

Worried about a student?

University students face a great deal of stress and pressure that can impact their life, on both a personal and an academic level. Whether you are a member of faculty or staff, a family member or a friend, this page contains information to guide you as you address your concerns about a student. On this page, you will find information about possible signs of excessive distress and guidance on how to approach a student whom you are concerned about.

Signs of excessive distress

While short-term changes in a student's emotional state or behaviour can be normal, extreme or significant changes that persist for weeks at a time or that interfere with daily functioning can be signs of excessive distress or a mental health problem. If you notice behaviour that is unusual for the student whom you know and that raises concern, trust your instincts and take action.

The following are possible signs of excessive distress:

- Uncharacteristically poor work and dropping grades.
- Noticeable changes in the person's appearance (e.g. weight loss/gain and decline in personal hygiene).
- Significant shifts in sleeping pattern over a period of time (e.g. sleeps much more or less than before).
- Uncharacteristic social withdrawal.
- Inappropriate reactions during conversations and/or disjointed thoughts that do not make sense.
- Bizarre behaviour that is clearly inappropriate (e.g. talking to someone not present).
- Intense, dramatic or volatile emotions such as sadness, despair, nervousness or anxiety.
- Physical harm to self (e.g. cutting).
- Verbal or written references to suicidal/homicidal thoughts or plans.
- Extreme defensiveness.
- Frequent or high levels of irritability or aggressive behaviour.

What to do in an emergency or if a student is experiencing a crisis

In exceptional circumstances, where there are indications that a student's safety is at risk or that they're behaviour puts others at risk, you may need to act without his/her consent. Examples of such urgent situations are *if the student has expressed suicidal ideas, experiences mental confusion or disorientation, is behaving strangely (e.g. hearing voices or becoming paranoid) or is hurting him-/herself*. In crisis situations, the first priority is your own safety and that of others.

As with medical emergencies, if a student is experiencing a psychological emergency, request urgent assistance:

- After hours: Contact ER24 at 010 205 3032.
- During office hours: Contact the Unit of Psychotherapeutic and Support Services (UPSS)
 - Stellenbosch campus 021 808 4994
 - Tygerberg campus 021 938 9590

What to do when you are concerned about a student in nonemergency situations

For friends and family

Many people find it hard to ask for help or to reach out when they are not feeling well. A student who is distressed might not be aware of University support services. A friend or family member who can offer support in times like this can be of great value. Here are some suggestions on how to respond to a student in distress:

- Speak to the student in private. Share your concern and clearly identify the specific things that have led to your concern in non-judgmental terms. For example, you can say, “You’ve been crying a lot lately and it looks like you’ve lost some weight – I’m concerned about you.”
- Make time to listen to the student and try to understand what he/she is sharing.
- Remember that you do not need to offer solutions or solve the person’s problems. Just listening without judging can help someone to feel heard and can lessen the feeling of isolation.
- If you notice hopelessness, despair or any indicator of not wanting to live, acknowledge those feelings. If the person has thoughts about suicide, treat the situation as serious and contact the above crisis numbers.
- Encourage the person to seek help and let him/her know that support is available at the University. Some students are afraid that telling the University about a personal problem will count against them. This is not true – the CSCD’s services are confidential, and we are here to help. You can find information about the available resources on the CSCD website at <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/learning-teaching/student-affairs/cscd/psychotherapeutic-support>
- Treat the information shared as confidential as far as possible and share it only with the student’s consent, unless in emergency situations as described earlier.

For faculty and staff

- Talk with your supervisor or a colleague to develop a response about your concerns.
- Be cognisant of your professional relationship with the student and take into account possible conflicts of interest, for example whether you are in an evaluative position regarding the student.
- Consider having someone meet with you and the student. Share your concern and clearly identify the specific things that have led to your concern in non-judgmental terms. Make time to listen to the student and allow time to try to understand what she/he is sharing. Just listening without judging can help someone to feel heard and can lessen the feeling of isolation.
- Remember that you do not need to offer solutions or solve the student’s problems.

- It may be necessary to clarify your role and explain that while you care, you are not able to offer counselling but can provide information about the available resources for professional help.
- Encourage the student to seek professional help and let her/him know that support is available at the University. Provide the student with the relevant CSCD contact details and resources.
- Treat the information shared as confidential as far as possible and share it only with the student's consent, unless in emergency situations, as described earlier.

Frequently asked questions

What type of health care professionals can assist a person with mental health problems?

A range of health care professionals can screen for or assess mental health problems. These experts include psychologists, counsellors, psychiatrists and general practitioners. Some individuals may feel more comfortable to start by consulting a medical professional, like a doctor, who can then do a referral to a mental health professional should it be indicated, and others may prefer to first address their challenge in counselling with a psychologist or counsellor before considering medical advice.

Can I contact the CSCD to confirm whether my friend/family member attended a session there?

Due to the ethical principle of confidentiality, we are not allowed to disclose any information about a student without her/his express consent to any third party, except in an emergency situation where a health care professional's assessment indicates that the student may be a risk to her/his own or others' safety. This means that the CSCD cannot verify that a student has accessed our services.

My friend/family member does not want to seek professional help. How do I handle this situation?

A person over 18 years old has to consent to treatment, even if she/he is unwell. An exception is cases that constitute emergencies, as noted above. For many individuals, seeking professional help may take time – this can feel like a daunting step to take.

Ensure that the person has the necessary information about available help or resources in case she/he later wants to access support or changes her/his mind.

I have been supporting someone with mental health problems for a while and am struggling myself.

It can be hard to see someone whom you care about go through a difficult time and it is important to take care of your own mental health. Remember that it is not your responsibility to solve the person's problems. If you feel overburdened, it may be necessary to reflect on whether it is healthy for you to continue supporting the person in the same way that you have been. It may be helpful to seek counselling to determine the next steps in this situation.