



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 assist Academic Department and Professional Services staff 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).

You can also [report a concern about a student](#) using the online form, allowing SWIS to take appropriate action as soon as possible.

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.
- Make appropriate referrals and arrange a follow up conversation.

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.
- As part of the University's duty of care, we are unable to offer extensive support and advice to distressed individuals who are not registered with the University.

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 student's full name and PRID. Emails will be responded to within two working days.

Before Offering Support

You should 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 disclosing any information in the absence of consent from the student. You may need to check the student's attendance and engagement and refer to the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service or Student Progress if there are concerns.
- If external third parties contact you regarding a student, you should avoid disclosing any information in the absence of consent from the student.
- 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. Emails will be responded to within two working days.

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. See Page 7.

If you help the student, you must ensure that:

- You will be able to listen to the student, reassure them, and offer practical advice

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 if you work within an academic department, or you can email your concerns and notes from the conversation to wellbeing@essex.ac.uk if you work within Professional Services or Estates.

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.

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
- Inform your manager 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 (**01206 872222 for Colchester, 01702 328208 for Loughton, and 01702 328508 for Southend**)
- **Out of hours: please contact Campus Patrol Staff on the numbers above to inform of the student**

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 (**01206 872222 for Colchester, 01702 328208 for Loughton, and 01702 328508 for Southend**)
- **Out of hours: please contact Campus Patrol Staff on the numbers above to inform of the student**
- Take notes of the concerns 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 the concerns

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 and if safe to do so

Make sure you get support for your own wellbeing by talking with your manager or by talking to [Workplace Wellbeing](#). This includes the [Employee Assistance Programme](#) supplied by HealthHero.

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.

Student Counselling Service

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

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 skill support e.g., concentration and focus, and presentation/writing skills.

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.

Example scenarios and actions

Student discloses poor mental health which may/may not be impacting their studies or university life e.g. depression/anxiety/high stress/trauma/bereavement.

- Staff can listen and show empathy to student. Staff should make some notes after meeting the student to send to SWIS or upload to their own internal systems.
- If within an academic department setting, staff may wish to outline any possible academic support available, for example, Extenuating Circumstances/Late Submission.
- Staff should signpost the student to speak with SWIS for wellbeing support.
- SWIS will meet the student to understand more about their circumstances and suggest areas of support that may be helpful for the student.
- This may include signposting the student to the University Counselling service or digital mental health platforms such as SilverCloud and Togetherall, as well as to seek medical professional advice from their registered GP.
- Following an assessment by SWIS, the student may be referred to the Inclusion Learning Advisers for study skill support (in-house referral via SWIS only), or to be allocated to an Accessibility and Wellbeing Adviser for long-term one-to-one support.

Student discloses suicidal ideation or previous suicide attempt.

- Staff to report a concern to SWIS via email (wellbeing@essex.ac.uk) or the [Report a Concern form](#). SWIS will contact the student as soon as possible.
- If student is actively suicidal, staff should immediately contact [Campus Patrol Staff](#) for assistance.
- Upon contacting the student, SWIS will undertake an assessment of risk to determine next steps, for example, contacting crisis support lines, GP, or a trusted contact, for student to access urgent support for their mental health and safety.
- The student may undergo Stage 2 or Stage 3 of the Study and Wellbeing Intervention Policy (SWIP) to discuss next steps in their studies and determine best course of action for the student.
- Staff should make some notes after meeting the student to send to SWIS or upload to their own internal systems.

Student is struggling financially which may be impacting their mental health and studies/university life.

- Staff member to signpost student to SWIS for wellbeing support, the Student Funding team for funding advice (funding@essex.ac.uk) and SU Advice for financial advice and support (suadvice@essex.ac.uk).
- If within an academic department setting, staff may wish to outline any possible academic support available, for example, Extenuating Circumstances/Late Submission.
- Staff should make some notes after meeting the student to send to SWIS or upload to their own internal systems.

Student's behaviour is becoming aggressive.

- If a student's behaviour becomes aggressive because of challenging circumstances, or a health condition/disability, staff should immediately contact Campus Patrol Staff for assistance.
- SWIS will reach out to the student to offer wellbeing support.
- The student, depending on circumstances, may undergo procedures outlined in the Student Code of Conduct or at Stage 3 in the Study and Wellbeing Intervention Policy (SWIP).
- Staff should make some notes after meeting the student to send to SWIS or upload to their own internal systems.

Student discloses abuse by someone close to them or fellow student.

- Staff can listen and show empathy to student.
- If within an academic department, staff may wish to outline any possible academic support available to help the student, for example, Extenuating Circumstances/Late Submission, extensions.
- Staff to report a concern to SWIS via email (wellbeing@essex.ac.uk) or the [Report a Concern form](#). SWIS will contact the student as soon as possible.
- Staff should make some notes after meeting the student to send to SWIS or upload to their own internal systems.
- Upon contacting the student, SWIS will undertake an assessment to determine next steps, for example, contacting the University Safeguarding team, Student Conduct and Campus Security.
- SWIS will support the student to make informed decisions on what they may wish to do in the moment e.g. reporting to police and will discuss support services to ensure students safety.

Responding to the death of a student

The [University Student Death Procedure](#) is available for staff to read via the Staff Directory.

Who needs to be contacted?

In the event that staff be notified of the death of a current or former student, the Head of SWIS should be contacted via headofswis@essex.ac.uk in the first instance, or if out of office hours, staff should contact Security on 01206 872222 as soon as possible.

Support available for staff

The death of a student can be very upsetting for everyone involved. Staff can talk to Workplace Wellbeing to seek support. Information on support available for health and wellbeing is available at <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/health-and-wellbeing>. This includes the [Employee Assistance Programme](#) supplied by HealthHero.

Supporting those affected

Although staff may worry that they will say something wrong, the most important thing that you can do is just to be with students affected and listen.

- Listen and show that you care.
- Ensure that all information given to students is honest, factual, and clear.
- Remind students that grief is natural and that support and help are available in the University and in the wider community.
- Do not add to speculation.
- Do not respond to media enquiries, please direct journalists to the Communications Office.
- Take care of yourself.

University Resources

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service

01206 873133	wellbeing@essex.ac.uk	https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/professional-services/student-wellbeing-and-inclusivity-team
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Security Services - During and Out of Hours (after 5pm)

	Emergencies	Non-emergencies
Colchester	Telephone ext. 2222	Telephone ext. 2125
Southend	Telephone ext. 8508	Telephone ext. 8508
Loughton	Telephone ext. 8208	Telephone ext. 8208

Faith Centre

faithcentreadmin@essex.ac.uk	https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/faith
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Student Services Hub

01206 874000	https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/advice-and-support
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Residence Life

reslife@essex.ac.uk	https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/accommodation/residence-life#:~:text=The%20Residence%20Life%20program%20includes%20monthly
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SU Advice Centre

01206 863211	suadvice@essex.ac.uk	https://www.essexstudent.com/advice/
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Wellbeing Appointments for Students

Colchester	1 st floor of the Silberrad Student Centre. Monday – Friday, 9am-4pm Please email wellbeing@essex.ac.uk or complete the online appointment form .
Southend	Please email wellbeing@essex.ac.uk or complete the online appointment form .
Loughton	Please email wellbeing@essex.ac.uk or complete the online appointment form .

Student Counselling Service

Provides a safe and confidential space to talk about concerns, explore thoughts and feelings, find solutions, and improve coping strategies.	https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/mental-and-emotional-health/counselling
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Wellbeing and Inclusivity

CONCERNED ABOUT A STUDENT'S MENTAL WELLBEING?

If the student is willing to accept help

- [Report your concern](#) without delay to SWIS.
- Help the student to contact SWIS directly on **01206 873133**, including offering to bring them to the Wellbeing Drop-In at 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 (**01206 872222** for Colchester, **01702 328208** for Loughton, and **01702 328508** for Southend).

Offer appropriate support

- It's important to set clear boundaries to your involvement and encourage the student to engage with the support services available.
- You should listen and understand what the student needs and signpost/refer them to the appropriate support service.
- Decide who might be best placed to support the student using Pages 7 and 8 of the [guide](#) and signpost the student using the webpages and contact details supplied.

Out of hours

For advice and support outside of working hours, please contact Campus Patrol Staff on the numbers below to inform them of the student:

Colchester: 01206 872222

Loughton: 01702 328208

Southend: 01702 328508

Is the problem urgent?

Do you have reason to believe:

- The student is at risk of [suicide](#)?
- The student is at risk of hurting themselves or [others](#)?
- The student is experiencing serious [vulnerability](#)?

Can you help?

- Do you have the time and/or skills to listen and support?
- Do you have access to the appropriate advice and support services?

In an emergency

Call Campus Patrol Staff who will assist in contacting the emergency services immediately upon request. They may seek further information from yourself or from SWIS.

Colchester: 01206 872222

Loughton: 01702 328208

Southend: 01702 328508

Please note, SWIS can only share information about a student if they have given consent, unless there is serious risk of harm to self or others or safeguarding concerns.

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.
- Inform the Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity Service on **01206 873133** and your line manager, of concerns for the student.
- Contact Campus Patrol Staff for help in contacting the emergency services (**01206 872222** for Colchester, **01702 328208** for Loughton, and **01702 328508** for Southend).

Signpost the student to SWIS or their GP

- Encourage the student to attend the Wellbeing Drop-In at the Colchester Student ~~Silberrad~~ Centre, Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm. Students in Southend and Loughton can request an appointment by emailing wellbeing@essex.ac.uk.
- Signpost the student to SWIS support services using the webpage below: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/professional-services/student-wellbeing-and-inclusivity-team>.
- Encourage the student to book an appointment with their GP.
- If you have concerns for the student's wellbeing, email these to wellbeing@essex.ac.uk.