



University of Essex



Helping Distressed Students

A Guide for Staff

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Helping Distressed Students:

A Guide for Staff

This guide has been produced by the [Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service \(SWIS\)](#) to:

- Help you recognise when a student may be in difficulty
- Provide advice to help you respond and/or refer appropriately and effectively
- Remind you of the support resources and services available within the University
- Raise awareness of issues relating to student mental health

Many people experience emotional and psychological difficulties at some point in their lives. Usually, these difficulties can be resolved by talking them through with family and friends, though sometimes professional help is needed.

If you are required to offer extra assistance to a student, it is important to be mindful of your competence and capabilities, as well as the boundaries of your role.



The health and wellbeing of all members of the University community is everyone's concern. This guide gives you advice on how to assist students in crisis, as well as guidance on supporting students experiencing emotional distress. It is important to be prepared for emergencies, but also to be aware that expert help is always available.

A safe campus is the responsibility of everyone who is part of the University community: staff, students, and visitors.

If you are concerned about something that has happened, you can contact any of the services listed in this guide or use the Report + Support service (for reporting sexual harassment, bullying, hate crime, relationship abuse): <https://reportandsupport.essex.ac.uk/>.

You can also report a concern about a student using the online form, allowing SWIS to take appropriate action as soon as possible: <https://www1.essex.ac.uk/forms/student/report-concern.aspx>

What You Can Do

- Recognise when a student may be distressed and engage them in conversation.
- Actively listen and ask open questions.
- Give the student time to talk and be non-judgemental.
- Demonstrate empathy and compassion and validate their thoughts and feelings.
- Be sympathetic and not dismissive.
- Check risk factors for suicide or self-harm, for example, trauma, recent life changing event, previous history of mental health.
- Make appropriate referrals and arrange a follow up conversation – focus on coping strategies and support systems.

What You Can't Do

- Solve the student's problems and provide ongoing long-term support for them.
- Take responsibility for their emotional state or actions.
- Force the student to get help if they don't want it.
- Act as the student's counsellor.
- Make physical contact, for example hugging or taking their hand, as this could be misconstrued.

Roles and Responsibilities

Identifying Sources of Support

It is not always possible to know what the best source of support might be. The student may have more than one problem, or the initial problem may not be the most central. What is important in the first instance is to refer the student to somewhere that is acceptable to them.

If in doubt, please contact the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service at wellbeing@essex.ac.uk or call 01206 873133 (Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm). Please include the students full name and PRID.

Before Offering Support

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 appropriate advice and support
- You seek advice from colleagues or the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service if you have persistent concerns

Remember — You are not solely responsible for a student's emotional state.

Confidentiality

- Treat personal information about students with discretion.
- Do not promise absolute confidentiality; advise the student that you may have to consult a colleague or other services where there is risk of harm to self/others, or there is imminent danger or safeguarding concerns.
- If parents wish to contact a student, you should avoid confirming the student's registration status. Instead, tell the student afterwards that they have been in touch. Encourage the student to give consent to liaise with an Emergency Contact.
- The Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service can provide advice to all staff who may wish to discuss their concerns about students in distress. Please email wellbeing@essex.ac.uk or call 01206 873133.

How do you know there is a problem?

Trust your judgement and use the below checklist

Is the student's behaviour causing concern?

- 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?
Has there been a sudden change in the student's behaviour?

Does the student seem:

Tense/Irritable	Sad/Miserable/Tearful	Behaving erratically	Change of mood or behaviour	
Panicked	Withdrawn or quiet	Poor concentration	Agitated	Very loud/uninhibited
Smelling of alcohol or cannabis	Talking incoherently	Dulled		

Is any other information available?

- Has the student declared a mental health problem?
- Are other students or staff telling you something about the student which indicates a problem?

Is this different from your previous experience of this person?

- You may see a significant change in appearance (e.g., decline in personal hygiene or weight change)
- Behaviours may have changed (e.g., attendance decline, late work)

Do you need more information from the student?

- Gather basic information such as their name, and registration number by checking student records
- How are they feeling? Have they experienced any difficulties in their wellbeing recently?

Do you need more information?

- Has anyone else noted concerns about the student? How is the student doing in their studies?
- Consult with the [Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service](#) via email or telephone. Please remember to include the students full name and PRID.

What to do if the situation does NOT require immediate action

A student may display signs of emotional distress due to some of the following situations:

Depressed, anxious, generally stressed	Having problems with relationships	
Having health issues	Homesick, lonely, and isolated	Bereaved
Suffering from low self-esteem	Having unexplained study or money problems	

However, these situations should NOT be deemed urgent if you perceive no immediate risk to the student or others.

If the student will accept help:

- Decide with the student who is the best person or service to help them

If you feel that you could help the student, you must ensure that:

- You will be able to listen to the student, reassure them, and offer practical advice
- Areas you could explore include sleep, appetite, enjoyment, tiredness, concentration, thoughts of the future, feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, reactivity, anger or frustration, and whether they have support

If you agree someone else could help the student:

- Understand what the student needs and refer directly to the appropriate support service
- If you're unsure, then seek further advice from a colleague or contact the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service

If the student will not accept help:

- You can make it clear that you'll be available for help if the student changes their mind
- [You can provide the student with a list of contacts should they change their mind about support](#)
- You can seek advice from the [Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service](#) on next steps

In all situations:

- Ensure you get support by talking to your line manager
- Make a record of the conversation with the student on LEAP, highlighting your concerns

What to do if the situation is urgent

A situation is URGENT if:

You believe the student may be at risk of harming themselves or others, or if you are concerned for one or more of the reasons below.

The student:

May be at risk of serious self-harm

Expresses suicidal thoughts/plans

Is violent or threatening violence to others

Seems disorientated and out of touch with reality

If the student will accept help:

- [Report your concern](#) without delay and do not leave the student alone
- Inform your senior tutor and help the student to contact the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service directly, including offering to bring them to the Student Services Hub
- Encourage the student to book an emergency appointment with their GP or contact NHS 111
- Contact Campus Patrol Staff for help in contacting the emergency services (ext. 2222 for Colchester, ext. 8208 for Loughton, and ext. 8508 for Southend)

If the student will not accept help:

- If the student presents at risk of harming themselves or others, and won't accept help, this is an urgent situation
- Contact Campus Patrol Staff for help in contacting the emergency services (ext. 2222 for Colchester, ext. 8208 for Loughton, and ext. 8508 for Southend)
- Take notes of the concerns and risks regarding the student, as well as information such as Name, Registration No., Address, Telephone Number, to pass onto Campus Patrol Staff
- Inform the [Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service](#), and your line manager, of concerns for the student

In all situations:

Try to stay calm and prioritise your own safety, and that of others

Keep an accurate written record

Engage with the student if possible

Make sure you get support by talking the situation through with your manager

What support may benefit the student?

You may wish to show this page to the student to help them identify any issues they are experiencing and decide which service could best support them.

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service

- For concerns around mental and/or physical health and putting in place support whilst at university.
- For advice and support with academic worries, financial concerns, accommodation issues, and Report + Support for survivors of sexual violence, harassment, and hate crime.

GP

- For students in need of professional medical advice and support for mental and/or physical health.

Academic Department

- For students who have academic concerns and worries and for advice regarding submitting Extenuating Circumstances and/or Late Submission claims or reporting absences.

Skills for Success and Inclusion and Learning Advisers (SWIS)

- For study problems e.g., concentration and focus, and presentation/writing skills support.

SU Advice Centre

- For advice and support regarding finances/academic concerns/housing/hate crime.
- For advice and support with academic appeals and Student Conduct procedures.

Residence Life

- For supporting student wellbeing in accommodation and arranging social events and activities.

Faith Centre

- For students in need of spiritual guidance, support with bereavement, or space for quiet reflection.

Student Services Hub

- For advice and support with accommodation, funding, exams, visas, careers, and academic studies.

University Resources

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service

T: 01206 873133 E: wellbeing@essex.ac.uk

W: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/professional-services/student-wellbeing-and-inclusivity-team>

Security Services

Colchester – Emergencies: Telephone ext. 2222 Non-emergencies: Telephone ext. 2125

Southend – Emergencies and Non-emergencies: Telephone ext. 8508

Loughton – Emergencies and Non-emergencies: Telephone ext. 8208

Faith Centre

E: faithcentreadmin@essex.ac.uk

W: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/faith>

Student Services Hub

T: 01206 874000 (for all campuses)

W: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/advice-and-support>

Residence Life

E: reslife@essex.ac.uk

W: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/life/accommodation/living-on-campus/residence-life>

SU Advice Centre

T: 01206 863211 E: suadvice@essex.ac.uk

W: <https://www.essexstudent.com/advice/>

Wellbeing Drop-In for Students

- Colchester Campus: 1st floor of the Silberrad Student Centre, Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm.
- Southend and Loughton Campus: Please email wellbeing@essex.ac.uk for an appointment

Student Counselling Service

- Provides a safe and confidential space to talk about concerns, explore thoughts and feelings, find solutions, and improve coping strategies.

W: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/mental-and-emotional-health/counselling>