

Managing Distressed Students

A guide, not a handbook.

Whenever we encounter someone in distress, the majority of us feel the need to help in some way but sometimes we worry “Am I going to do or say something that will make it worse?”

Within these few pages are some ideas that you may find helpful and in turn, those who you are trying to speak with will feel supported.

You may have never done a counselling course but you will have supported colleagues, friends or family at some time and most likely, those you have tried to help have benefited from the ideas or suggestions you have made.

Reading this does not make you a counsellor or a therapist, it will hopefully, aid you in enabling the person in distress to be able to talk about what is concerning them and by doing this; they may be able to come up with some ideas or a plan to move forward towards some kind of resolution.

If you have not done so, we would highly recommend you take some time to look at the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust learning portal found at: <http://learning.cwmt.org.uk/>. This new e-learning package is designed to give non-specialist staff the skills, knowledge and confidence to offer a first line of support, to students who may have mental health issues and may present in distress. The package consists of six, easy-to-follow 20-minute sessions, including:

- Signs to look out for
- Key helping skills
- Knowing who else to involve
- Supporting students at risk or in crisis

Meeting a student in distress

If you see, or have been alerted to a student in distress, consider:

- Is the area a safe and confidential place to talk?
- Do you have time at that moment to give the support needed?
- Is there somewhere you are able to sit safely with the student?
- Is it appropriate to offer a time later that day to meet with the student so that you don't feel pressured by time constraints?
- Remember issues of confidentiality
- Don't promise the student anything that you are not sure you or the university are not able to fulfil.

Give time to the student to allow them to talk through their distress

The following is taken from the Charlie Waller Memorial Learning Portal:

The Traffic Light response

This is a simple but helpful way to think about how to offer support to the student in distress.

The traffic light response of **Stop – Consider – Respond**, this can be applied to different situations.



Red: stop and listen

Really listen, don't just go through the motions while thinking about other things you have to do.

Pause, and allow yourself to be present and available for the student. You may have decided to make the initial approach to them yourself, rather than waiting for them to come to you. Take time to stop and focus on what you are going to do and say.

Amber: consider

Try not to just respond instantly to what you have heard.

Take a breath and pause to consider what is going on. If it is something alarming or close to home to you remember that your experience of this 'problem' may be completely different to the student's own perception. Avoid responding with your own way of thinking.

Focus on what they are telling you. Be calm and warm; remember your boundaries, but let the student know you are with them.

Green: respond

Saying something back to the student can show you have understood what has been said. Assess the urgency and immediacy of what to do next.

If necessary, find a contact for the student and follow this up by arranging to see them later with more information, if possible. Be interested in them and show you are willing to help. Acknowledge their position and bear in mind what they have said.

Do not brush it off or make light of it. Remember, it is their perspective, not yours, which is important.

Carry on listening and formulating a plan of action with them. Try to be as collaborative as possible.

Thinking about how we listen

We would all say we listen to the person speaking to us, but what we often do is make suggestions before they have finished saying what it is that is troubling them. Just because they may stop talking for a moment, does not mean they have finished, so be careful not to end sentences for them, give space to allow them to think.

The person you are talking with may be concerned you may judge them or be critical in some way, so it is important to be patient and non-judgemental.








Show empathy by acknowledging you understand the distress they are experiencing.

Ask questions that will encourage information such as, How long have you been feeling like this?

Give information back to the student to show them you have understood what they have been saying such as, "So you have been feeling unable to cope since your last exam results".

While talking with the student try not to use leading questions such as, "You will be able to talk with your tutor now won't you?" as the student may then just agree with you because they feel they should.

Once the person has explored how they are feeling and you have a clearer picture of their situation it is then useful to begin to develop a strategy with them to help with their current situation.

	Give a summary of what you understand the situation to be
	Talk about what they have done in the past that has worked. Use listening skills to explore other possibilities to expand their options
	Establish a plan of action beginning with what they will do as they leave you, who they will talk to, where they will go, what they will do
	Identify specific institutional contacts/networks, as well as statutory/voluntary services, websites, self-help information etc.
	Discuss support, for example family, friends, self-care strategies
	Summarise what has been agreed and what is going to happen next
	Be clear if or how you will have further contact with the person

How some interpret differently

When supporting a student we need to be aware that some may have a different understanding of language and interpret what we are saying in a way differently than we were meaning. This misunderstanding can be two-way, how they interpret us and how we interpret them. The confusion and misinterpretation may be due to English not being the student's first language or possibly the student having a social communication disorder such as an autism spectrum condition (ASC).

We need to be clear with our speech and allow time for the distressed student to process what is being said to them, not to overload with language, have gaps between sentences and avoid the use of metaphors and idioms.

The absence of eye contact is often apparent when someone is in a distressed state, students with ASC often find maintaining eye contact challenging so be aware that the student may not look directly toward you. Not maintaining eye contact does not mean the student is not listening or paying attention.

Many students with ASC experience sensory overload, this means one or more of their senses are being affected, to such a degree that they are unable to manage the situation they may find themselves in. If the student you are with is talking about the noise or lights around them, if possible take them to a calmer quieter area before you begin to try and find out what it is that troubling them.

Sometimes the support we offer may not be enough









Some students may find they are unable to cope with the demands and pressures they are facing and present to the Wellbeing Service, or other university staff, in crisis. Supporting these students is a priority, and reacting to the student's needs and involving primary care services such as their GP in order for them to access the Community Mental Health Services, is vital in safeguarding the student and keeping them safe.

Occasionally, crisis interventions may constitute an 'emergency situation', which will require emergency operating procedures to be adopted and adhered to. These procedures effectively escalate the case to directly involve senior managers and external agencies and organisations.

If the situation does need to escalate to involve others, either within the university, or external agencies, this does not mean we have failed the student it means we are making sure the student gets the support they need at that moment.

Looking after yourself

Supporting others can be hard, especially if they are talking about things that might distress you or which you can't change. It is important to keep yourself safe, emotionally, mentally and physically. To be in a position to support others we need to look after ourselves.

	Be clear about the time you have available to the person and re-schedule time if more is needed
	Be familiar with the appropriate institutional policies and procedures
	Create your own list of local/national services, support networks, useful websites, self-help information
	Identify a colleague/manager/support person/friend who you can turn to if you are struggling
	Give yourself space after talking to someone if this has been difficult, for example, make a drink, go for a walk (if possible)
	Make sure you have balance in your work; space out contact with distressed people so that you are not overwhelmed
	Devise ways you leave the person's distress at work and don't take it home with you, for example locking notes in the cabinet, pass on your concerns
	Make a list of things which soothe you when you are struggling inside and outside of work, for example music, dance, listening to the radio, reading, comedy, exercise, cooking, baths etc.

To reiterate what has been said at the beginning of these information sheets, we would strongly recommend you take some time to look at the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust learning portal found at <http://learning.cwmt.org.uk/>. It is full of extremely good information and ways to support those in distress.

There is also a very resource produced by AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation <https://resiliencetoolkit.org.uk/>