

Mental Health Guidance for staff dealing with students

Introduction

This guidance is designed to support staff in their contact with students who are experiencing mental health difficulties. It is intended to help staff identify, and respond appropriately to, students with mental health difficulties.

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1. What is mental health?

Mental health can be considered as the capacity to live in a resourceful and fulfilling manner, and having the resilience to survive pain, disappointment and sadness.

A mental health problem is one in which a person is distracted from ordinary daily living by upsetting and disturbing thoughts or feelings. The problem may disorientate a person's view of the world and produce a variety of symptoms and behaviour which may cause stress and concern.

For the purpose of these guidelines, mental health difficulties refer to:

- Long term mental health issues/psychiatric conditions which may be classified as a disability
- Emerging mental health problems which may arise during a student's time at University and require intervention and support
- Temporary mental health problems which interfere with a student's capacity to fulfil their academic potential

2. Mental Health and students

Mental health problems are more common amongst students than in the general population. Research shows that one in four students will experience a mental health problem during their studies and that young people are more likely than any other age group to suffer from depression. First episodes of other serious mental health conditions also often start in young adulthood.

3. Identifying students with mental health difficulties

Times of transition are potentially stressful for students with mental health problems, or can be a trigger for the onset of a range of mental health concerns. As change is a common feature of the university experience, it is essential to handle these transitions with care and ensure adequate support.

Common 'warning signs' of possible mental health difficulties include:

- Erratic, unpredictable, bizarre or uncharacteristic behaviour
- Loud, agitated, aggressive behaviour
- Becoming withdrawn or unusually quiet, or changes in sociability
- Persistent absence from lectures and failure to produce course work
- Problems concentrating or over-working.
- Erratic sleep patterns over a significant period of time
- Unkempt personal appearance, significant change in weight, decline in personal hygiene
- Changes in speech
- Signs of self-harm
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Mood swings or being consistently distressed or distracted

Often, we have a 'gut feeling' that something is not quite right with a student, and this reaction is worth following. Situations will often not be clear-cut, but remaining calm, listening carefully and taking student concerns seriously are all fundamental.

4. Responding to students with mental health difficulties

Students who are showing signs of mental distress do not always express difficulties directly or ask for help. If you are worried about a student, it is important to address your concerns and to do so with sensitivity particularly in relation to sexuality, race, religion, culture and disability.

The following steps may be followed:

- Talk with, and listen to, the student explaining that you have concerns about their welfare and give them the opportunity to open up. Express your concern empathetically and in private. This in itself may be reassuring for the student.
- Having spoken with the student, if you remain concerned about them, you may offer them practical direction in terms of the central University support services that are available to them.
- It may be that an individual is too upset or confused or that they cannot understand or listen during this initial discussion so a follow-up may be helpful, to reiterate sign-posting, show a commitment to help and also review the situation.
- Students can contact the Counselling Service or the Disability Team and if you are still concerned, you may speak confidentially with staff from the University Counselling Service ex 4007, Disability Team ex 4007, the Chaplaincy , ex 4275 or Fiona Troughton, Critical Incident Co-ordinator ex.4729

5. Aston's support services

The following sources of support are available within the University:

The Counselling Service:

The Counselling Service (ex 4007) is able to help with making an assessment of the severity of a student's situation, advising of the next step and offering general support to the School or Department. Counsellor Katie Keogh leads the team's response on mental health (ex 4734) k.keogh@aston.ac.uk

The Disability Team:

The Disability Team (ex 4007) is able to help with advice and support for students with disabilities, which include mental health difficulties. They are able to guide you to the right support and, where appropriate, liaise with other services such as Counselling. Dr Sally Holgate, the Disability Support Manager, leads the team's response on mental health (ex 4727) s.holgate@aston.ac.uk

The Critical Incident Coordinator:

Fiona Troughton, based in the Martin Luther King Multi-faith Centre, coordinates the University's response to students in crisis and is also able to access support from the chaplains who care for students of all faiths and of none (ex 4729)

f.troughton@aston.ac.uk

6. Making a referral

Students should be made aware of the resources available to them. It is important to listen carefully, clarify the nature of the problem and its urgency, and ascertain the type of help the student is looking for. A student should then generally be encouraged to approach the support services themselves. In so doing, they indicate a commitment to seeking help and support. There may, however, be occasions when a student finds it hard to make the first move. Having obtained the student's consent, you may choose to contact a support service directly and ask for an appointment to be arranged for the student.

If you are unsure about where to refer a student, please contact Fiona Troughton, Critical Incident Co-ordinator (ex 4729) who will be able to advise you.

7. After the referral

Once a referral has been made to one of the support services, there may be occasions where it is appropriate for some collaboration between the academic School and the service. A case conference of all the parties involved may be called if there is particular concern about the welfare of the student. School staff, such as Personal Tutors, may also invite a student to meet with them from time to time to review their academic progress. This can be hugely beneficial to the student particularly if their studies are being interrupted.

8. When a student will not accept help

There are likely to be occasions when you consider that a student could benefit from speaking with one of the support services but the student is not willing to do so.

Clearly students are under no obligation to accept help, but you can be left feeling stuck and frustrated. You may, however, wish to consider the following:

- Record your concerns in an appropriate student file, noting what action you have taken, e.g. recommending that the student approach the University Counselling Service or the Disability Team
- Inform senior staff in the School of your concerns
- Contact the Counselling Service and/or the Disability Team and/or the Critical Incident Coordinator for advice. There is no need to disclose the name of the student at this point

9. Urgent situations

On rare occasions you may consider that a student's behaviour calls for an urgent response, particularly when a student's feelings have become outside of their control. Crisis situations can often be prevented and contained with a pro-active approach. It is important to stay calm and ensure the safety of all involved, including yourself.

Such situations may include:

- Current suicidal plans and an expressed intention to act on them
- Imminent risk of harm to self or others
- Psychotic episodes or hallucinations (i.e. when a student lacks insight into their behaviour)
- Showing no sense of reality or exhibiting behaviour which is worryingly out of character

If you consider that there is imminent danger of harm either to the student or to others, call:

Security regular number (ex 4803)

Security emergency: (ex 222)

Security emergency from an external phone: 0121 359 2922.

Security emergency from University Residences: (ex 2222)

Security staff will attend or contact the Emergency Services. Such situations are rare.

Ensure privacy and respect but ensure that you are not left alone to handle the situation. Also ensure that you have somebody to talk to and support you after the event.

10. Disclosure/confidentiality

Be clear about the extent of support and level of confidentiality that you can offer. If you are supporting a student with mental health difficulties, a general rule is that information about the student is not passed on to others without the student's consent. Counselling staff are also bound by a professional code of ethics concerning confidentiality. It is thus advisable to encourage the student to inform other relevant members of staff of their circumstances or check that they have no objections to you doing this prior to you passing on information about them.

However information may be passed to others without the student's consent in certain circumstances where there is a cause for concern such as when issues of

personal safety of the staff are involved or when there is potential harm to the student or others.

11. Support for students whose friends have mental health difficulties

Students may find themselves supporting a friend who is experiencing mental health difficulties. It is important that their needs are recognised, as well as those of the student causing concern. A student in this position may often be feeling unsure how to help and what to do for the best. Such students are advised to contact the University Counselling Service, meet with one of the counselling staff, and discuss the situation in order to obtain advice and support.

12. Other information about mental health and mental health difficulties can be found at the following:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk www.mind.org.uk www.studentdepression.org

13 Fitness to study policy

The University plans to introduce a Fitness to Study policy in time for the 2014-2015 academic year. You are advised to consider the policy in association with this guidance.

(Some of the material above is based on a document from Leeds University Counselling Service and has been used with their consent)

Last checked and updated May 2014

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