



# Guideline for Staff: Supporting Students in Distress

## Purpose

This is a guideline from the University Counselling Centre providing general information on responding to and supporting students exhibiting different types of distress, including general distress, concerning distress behaviours, and risk of suicide or self-harm.

## Guideline

### Preamble

Studying at university can be a unique and challenging experience. Most students experience elevated stress at some time during their university career. Students may become distressed (have a strong emotional response) for many reasons, including poor health; stressful life circumstances; mental health concerns like anxiety or depression; family difficulties; relationship problems; pressures of balancing work and study; trauma; grief; sexual assault, harassment or exposure to violence; or drug/alcohol use. Not all students experience distress, and not all distressed students are experiencing signs of mental illness.

Throughout the course of their work, ANU staff members may encounter students who are in distress or who exhibit distressed behaviour which is confusing, concerning, or challenging to respond to. This guide is designed to assist staff in the understanding of the nature of distress and to provide information on the support channels available to students in distress. This guideline recognises that best practice in the support of those who are emotionally distressed or who may be experiencing signs of reduced mental health is one of early intervention, through timely and respectful access to support.

### Related University Policy and Procedure

This guideline has been developed and is to be read and applied in conjunction with the following university policy and procedure documents:

- *Student Critical Incident Policy*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_002606](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_002606)
- *Disability Policy*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_000405](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000405)
- *Procedure on the Prevention of Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_000623](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000623)
- *Student Discipline Rules*  
<http://legalloffice.weblogs.anu.edu.au/legal-services/student-discipline/>
- *Student Complaint Resolution*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_000468](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000468)
- *Disruptive Behaviour: Guidelines for a Coordinated ANU Response*  
[http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser\\_to\\_staff/index.php](http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser_to_staff/index.php)

Useful information about privacy is also available:

- *Privacy Policy – statement on the collection, use and control of personal information*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_000442](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000442)

- *Disclosure of Information by Students with a Disability or Illness*  
[https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_001226](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_001226)
- *Frequently Asked Questions on privacy*  
<http://legaloffice.weblogs.anu.edu.au/legal-services/privacy/>

### **Precautions**

1. Please be aware that this is a general guide only and in no way covers all distress situations, which can vary widely. Modification to your approach or further consultation with relevant professional staff may be required, depending on the individual circumstance. This is especially the case for complex situations or those involving safety concerns.
2. When supporting a student, be clear about your time constraints and set boundaries or limits if the student appears to be asking for ongoing support from you – *for ethical reasons it is not appropriate for you to offer to be the student's main source of support.*
3. Ensure that you do not place yourself in a position where you are solely responsible for the student's safety or safety-planning, particularly if you are not formally trained in suicide prevention responses. The best response is to connect the student promptly to appropriate professional support (See page 7 for emergency and crisis contact details).
  - If you are interested in basic training in the area, you can enrol in an accredited Mental Health First Aid and/or suicide intervention skills course.
  - Please note that even if you have completed an existing or similar course, the emphasis of support is on mental health *first aid*, whereby you respond to any immediate threat by activating an initial response, then handover to suitable professional services for treatment, support and ongoing care.
4. This document does not cover suggested responses to threatening behaviours such as aggression toward others, harassment, bullying, sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, physical violence, property damage, or threats of harm to others. Refer to the appropriate overarching policies and procedures on these matters, in addition to 'Disruptive Behaviour: Guidelines for a Coordinated ANU Response.'

### **General Support**

1. Distress can manifest in a variety of ways, some more common than others. For example, crying is a natural way to release emotional distress.
2. More common distress reactions can include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Tearfulness, crying, expressions of sadness or concern
  - b. Tension, shaking, panic, and reporting fears or anxieties
  - c. Reduced or low motivation, loss of interest in usual activities
  - d. Difficulty concentrating or focusing
  - e. Avoidance (of others, classes/exams/assignments)
  - f. Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol
  - g. Noticeable changes or deterioration in mood or appearance
3. If a student approaches you and is showing common signs of distress, here are some responses to consider:
  - a. Acknowledge the student's distress.
  - b. Remain calm and offer your assistance.
  - c. Listen to their concerns, within reason and given the bounds of your role.
  - d. Repeat back the essence of what they have told you.
  - e. Ask if they are currently receiving any support for their concerns or if they are aware of family, friends, and/or student services that may help.

- f. Consider the option of discussing the allowance of extended time on assignments or special consideration if you think it relevant – this may be the main reason the student is meeting with you. If this behaviour becomes a pattern at assessment times, then refer the student to the *Disability Services Centre* for professional review, rather than immediately agreeing further or repeated extensions.
- g. Provide information on available and relevant student services (*such as the University Counselling Centre, ANU Health Service, or Disability Services Centre*) – service contact details are provided on page 6.
- h. Encourage the student to make their own decisions about accessing support.
- i. If the student's distress does not reduce at this stage, offer to assist them to connect with a relevant service or support and gain their consent to make a telephone call on their behalf.
- j. Facilitate the student's access to support if required, then agree on any follow-up pertaining to your own role.

### **Support for Concerning Behaviour**

- 4. Some types of distress are less common, more severe, and may require a more immediate response. Many students in these circumstances do not see themselves as needing help, so due respect and precaution should be applied when providing or offering support.
- 5. Less common and more severe distress reactions can include:
  - a. Unusually restless or agitated behaviour
  - b. Defensiveness, shouting, or aggression
  - c. Self-harm – cutting, burning or other intentionally inflicted damage to self
  - d. Implied or apparent thoughts or threats of suicide
  - e. Obvious confusion, disorganisation, illogic, or behaviour that is greatly out of character or out of the context of reality (e.g. responding to things which are clearly not present)
  - f. Being overly elated, energised, excited, or confident, and potentially placing self at risk of accidental harm
  - g. Seeming very suspicious, mistrustful, or sensitive to minor oversights or interpreting neutral situations as evil or threatening
- 6. As a broad guide and wherever safe to do so, initially follow the suggested general support process described in Section 3.
- 7. Additionally, you may apply the following support steps as relevant, being aware that distress situations can vary and modification to your approach or further consultation with relevant professional staff may be required:
  - a. Respond calmly to any natural invitation to discuss the student's distress. Often, students showing behaviours of concern will mention general issues like stress, sleep problems, feeling scared, or having trouble thinking. Use this as an opening to suggest they seek support via counselling or medical attention.
  - b. Acknowledge your concerns and state that you can see they need help, e.g. "*I can see things are difficult for you at the moment and I'm concerned for your wellbeing. I'd like to help you get some support.*"
  - c. Seek advice from the Counselling Centre and/or your supervisor if the student is sending disorganised, concerning, and/or disturbing letters or emails. You can also refer to the guide on 'Responding to Disturbing Content in Students Work': [http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser\\_to\\_staff/index.php](http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser_to_staff/index.php)
  - d. Where there are no immediate concerns for safety and where safe to do so, consider raising the student's behaviour with the relevant 'Prescribed Authority' in your College, Centre or Administrative Unit - it is possible that the behaviour is affecting students and staff elsewhere in the University. In these circumstances, it

is more helpful to the student and the University community to intervene early rather than allowing concerning behaviors to become repetitive or escalated.

- e. If you become alarmed or feel the safety of yourself and any nearby person(s) is at immediate risk, keep at a safe distance and explain calmly to the student that you will call ANU Security and/or the Police. Proceed to call ANU Security (6125 2249) and/or the Police (000 or 131 444) without hesitation if the situation does not calm down or the threat escalates or continues.

### **Risk of Suicide, Self-Harm or Safety Concerns**

8. On rare occasions, student distress may involve a risk of harm to the individual student or others. All safety concerns should be taken seriously and responded to in line with the overarching policies, procedures and guidelines (*'Student Critical Incident Policy'*; *'Occupational Health and Safety Policy'*; *'Staff Code of Conduct'*, *'Procedure for the Prevention of Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying'*).
9. Safety concerns and risk of harm related to student distress can include:
  - a. Actual or implied threat of harm to self, including disclosures of thoughts of suicide or self-harm;
  - b. The expression of hopelessness, for example statements such as *"things will never get better"*, *"no one can help me"*, *"I don't see my future improving"*, or *"what's the point?"*
  - c. Observed non-accidental injuries (e.g. distinct pattern of burns, scars or cuts) or reported self-harming behaviours (including stated future plans to harm);
  - d. Indirect behaviours or statements indicating possible intention to harm (e.g. giving away possessions, acquiring methods of harm, or saying farewell unexpectedly).
10. Any student expression of harm should be taken seriously and responded to promptly with professionalism, respect and compassion.
11. In the event a student is extremely distressed and expresses immediate thoughts or intentions to harm themselves, or you see evidence of harm in progress:
  - a. Establish immediate safety – **if there are any concerns that there is immediate danger, or a medical or other emergency including inflicted harm or harm in progress, contact emergency services on 000, then call ANU Security on 6125 2249.**  
Then continue to follow steps outlined in the Student Critical Incident Policy: [https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_002607](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_002607)  
Note that the student should not be left alone in this circumstance – you may need to ask a colleague to assist by making calls or waiting with the student.
  - b. If immediate safety can be established and you are able to safely talk with the student, take the students concerns very seriously and express your concern for their wellbeing.
  - c. Advise them you think it best if you could help them to talk with a mental health professional or with the University Counselling Centre about the concerns - try to do this with the student's consent and while they are present.
  - d. Be as transparent as possible in gaining the student's consent to make any calls, and checking the accuracy of the information you will provide.
  - e. If you see evidence the student has self-harmed or self-injured but you have been able to establish immediate safety and the injuries are minor, administer or seek necessary medical first aid (where qualified to do so). Please note that prompt, preferably same or next day, medical assessment of any injury is recommended, via connection of the student with their local doctor or medical centre. First aid is unable to rule out or treat possible long-term consequences of self-injury such as infection or scarring.

- f. Under no circumstances agree to keep information pertaining to a risk of serious harm a secret – if in doubt about the limits to confidentiality, check with the University Counselling Centre or the ANU Legal Office (Privacy Frequently Asked Questions <http://legaloffice.weblogs.anu.edu.au/legal-services/privacy/> ). Explain to the student that this is why you need to tell someone about your concerns.
- g. If the student is unwilling to allow you to engage the assistance of the University Counselling Centre, or if serious concerns emerge out of usual business hours, offer the student your support to connect them with a relevant community service. Appropriate services include:
  - The ACT Mental Health Crisis, Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT)  
1800 629 354 or 6205 1065
  - Lifeline on 13 11 14
  - Kids Helpline (if the student is under 25yrs old) on 1800 551 800
  - Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

Any community member can contact these numbers for assistance. *Please be aware that the University Counselling Centre will assist wherever possible, but it is not a crisis service and cannot guarantee an urgent response in these situations.*
- h. If the student is unwilling to let you connect them with any support services, offer to provide them with the numbers to contact themselves and obtain their agreement to do this where possible. If you are still concerned about their safety when the interaction is over, follow the next step.
- i. If the student is unwilling to activate any support and your concerns for their wellbeing or safety remain, raise the issue with your immediate supervisor and the University Counselling Centre directly. You can also contact ANU Security to discuss any immediate safety concerns.

### **Debriefing**

1. It is encouraged and suggested that you seek support for yourself, if required, following your involvement in aiding a distressed student, particularly if the situation involves a serious threat of harm, if you become aware of your own strong emotional response, or if you have any residual concerns about yourself and/or the student.
2. Initial debriefing can be sought via your direct supervisor.
3. Professional debriefing can be accessed via the Staff Employee Assistance Program (details listed on page 6).
4. Debriefing for any student(s) also involved in assisting a distressed student is available via the University Counselling Centre – you can provide the student(s) with contact details or offer to assist them to make an appointment with their consent.

## **SUPPORT AT THE UNIVERSITY**

### **ANU Health Centre:**

**Front Desk (+61) 02 - 6125 3598**

**Nurse (+61) 02 - 6125 9695 between 2pm and 4pm weekdays**

9am - 5pm, Mon to Thurs; 9am - 4pm Fri. Closed 12:30pm - 1:25pm & public holidays

Medical support, information and referral

### **ANU Counselling Centre: 6125 2442**

9am – 4.45pm, Mon to Fri. Closed 1pm – 2pm & public holidays

Counselling, support, information and referral

### **ANU Disability Services Centre: 6125 5036**

9am – 5pm, Mon to Fri. Closed 12.30pm – 1.30pm & public holidays.

### **Heads of Residential Halls and Colleges – for students who live on campus**

Academic and personal support, referral.

### **Dean of Students: 6125 4184**

Academic and personal support, referral.

### **Postgraduate and Research Students Association (PARSA)**

**Welfare Officer: 6125 2603**

9:00am - 5:00pm, Mon to Fri

Personal and academic support, advocacy, and referral.

### **Student Legal Officer: 6125 2444**

9am – 5pm, Mon – Wed.

Legal support for students.

### **ANU Students Association (ANUSA)**

**Student Assistance Officers: 6125 2444; E: [sa.assistance@anu.edu.au](mailto:sa.assistance@anu.edu.au):**

9am - 5pm, Mon to Fri.

Personal and academic support, advocacy, referral. Financial support and food aid also available.

### **ANU Legal Office: 6125 8489 E:[legal.office@anu.edu.au](mailto:legal.office@anu.edu.au)**

Legal support for staff.

### **ANU Security: 6125 2249**

ANU Security maintains a 24-hour patrol for the safety of students and staff, responding to emergency situations and providing First Aid. They also provide support in the event of a critical incident on campus.

### **Registrar Student Life: 6197 0110**

Primary contact for ANU Critical Incident.

## **STAFF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

### **Adviser to Staff: 6125 3616. Messages can also be left at 6125 2442**

9am – 4.45pm, Mon to Thurs, [http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser\\_to\\_staff/index.php](http://counselling.anu.edu.au/adviser_to_staff/index.php)

### **Assure: 1800 808 374**

9am – 5pm, plus 24hr after-hours service: 1800 808 374

Website: [www.assureprograms.com.au](http://www.assureprograms.com.au)

External provider offering phone, face-to-face and online (skype or email) counselling. Limit of 4 appointments per year for staff and their immediate family members.

### **Relationships Australia: 6122 7100**

9am to 5pm, Mon to Fri.

External provider for relationship and related counselling (telephone or face-to-face)

Website: [www.relationships.com.au](http://www.relationships.com.au)

**IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE**

**Emergencies (Police, Fire or Ambulance): 000**

**Australian Federal Police: 131 444**

**ANU Security: 6125 2249**

**AFTER-HOURS AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS ASSISTANCE**

**ACT Mental Health Crisis, Assessment & Treatment Team (CATT):  
1800 629 354 or 6205 1065**

**Lifeline: 13 11 14**

**Kids Helpline (12-25yrs) - 1800 551 800**

**Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467**





