



# Helping skills: improving listening and communication skills with students facing difficulties



Alta Panera, Psychologist – Psychotherapist  
Center for Counseling and Psychological Support  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki



Group  
guidelines

---

Confidentiality

---

Time-keeping

---

Equality

---

Taking care of  
yourself

# Mental health issues in academic life

---

- ← As part of your daily work, you might often come in contact with difficult situations where students might present with behaviors which cause you concern.



## Mental distress in academic life

We often deny the psychological difficulties of students, or we approach them with fear or hostility because we don't have the answers to the questions "how should I act?", "what must I do?"

Often those who notice a psychological difficulty in a student don't do anything because they fear the possible responsibility of their actions.

This results in the student existing in a social vacuum, not receiving support and the consequences of the existing problem multiply, as do the fears the student faces about sharing the problem with someone.

The lack of support and its consequences create the ground for symptoms exacerbation.



## Mental distress in academic life

The psychological difficulties have a wide range of expression and the students who face them have the most difficulties in their social integration.

The presence of psychological difficulties and their impact on academic progress might be misconstrued as lack of desire to follow up with difficulties or create fear and insecurity.

To understand what a student with psychological difficulties is experiencing in an academic setting it isn't important to understand the diagnosis or the symptoms they are experiencing, but rather the barriers they might be facing in their participation in academic life.



## Mental distress in academic life

The difficulties might affect many aspects of academic functioning

Whoever notices the changes in the behavior of a student which indicate the worsening of their mental state can act first

It is important to consider the changes we notice and not our guesses regarding the students personal issues or our guesses regarding the possible diagnosis.

This is how we can operate within our capabilities without negative impact on the student



## Mental distress in academic life

It is important to give the student the message that their difficulties are accepted and not interpreted in a negative manner (e.g. as laziness, disrespect, arrogance, lack of capability or interest) and that the student is not alone.

It is important that the student be directed where they can discuss their problem.



## How to recognize when a student may be in distress

- ← Direct approach from a student stating that they are distressed
- ← Concern expressed by friends about a student
- ← Sudden changes in behavior e.g., withdrawal from normal activities
- ← Sudden changes in emotions e.g., tearfulness, irritability, acute anxiety, expression of hopelessness about the future, exaggerated emotional responses
- ← Sudden change in academic performance e.g., lower grades, unexplained absences from classes, loss of motivation for academic work or participation in class
- ← Repeated requests for special consideration e.g., deadline extensions



## How to recognize when a student may be in distress

- ← Being unusually demanding of staff time
- ← Appearing very emotionally dependent on staff
- ← Disruptive behaviors e.g., aggression
- ← Regular signs of substance use e.g., smell of alcohol or drugs
- ← Inability to communicate clearly e.g., disjointed thoughts, personal content in essays that would be raise concerns
- ← Obvious loss of contact with reality e.g., talking about hearing voices or expressing concerning beliefs
- ← Talking about harming self
- ← Talking about harming others



## How to be supportive of students in distress

---

Offer to meet with the student in a private and calm setting (unless you feel it is inappropriate or unsafe to do so)

---

Make clear to the student how much time is available for the meeting

---

State your concerns openly in a non-judgmental way e.g. "I'm concerned about you and would like to try to help"

---

Listen to the student's account of his or her situation in a non-judgmental way

---

Remember how important listening is (being listened to and feeling understood may be enough to resolve some issues)

---

Try to assist the student's identification and articulation of the main issue and decide, together, if possible, on the most appropriate way forward. This may involve offering practical support such as a deadline extension or advice about how to complete an academic assignment. In more serious circumstances the situation may require organizing or facilitating a referral for professional support.



## How to be supportive of students in distress

---

If necessary and appropriate arrange to meet the student again to ensure that assistance has been sought and received.

---

Know the limits and boundaries of what you can offer (your expertise is in your role in the university, and you are not expected to be an expert in dealing with major distress)

---

Always consider checking out your concerns with one of the psychologists in the Student Counselling Service. It can be helpful to get another impartial perspective on the psychological meaning and significance of the signs a student is demonstrating.

---

If you are concerned or if you feel that the student requires more than you can offer explore options for further support for the student e.g., that the student would seek an appointment with a student support professional or an appointment with outside health professional or talk to his or her parents and obtain family support.

---

Get support yourself if required e.g., discuss your concerns with a colleague or access staff support service

# The role of the counselor

- ← R= relate
- ← A= assess
- ← R= refer



# Counselor qualities

- ← Compassionate understanding
  - The ability to be in another's place without having the same feelings.
- Acceptance- unconditional positive regard
  - Acknowledging the other as they are without judgement
- Genuine/ honest
  - The ability to be ourselves in an open and consistent manner



# Body language- non-verbal communication

Words are only a very small part of communication. While you are saying words your body is speaking volumes. Is your body helping or hindering the message you want to get across?

- *Eye contact*
- *Posture*
- *Gestures*
- *Facial expression*
- *Voice tone, volume, rhythm, etc.*
- *Proximity, distance, height*
- *Mouth, chin*
- *How you feel in your body*



# Counselling skills

← **Minimal encouraging**

← **Active listening/reflection**

- listening carefully at what the other person is saying
- actively inform the person that we heard what they are saying expressing our understanding through the use of non verbal use of body language, as well as verbal counseling interventions.

This is a very strong tool!

← **Open-ended questions**

← **Summarizing**

← **Challenging**

# Useful phrases

Could it be that  
I wonder if  
I'm not sure if I'm with  
you but  
Would you buy this  
idea  
What I guess I'm  
hearing is  
Correct me if I'm  
wrong, but  
Is it possible that  
Does it sound  
reasonable that you  
From where I stand  
you  
This is what I think I  
hear you saying  
You appear to be  
feeling  
is somehow sense that  
maybe you feel  
Is there any chance  
that you

Maybe you feel  
Is it conceivable that  
you  
Maybe I'm wrong, but  
Do you feel a little  
Maybe this is a  
longshot, but  
I'm not sure if I'm  
with you, do you mean  
I'm not certain I  
understand, you're  
feeling  
It seems that you  
As I hear it, you  
Let me see if I  
understand, you  
I get the impression  
that  
I guess that you're



# What is NOT supportive

- ← Advise
- ← Explanations
- ← Curiosity questions (how, why, etc.)
- ← Criticizing
- ← Interpretating
- ← Comforting



# What to focus on

- ← Students frame of reference
  - ← What student says about self rather than what they say about other people
  - ← What students says about feelings/ underlying issues rather than incidental facts/details
  - ← Feeling are unclear, difficult, painful in particular
- 



# Caution!

- ← Be cautious not to pressure
  - ← The purpose isn't to gather information but to help
- 



# Roleplays

- ← Three people groups (counselor, counselee and observer)
  - ← Discussion of a problem faced by the counselee
  - ← The observer assesses the verbal and non-verbal communication of the counselor
- 

# When to make a referral to professional support services

- The student explicitly requests a specialist service such as psychiatric, counselling or medical input
- The student acknowledges the problem but is reluctant to discuss it with you
- The student talks about issues that indicate that they or someone they know may be at risk of harm e.g., considering suicide, self-harming or other behaviors
- The student is clearly experiencing a personal crisis e.g., is obviously very distressed or unable to function normally
- The student presents with complex or serious issues that are outside your own areas of knowledge and obviously require ongoing health input e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, serious alcohol or drug abuse, gambling difficulties, physical health problems, addiction, family difficulties, past trauma, financial problems etc.

# When to make a referral to professional support services

- You have been attempting to help the student with no real signs of progress taking place and you don't know how to proceed
- You are feeling overwhelmed by the level of dependence the student is developing on you
- You are feeling overwhelmed by the issues being presented. This may be because you are unsure about how to deal with the problem, you are under significant pressure yourself, or the problem is too close to your own experience and has painful resonances for you. For example, a family situation that is similar to a problem that you yourself have had to deal with such as a recent bereavement. In these situations, it can be difficult to maintain appropriate distance from students' problem in order to be helpful to them

# How to assist reluctant students in accessing professional support

- ← When a student expresses concern about accessing a professional support service you should offer them the opportunity to discuss their reasons for this as in doing so you may be able to deal with their concerns.
- ← This may be something simple that can easily be resolved such as anxiety about making appointments or it may be more complex and need further consideration.
- ← It is important that you openly discuss your reasons for wanting students to access further support. This may be because you are worried about them, feel that you need the advice or opinion of someone else or because you think that a student's academic potential is being thwarted by his or her distress.
- ← Encourage the student to recognize that to get help is a positive sign of personal strength and not a sign of weakness and that students attend student counselling for very many reasons for additional, confidential support when issues arise for them.
- ← Some students may be reluctant to talk to a counsellor or doctor but may be willing to talk to a student adviser or a chaplain. It is important to discuss the various support options available to them

# How to assist reluctant students in accessing professional support

- ← It is important to give the student details of the services available for use now or later.
- ← Students have the right to refuse further support and the right to decide not to attend any Student Support Services.
- ← Sometimes students may agree to seek support and then get anxious about it. They may change their minds about going to see someone so it can be helpful to offer to meet with them again to discuss the issue further and see how they are getting on
- ← It is important that staff do not carry the weight of guilt or worry if students refuse to avail of the options offered to them. Staff also need to mind their own health and well-being and having offered assistance and a number of options, the responsibility for the next step is the student's unless in situations of known extreme risk when confidentiality has to be breached and services contacted in the best interests of the student and other students on campus
- ← If you feel that a student is at risk of harm to self or that others may be at risk, then it is important that you explain that this is the reason for wanting them to access professional support and that even if they decide not to do so that you will need to speak to a professional about your concerns

# How to recognize serious distress

Talking about harming self

Talking about harming others

Expression of sudden extreme or overwhelming emotion e.g., upset, agitation, anxiety, anger, aggression, confusion

Sudden and dramatic changes in a student's emotions e.g., tearfulness, irritability, acute anxiety, expressions of hopelessness about the future, exaggerated emotional responses, suspiciousness

Sudden and dramatic changes in a student's academic performance e.g., lower grades, unexplained absences, loss of motivation, inability to cope with academic demands

Inability to communicate clearly e.g., disjointed thoughts, odd, unusual or personal content in essays that would raise concern

# How to recognize serious distress

Obvious loss of contact with reality e.g., talking about hearing voices, persecutory ideas, extreme suspiciousness, fear of being plotted against, that there are conspiracies against them, that other people can hear their thoughts or generally expressing intense beliefs that appear to be without justification and that concern you

Obvious inability to cope with day-to-day activities

When such extreme moods, emotions, beliefs or behaviors arise it can, however, be helpful to talk to students about other things, for example, if they are eating, sleeping, or if they have any somatic complaints or feelings of being very anxious as students sometimes feel more comfortable having the focus on these aspects of their distress rather than their more extreme emotions. This kind of discussion can also often encourage a student to get these aspects checked out and can be a conduit into getting the help required

Gentle, kind expressions of concern are almost always reassuring



# Confidentiality and its Limits

- ← Never promise a student complete confidentiality
- ← If the student appears at risk of harming him/herself or others or indicates that someone else is at risk of harm (e.g., a child) explain that you will need to contact someone else with your concerns even if the student doesn't wish for this to happen and that you are doing this to help the student because you are concerned
- ← Discuss the situation with your Head of Unit or another appropriate senior colleague and decide who to contact e.g., student's family, family GP, Student Counselling Service, Student Health Service, etc.
- ← If in any doubt, contact the Student Counselling Services

# Looking after your own well- being

- ← It is important that you recognize your own personal and professional limits in supporting students in distress and that you do not take on situations that are outside your own area of competence that may cause undue stress to you. However, you may at times have to deal with situations that lead to you feeling exhausted, overwhelmed or upset. It is important that you acknowledge and recognize these feelings, and, in many cases, you will be able to deal with them by employing your own usual coping strategies e.g., exercise, relaxing activities, speaking to colleagues etc. However, if these coping strategies do not appear to be resolving your feelings, you may want to consider accessing some professional support for yourself.