

**Responding to  
Distressed Students:  
A Guide for Staff**

## Responding to students in distress

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In your professional role within the University it is likely that, at some time, you will be faced with a student who is distressed or vulnerable. Understandably, this can be very daunting, and even disturbing at times. There are many causes of distress for students and many ways in which they express it, exactly the same as for anyone else.

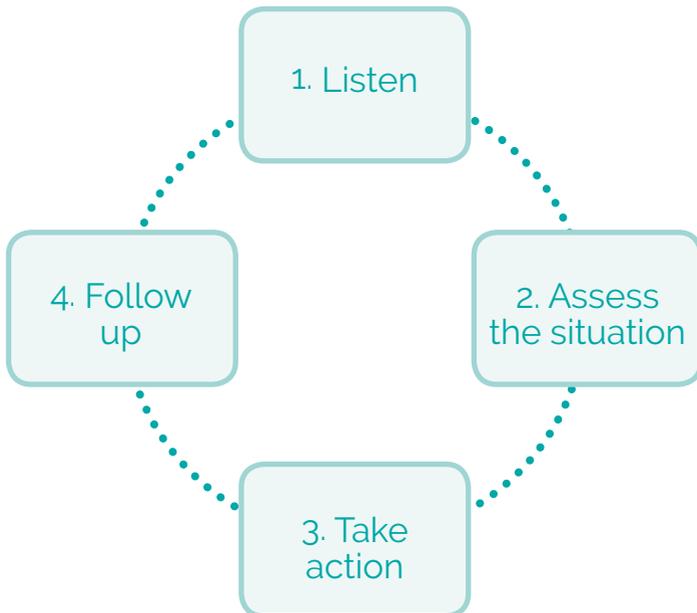
Responding to a distressed student can be seen as a series of stages:

**1.** Listening to the student – giving the student the opportunity to talk and gaining the information you need. Having a sympathetic listener can reassure the student that

encountering difficulties is a normal part of student life and may be all that is required.

- 2.** Assessing the situation – making judgements with the student about the severity and immediacy of the situation and deciding what, if anything, you need to do.
- 3.** Taking action – based on the last two stages.
- 4.** Following up – making sure that there are no loose ends and the student is aware of what has been done and who they can go to if they need further support.

Further information on all these stages can be found on the following pages.



# STAGE 1: Listen

## If the student is agitated, angry or upset

- Try to appear calm and in control of the situation, even if you don't feel that way.
- Allow the student space to talk about what is distressing them. If there is only limited time available, offer more time later.
- Discuss with the student where they can access support in the future.
- If the student is creating a disturbance or if you are concerned about your personal safety, contact Security on +44 (0)191 208 6817.  
In an emergency, contact security on +44 (0)191 208 6666.

## Listening in the right time and space

- If the student appears to be agitated or upset, could a brief meeting be offered immediately?
- If you have an urgent deadline or an imminent appointment, say so and offer a specific time later. Alternatively, could the student be directed to someone who can offer time immediately?
- Make clear how much time is available.
- Try to ensure the time offered is free from interruptions and is in a private space.
- Maintain a professional relationship e.g. do not give a student your private mobile phone number, avoid sharing personal details about yourself, maintain appropriate boundaries.



## Listening with purpose

- What seems to be the main issue?
- Is this the whole story or are there other problems?
- Is the issue having a major impact on the student's wellbeing?
- How does the student think/hope you can help them?
- How do you think you can help the student as they might not know for themselves?



### Listening with skill

- Use open questions.
- Occasionally allow silences to last slightly longer than is comfortable. People need time and courage to find the right words.
- Check with the student that you have understood them correctly.
- Reflect their words back to them to give them a chance to clarify or expand on something.
- Consider their body language and any recent behaviour changes you might have noticed.
- Do not be drawn into physical contact with the student.

### Making a record

- If you are going to make notes, explain to the student why you are doing this, even if it's just to serve your own memory.
- You should make notes:
  - if you think you will see the student again, so that you can remember what they have told you and/or track their progress
  - if you think the student is at risk and you will need to
    - (a) consult someone else about how to support them and
    - (b) have evidence of what they told you and how you responded
- All notes should be kept securely; these may be requested under Freedom of Information, so be objective.

## STAGE 2: Assess the situation

During your initial conversation with the student it is important to form an impression of how serious the situation is, as this will determine the action that you take.

Having someone listen and take them seriously may be sufficient to defuse the situation and/or for the student to work out a course of action.

On most occasions, although the situation may be very distressing for the student at the time, it will not be an urgent matter. The following questions will help you to assess whether the situation is more serious.

### Questions to ask yourself

- Is the student or other people at high risk of harm (e.g. self harm or suicide)?
- Is anyone else at risk through coercive behaviours (e.g. relationship abuse or initiations)?
- Are the risks immediate?
- Is specialist help required?
- Is there a need to act quickly?
- Is there a need to inform or consult with someone else?

A prompt response is required if:

- a student may be at risk of hurting themselves or someone else
- their behaviour appears to be significantly out of character

Discuss your concerns with your manager or with a member of the Student Health and Wellbeing Services by calling the Wellbeing Consultancy Service on +44 (0)191 208 3333.

See page 9 for further details.

If you think there is an immediate risk, call the emergency services directly, on 999 and then inform Security of the situation on +44 (0)191 208 6666.

### Out of hours:

If the concern cannot wait until the next working day please call Security on +44 (0)191 208 6817 who will take appropriate action.

## STAGE 3: Take action

### What can you do?

There may be practical things that you can do within your role which may help the student. For example:

- helping with academic adjustments
- arranging follow-up contact with the student
- helping to resolve conflict with other students

### Offer information

Signposting – sharing information with the student about resources and services which you think might help them, and encouraging them to access these. The Student Health and Wellbeing Services website has links to a wide variety of resources and other online information and support, as well as emergency and out of hours contacts:

[www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wellbeing](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wellbeing)

A student should be directed elsewhere for support when:

- the problem needs specialist help
- the problem is complex or serious
- the situation needs more time than you can offer
- the student appears to be at risk to themselves or others
- the student is requesting support from a particular service

For example, if a student is a victim of a sexual crime and wants to report it to the police, they should ring **999** in an emergency, or **101** in a non-emergency.

Encourage the student to seek support from REACH, the local Sexual Assault Referral Centre: REACH staff offer support whether or not the student wishes to report the assault to the police and can be contacted on +44 (0)191 221 9222. They can also receive support from Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland on 0800 035 2794. Newcastle University is committed to providing a positive experience for our students and believe that abusive behaviours are never acceptable.

Our online Report and Support tool enables anyone to report concerns anonymously, make a formal complaint and/or receive support. If you have experienced or are aware of, sexual violence, sexual harassment or initiations behaviours affecting a Newcastle University student, you can report these directly to us via this tool: [reportandsupport.ncl.ac.uk](http://reportandsupport.ncl.ac.uk)

Where a student is disturbing others or there are concerns about the student's physical or mental wellbeing, but there does not appear to be an immediate risk, try to calm the student down by encouraging them to talk about what is distressing them, and then suggest where further help is available.



## Making an appointment with the Student Health and Wellbeing Services

Students can book an assessment appointment on our appointment site [studenthealthandwellbeing.ncl.ac.uk](http://studenthealthandwellbeing.ncl.ac.uk) or request an appointment by phoning us on +44 (0)191 208 3333. During the assessment appointment, the range of possible support will be discussed with the student, depending on their particular needs. This could include signposting to other specialist services, within the University and externally. So that students are seen as quickly as possible, encourage them to take the first assessment appointment they are offered, even if this means missing a lecture or a seminar.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality needs to be respected at all times and sensitive information shared only with the explicit informed consent of the student.

Confidentiality can be broken:

- when a student is alerting you to a clear and present danger to self or a third party i.e. suicide, radicalisation, domestic abuse, child abuse
- if there is an issue around child protection
- disclosure of information relating to an act of terrorism or terrorist related activity

If you are unsure about the best course of action, seek advice from your manager in the first instance. A case can be discussed hypothetically without revealing names. If you are seriously concerned about a student's welfare, you or they should contact the appropriate emergency services, see page 11 of this guide.

## STAGE 4: Follow up

This stage gives the student an opportunity to let you know of their progress and any additional support they might need. It also gives you an opportunity to check they are still on track, accessing support and taking any action that you agreed would be helpful.

Following up:

- should ideally be agreed in advance with the student so they know when and how you will follow up with them

- enables you to go home with a clear mind and you are both aware of your role in this situation
- relieves the pressure to have covered everything in the initial meeting. The time in between the initial interaction and the follow up gives you an opportunity to think a bit more about what might be useful and prepare for the student meeting
- can be done by phone, email or face-to-face. Use your judgment to decide what you think will be most appropriate

Shall we agree to speak on the phone after you have talked to the manager in your halls? I'll call you at lunchtime on Monday to see how it's going.

I'll email you in a week to see if things have improved.

It sounds like you are OK for now, let's check in after your appointment with Student Health and Wellbeing and see how things are going.

Please come back to me if anything changes and you want to talk about it some more. My office hours are...

Would you like us to put another time in the diary to talk about this some more?

Thanks for letting me know, I'll have a think and let's meet again tomorrow at 3, when I'm not so rushed.

## Wellbeing Consultancy Service

The Wellbeing Consultancy Service is a telephone service available to anyone with concerns about the physical or mental wellbeing of a Newcastle University student.

Staffed by our Mental Health Team, callers are provided with advice and guidance on how best to help our students and mitigate any risks.

When necessary the Consultancy staff will take proactive safeguarding action.

You can access the Wellbeing Consultancy Service 09.00 – 17.00 on weekdays by calling +44 (0)191 208 3333 or emailing [wellbeingconsultancy@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:wellbeingconsultancy@ncl.ac.uk)

### Emergencies and out of hours

Please see the emergency situations advice on page 11 of this guide.



## Key points

Sometimes, listening will be enough.

Be clear about what is realistic for you to deal with yourself. Decisions about what support to offer will depend on your role, whether you have relevant expertise and the time available to you.

Be clear about the limits of confidentiality and information sharing e.g. do not disclose personal information about the student to parents or third parties.

Situations requiring immediate action are rare. If you are in doubt about how to respond to a student, it is nearly always possible to give yourself time by saying that you need to think over what is the best way to help and arranging to see them again.

Consult with others or contact the Student Health and Wellbeing Services if you think the student's problems may be serious or if you are uncertain what action to take.

Ensure that you have information about other services on campus that you can pass on to students.

Keep a note of Security contact details to hand.

Agree with the student what, if anything, needs to happen next.

Keep a record of your meeting/interaction and notify your line manager or the Student Health and Wellbeing Services if necessary.

# Emergency situations and out of hours

## Emergency services

If you are worried about a student's safety or feel they are at risk of harming themselves, you need to access help immediately.

If you feel there is imminent danger, you should call **9-999** and notify Security on **86666**

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## Out of hours

For any other out of hours concern, that cannot wait until the next working day, call Security on **+44 (0)191 208 6817**.

## Helplines

Nightline: available every night during term time 20.00 – 08.00 on **+44 (0)191 261 2905** and **[www.nusu.co.uk/nightline](http://www.nusu.co.uk/nightline)**

Samaritans: available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day on **116 123** and **[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**

Campaign against living miserably (CALM) (offering support and suicide prevention to UK Men): available every night 17.00 - 00.00 on **0800 58 58 58** and **[www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)**

PAPYRUS – Prevention of young suicide: available Monday to Friday 10.00 – 22.00, weekends 14.00 – 22.00 and bank holidays 14.00 – 17.00 on **0800 068 4141** and **[www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)**

## Useful contact details:

Student Health and Wellbeing Services: Consultancy Line	Tel: +44 (0)191 208 3333 <a href="http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wellbeing">www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wellbeing</a>
Counselling and Mental Health Team Manager Disability and Specialist Learning Team Leader Director of Student Health and Wellbeing Services	Tel: +44 (0)191 208 3333 Tel: +44 (0)191 208 3333 Tel: +44 (0)191 208 3333
Chaplaincy	Tel: +44 (0)191 208 3333

All of the above are available during office hours.

Newcastle University Security (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)	Tel: +44 (0)191 208 6817 Tel: +44 (0)191 208 6666 (emergency number)
Emergency services (24 hour emergency calls)	Tel: 999
Northumbria Police (24 hour non-emergency calls)	Tel: 101
NUSU emergency taxi service for students	Tel: +44 (0)191 298 5050 and quote reference NEWO2

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Newcastle University  
Newcastle Upon Tyne  
NE1 7RU  
United Kingdom