



Student Distress and Crisis: Guidelines and Suggestions for University Staff

Contents

If you think someone else might benefit from counselling	p. 1
When might counselling be beneficial?	p. 2-4
When to suggest counselling	p. 4-5
Is the situation an emergency or a crisis?	p. 5
A normal crisis	p. 5-6
An urgent crisis	p. 6
An emergency	p. 6-7
Confidentiality	p. 7
Is professional help required?	P. 8

If you think someone else might benefit from counselling

Do you feel out of your depth when offering help to a student? If you think that someone you know could benefit from professional counselling please contact us.

The University Counselling Service is based at 36 Wilkinson Street and provides a free, confidential service to undergraduate and postgraduate students and to all members of University staff.

Telephone: 0114 22 24134

Email: ucs@sheffield.ac.uk

Apart from offering counselling directly to those who require it, Duty Counsellors are available to assist University staff, colleagues, friends and relatives of an individual causing concern. This can be done over the telephone or, especially if the problem is fairly involved, face-to-face. A Duty Counsellor may not be immediately available to respond to a consultation request, but a Duty Counsellor will contact you as soon as the daily schedule permits.

When might counselling be beneficial?

It is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of 'problems' that should always be passed over to a counsellor. Some people facing enormous personal difficulties prefer not to receive professional help and can cope well with the support of family, friends and colleagues. Talking things over with an interested person can be very helpful and a referral to a counsellor might not be necessary.

In our experience an individual's motives for seeking counselling are many and varied. They might, for example, include a wish to resolve a particular problem, gain support during a crisis or a need to engage in a process of personal development. Nevertheless, a general guide to some of the factors indicating a need for professional help may be useful in arriving at the decision to suggest a student or colleague contact the Counselling Service. As there is a danger of over-interpreting a single or isolated behaviour it is advisable to look for clusters of signs that appear around the same time.

Indications that a person may be in need of professional counselling help might include:

A request for help

This may be stated explicitly or may be implicit in the way the person talks about a problem. For this reason it is important to pay attention to not only what he or she is telling you but also to the intentions and feelings behind the message. Having someone listen attentively is often a cathartic experience for the speaker and this can result in the individual feeling a lot better. This is sometimes difficult for the listener to believe, particularly if they are prepared to share the weight of a person's distress. Suggesting the person might see a counsellor may not be necessary if this type of listening can be offered.

References to suicide

Most of us are aware of the need to distinguish between talk of suicide as a cry for help and the serious intention to end personal anguish in a suicidal action. However, if an individual talks about or alludes to details of how, where, or when, he or she may be contemplating suicide this has to be taken seriously. It can be extremely risky to conclude that suicidal talk is a bid for attention. Up

to 70% of people who kill themselves have given definite warnings of their suicidal intentions, often to several people.

If the person you are concerned about is expressing suicidal thoughts immediate action may be necessary. See the section on responding to an emergency below.

Changes in mood or behaviour

Actions which are inconsistent with an individual's usual behaviour and which give rise to some concern may be an indication of psychological distress. Examples could include social withdrawal, loss of motivation to work, spells of unexplained crying, outbursts of anger and irritability and anti-social behaviour.

Anxiety and Depression

Both emotional states are common expressions of underlying difficulties. When an individual's ability to function in a satisfactory manner is impaired for a prolonged period because of anxiety or depression, some kind of assistance should be recommended.

Psychosomatic symptoms

Physical symptoms with no apparent organic cause may well be psychosomatic. Such symptoms may include tension-headaches, nausea, loss of appetite, excessive eating, insomnia, excessive sleeping, gastro-intestinal disorders and so on. These symptoms are real for the individual and so is the pain.

Loss or other traumatic changes in personal relationships

It is to be expected that the death of a family member or a close friend, difficulties in marriage or family relationships, divorce, changes in family responsibilities and difficulties in other significant relationships can have a tremendous impact on an individual.

Alcohol and drug abuse

Excessive drinking, drug abuse or drug dependence are often indicative of emotional problems.

Eating problems

Binge eating or self-starvation can be signs of deep underlying distress. As with excessive alcohol and drug abuse, motivation to seek help may not be there and may only emerge over a period of time.

Unwanted sexual experiences

Changes in societal attitudes and responses have made more possible the disclosure of childhood sexual abuse or of sexual assault in adulthood. Individuals suffering the effects of such experiences (both men and women) should be encouraged to seek counselling help. Leaving home for the first time can provide the opportunity for this disclosure to be dealt with in a sympathetic manner and University Counselling Services are becoming increasingly engaged in helping students with difficulties of this nature.

Academic-related problems

All of the above have a significant impact on students' ability to perform according to their potential although there are some students who continue to achieve well, even brilliantly, despite suffering social and emotional difficulties. It is often difficult in practice to disentangle these difficulties from clearly defined educational ones which may include poor study habits, test anxiety, dyslexia, unsuitable subject choice and so on. Talking through some of these issues with a counsellor may help to clarify the problem.

The effects of transition

Moving from home to University can prove extremely disturbing. Recent research on homesickness has indicated that over 60% of all students suffer this, that the effects last for several months and that increased oscillations in mood swings and psychosomatic symptoms are experienced. Research on international students also indicates higher incidence of health service usage during their first year at University (than home students) owing to aspects of culture shock. Support from the Counselling Service may well be useful in those circumstances.

When to suggest counselling

Suggesting that a person you are concerned about contact the University Counselling Service may well be helpful in the following situations:

- When a person is experiencing difficulties that you feel are beyond your capacity to help at this moment in time. This might be because you are having difficulties with a similar problem and/or feel that to get involved could be asking too much of yourself.
- When you feel that personality differences that cannot be resolved between you and the person are getting in the way.
- When the problem is such that deeper discussion will affect the professional relationship you have with the person.

- When you have contact with the person outside the professional area, for example as a friend, neighbour or relative and when this might impair the kind of help you can give.
- When you cannot make the necessary time available in order to help.
- When you have reason to believe your help has not been effective.
- When the person is reluctant to discuss a problem with you for some reason.

If you believe that a student or member of staff might benefit from professional counselling, it is best to be honest about your reasons and express your concern about his or her welfare. However, the option must be left for the person himself or herself to accept or refuse counselling, which cannot be effective without readiness or motivation on the part of the client.

If the person is sceptical or reluctant for whatever reason, express your acceptance of these feelings so that your own relationship with him or her is not jeopardised. They may just need more time to think it over. A refusal to seek professional help does not mean that you must therefore be prepared to act as a substitute or provide help on demand.

The option of discussing your concerns with a Duty Counsellor is available to anyone who feels that a student or member of staff is in need of professional help but is reluctant to seek it; telephone: 0114 22 24134

Is the situation an emergency or a crisis?

In our experience true emergencies are rare, and it is more common and accurate to describe the requests for immediate help made by understandably concerned colleagues, tutors, friends or relatives as a response to either a **normal crisis** or an **urgent crisis**.

A normal crisis may be defined as a situation which puts someone at a critical and, therefore, decisive point in their life, things could go either way. The individual concerned may perceive this as being very anxiety provoking / worrying /disastrous. The situation is not necessarily life threatening, or involves putting anyone else at risk, but may be perceived by the individual as such (literally or metaphorically). There can be an "end of the world feel" to it, but generally this is not so; it can, however, be life changing.

In the context of University life a normal crisis might include; exam panic, discovery of unplanned pregnancy, death of a friend, leaving home.

In response to a normal crisis the Counselling Service might offer:

- Information
- An assessment
- Depending on demand, short term counselling
- *If the person is already a client*, input is likely to be very brief and the matter passed onto their counsellor to deal with as soon as they can.

A normal crisis can develop into an **urgent crisis** or an **emergency**.

An urgent crisis. This is a situation requiring a prompt response. This is usually related to risk, either to the person concerned or to a third party. The person concerned may or may not recognise the seriousness of the situation. The situation may have gone on for a while, but the feeling of being overwhelmed has not abated, or they have not been able to mobilise defences or resources adequately. They may have become more isolated.

In the context of University life an urgent crisis might include serious self-harm, prolonged alcohol or drug abuse, self-neglect.

In response to an urgent crisis the Counselling Service might offer:

- A brief consultation with the Duty Counsellor to assess risk. This is not intended to be an urgent counselling appointment, and would not be offered routinely, but to help facilitate more appropriate action and to help the person access alternative sources of etc.
- The offer of 'first aid'. E.g. the provision of supportive telephone numbers (NHS Direct, the Samaritans, Nightline, etc) and encouraging contact with GP.
- To book or bring forward an Initial Appointment in the Counselling Service, if the person is not a current client.
- *If person is already a client*, input is likely to be brief and the matter passed onto the relevant counsellor to deal with as soon as they can, possibly with advice / recommendations from a Duty Counsellor

An emergency. We would define an emergency as a situation where there is an immediate threat of damage or risk to an individual's, life, health or property.

The Counselling Service is unable to provide an emergency service and does not offer on-call or acute psychiatric treatment. If you, or the person you are concerned about, need to see or talk to someone immediately, contact the following as appropriate:

- The person's GP or the University Health Service: Tel. 0114 222 2100, Internal: 22100.
- NHS Direct: Tel 0845 4647.
- The nearest Hospital Accident and Emergency Department. For the Northern General Accident and Emergency Department, Tel. 0114 243 4343
- Student Support and Guidance (Critical Support) Tel. 0114 2221263, Internal 21263
- The Emergency Services: Tel. 999.
- The University Security Service: Tel. 0114 222 4085, Internal: 24085.
- Nightline - Tel: 222 8787 (listening line) 222 8788 (Info line).
- The Samaritans: Tel. 08457 909090.

Because it is outside the remit of the Counselling Service to respond to emergencies, our role is to facilitate appropriate help.

In response to an emergency, therefore, we are most likely to:

- Direct caller / student to emergency services
- Contact, for advice or help, other parts of Student Services / Security
- Assess and refer, making direct contact with or without support or agreement of the person concerned; see the section on confidentiality below.
- ***If person concerned was already a client*** the counsellor working with them would be informed and would be expected to work with the Duty Counsellor or Head of Service in order to best manage the situation.

Confidentiality

It is important to note that Counsellors are bound by the rules of confidentiality. Information about what has been confided in a counselling session cannot be provided except with the freely given permission of the person concerned or, in circumstances where there is a clear danger to the individual or others, or as may be requested by law.

We do not give information about whether or not a student or member of staff has consulted us except in very exceptional circumstances; an emergency would usually constitute 'exceptional circumstances'.

All the counsellors are professionally trained and work within the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy. (A copy of this is available from our receptionist.)

Is professional help required?

The following checklist has been designed to help you think through whether or not the person you are concerned about requires professional help.

- Explore the person's current readiness to accept help.
- Be direct and honest regarding the concerns that led you to suggest they may require further help.
- Be honest about your own limitations.
- Bearing in mind the constraints of confidentiality, find out who else, or what other services (e.g. their GP, the University Counselling Service, Student Support and Guidance, etc), may currently, or previously, have had contact with this individual.
- Contact this person or service as soon as possible. It is usually better to do this with the person's permission.
- If there is real and immediate risk that the person you are concerned about may harm themselves, or someone else, contact the appropriate emergency service.

If you are not sure how best to help the individual you are concerned about, please contact the Counselling Service for advice.

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