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The Role of Academic Staff and University Services in Crisis Response

Building a Supportive Community for Students in Distress



Today's Journey

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Understanding the University Context

Why academic environments become first points of contact for students in crisis

03

University Services Network

The second layer of protection and collaborative support systems

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Three Levels of Crisis Response

Recognition, containment, and coordinated response strategies

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Supporting the Supporters

Caring for staff to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue





Universities as Living Communities

Not Hospitals, But Communities

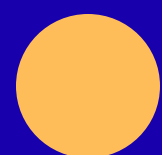
Universities are living communities where students spend significant portions of their daily lives. Unlike clinical settings, the academic environment often becomes the first point of contact when crisis strikes.

When Crisis Occurs

Students may experience various crises: the death of a family member , severe anxiety , or the loss of housing . In these moments, professors and staff often become the first responders.

Common Crisis Situations

- Bereavement and loss
- Mental health challenges
- Housing instability
- Financial difficulties
- Relationship breakdowns
- Academic pressure



Every Staff Member Matters

Every member of staff should know how to recognize distress , react calmly , and refer appropriately . This isn't about becoming a therapist—it's about being a caring human who can guide students to the right support.

"The academic environment becomes a safety net when students need it most."

Level 1

Recognition and First Contact

The Foundation of Crisis Response

Recognizing Warning Signs

Tutors and Professors as Observers

Academic staff are uniquely positioned to notice changes in student behavior. Through regular interactions in classes, tutorials, and office hours, they become familiar with students' typical patterns and can identify when something seems different.

Key Warning Signs to Watch For

Look for sudden absenteeism, withdrawal from participation, or emotional outbursts. Other indicators include declining academic performance, changes in appearance, or expressions of hopelessness.

Behavioral Indicators

Sudden absenteeism

Withdrawal from class

Emotional outbursts

Declining

Changes in appearance

performance
Expressions of distress

Social isolation

Difficulty concentrating

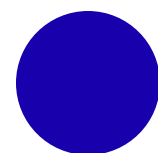
Trust Your Instincts

If something feels "off" about a student's behavior, it's worth paying attention. You don't need to diagnose or solve the problem—simply noticing and caring is the first step toward helping.

The Art of Gentle Approach

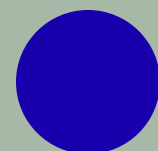


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Observe and Approach Gently

The first step is to observe and approach gently. Create a private, comfortable space for conversation. Your body language should be open and non-threatening. Remember, you're not interrogating—you're expressing care.



Effective Opening Phrases

Use language that communicates care without intrusion:

"I've noticed you've seemed very quiet lately. Would you like to talk about how things are going?"

Respect Boundaries

If a student isn't ready to talk, respect that. Let them know you're available when they are. Sometimes just knowing someone cares is enough to begin the healing process.

Do's of First Contact

- Choose a private, quiet setting
- Use open body language
- Listen more than you speak
- Validate their feelings
- Express genuine concern
- Be patient and non-judgmental

Don'ts of First Contact

- Don't pressure them to talk
- Don't minimize their experience
- Don't offer quick fixes
- Don't promise confidentiality you can't keep
- Don't diagnose or label
- Don't make it about you



Level 2

Containment and Referral

Creating Emotional Safety

Containing, Not Fixing



The Goal: Emotional Safety

When a student shares that they're struggling, the goal is not to fix the situation but to contain it—to provide emotional safety and guide them to the right support. You're a bridge, not a destination.

Useful Referral Phrases

Language that preserves dignity while encouraging professional help:

"I'm really sorry you're going through this. You don't have to face it alone. We have a counselor who can help—would you like me to connect you?"

Preserve Dignity

Students may feel vulnerable or ashamed. Your role is to normalize seeking help and reassure them that reaching out is a sign of strength, not weakness.

What Containment Means

- 1 Listen Without Judgment**
Allow them to express their feelings fully
- 2 Validate Their Experience**
Acknowledge that their feelings are real and understandable
- 3 Offer Hope**
Remind them that help is available and things can improve
- 4 Guide to Resources**
Connect them with professional support services

"You don't have to carry this alone. There are people trained to help, and I'd like to help you reach them."

— Example of supportive referral language





Knowing Your Resources

Key University Resources

Counseling Services

Individual therapy, group counseling, crisis intervention

Health Services

Medical care, psychiatric services, wellness programs

Disability Services

Accommodations, support for mental health disabilities

International Student Services

Cultural adjustment support, visa-related stress

Housing & Residential Life

Housing instability, roommate conflicts

Crisis Response Team

24/7 emergency support, threat assessment

Build Your Mental Map

Tutors should always know the names and contact information of the university's mental health services or crisis coordinators. Having this information readily available makes referrals smoother and more effective.

Keep Information Accessible

Store contact details in an easily accessible place—your phone, desk drawer, or syllabus. When a student is in crisis, you don't want to be searching for phone numbers.

Familiarize Yourself with Services

Understand what each service offers so you can make appropriate referrals. Know the difference between counseling services, disability support, and crisis intervention.



Level 3

Coordinated Response

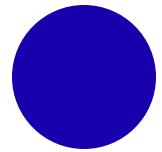


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Crisis Response Protocol



When Immediate Action is Needed

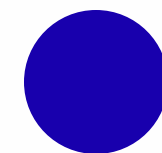
For severe crises —such as panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, or violent behavior—immediate coordination is vital. These situations require a structured response to ensure everyone's safety.

The Four Essential Steps

- 1 **Notify Student Support**
Contact counseling office or student affairs
- 2 **Contact Emergency Services**
If safety is at immediate risk
- 3 **Inform Crisis Team**
Alert designated supervisor or response team
- 4 **Document Respectfully**
Record event confidentially and professionally

Severe Crisis Indicators

- Suicidal thoughts or self-harm
- Panic attacks or severe anxiety
- Violent or threatening behavior
- Psychotic symptoms or delusions
- Severe substance intoxication
- Medical emergencies

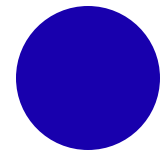


Emergency Contacts

- Keep these numbers readily available:
- Campus Security: [Your number]
- Crisis Hotline: [Your number]
- Emergency Services: 911

Remember: Your safety is also important. Never put yourself in physical danger.

Understanding Confidentiality Limits



Confidentiality Has Limits

Confidentiality has limits when safety is threatened. It's appropriate to share information with authorized professionals if a student is at risk of harming themselves or others.

When to Break Confidentiality

- Imminent risk of self-harm
- Threats to harm others
- Child or elder abuse
- Court orders or legal requirements



Share with Authorized Professionals Only

Information should only be shared with those who need to know to ensure safety—counselors, crisis teams, medical professionals, or law enforcement when necessary.

Best Practices for Documentation

1

Be Factual

Record observable behaviors, not interpretations

2

Include Date and Time

Document when the incident occurred

3

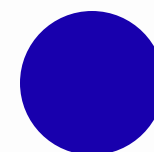
Note Actions Taken

Record what you did and who you contacted

4

Maintain Confidentiality

Store records securely and share appropriately



Transparency Builds Trust

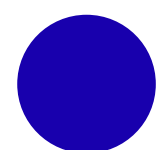
When possible, inform students about the limits of confidentiality upfront. This transparency helps maintain trust while ensuring safety.



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The University Services Network

Services Ecosystem



The Second Layer of Protection

University services—such as psychological counseling centers , disability offices , and international student units –form the second layer of protection. Their collaboration with academic staff ensures comprehensive support.



Collaboration is Key

Collaboration between academic staff and services ensures that emotional support and academic flexibility go hand in hand . When everyone works together, students receive seamless care.



Academic Flexibility

For example, a grieving student may need adjusted deadlines or temporary suspension of attendance requirements . Coordinating with academic services makes these accommodations possible.

Counseling Center

Mental health support, therapy, crisis intervention

Disability Services

Accommodations, accessibility support

International Student Unit

Cultural support, visa guidance

Health Services

Medical care, psychiatric services

Housing Services

Residential support, housing stability

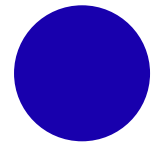
Financial Aid

Emergency funds, financial counseling



Supporting the Supporters

Self-Care Strategies



Supporting Students is Emotionally Demanding

Supporting students in distress can be emotionally demanding. Staff may experience secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout if they don't receive adequate support themselves.



Setting Boundaries

It's important for staff to recognize their own limits and set healthy boundaries. You can't pour from an empty cup—taking care of yourself enables you to better care for others.



Peer Support

Connect with colleagues who understand



Professional Support

Access counseling or supervision



Physical Wellness

Exercise, sleep, and nutrition matter



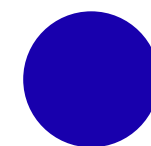
Mindfulness Practice

Meditation, breathing exercises



Work-Life Balance

Set clear boundaries between work and home



Recognizing Burnout Signs

Watch for: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, reduced efficacy, difficulty sleeping, or dreading work. These are signals that you need support.

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." – Audre Lorde



Creating a Safety Net

Effective crisis response is not about quick fixes—it is about coordination ,
clarity , and compassion .

When tutors, academic staff, and university services work together, they create a safety net
that allows students not only to survive crises but to recover and thrive.

***"In our next lecture, we will address how to manage these sensitive situations ethically
and confidentially, maintaining trust while respecting professional boundaries."***

