simply and clearly • Reassure student • Call or take to Doctor

These guidelines have been adopted from the Code of Practice on Supporting Students with Mental Health Problems, Westminster University (2001) and the Mental Health Code of Practice, Loughborough University (2002)

How to Respond to a Student Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties

Guidelines for Staff

