

# Responding to students in difficulty

## A guide for advisers and other UEA Staff



## Acknowledgments

This guide has drawn from the findings of two HEFCE-funded projects undertaken at the Universities of Leicester and Nottingham and from documents developed as part of these projects. The Dean of Students' Office is grateful to these institutions for their generosity in making the results of their work available to the UK higher education sector.

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### Key contact numbers

Dean of Students' Office: 01603 592892

Mental Health Coordinator: 01603 593032

Counselling Service: 01603 592651

## Introduction

There is evidence from across the higher education sector of an increasing proportion of students who experience mental health difficulties, or encounter problems that are serious enough to have an adverse impact on their ability to achieve their academic and personal potential. This guide has been written to provide information and guidance for advisers and other UEA staff who, in the course of their work, encounter students who are experiencing serious personal difficulties.

The guide aims to:

- raise awareness of the kinds of difficulties that students may experience
- provide practical advice to help staff respond effectively and appropriately
- identify the most appropriate sources of advice for staff and of guidance and support for students.

## Student difficulties

Most of us experience difficulties of a personal or psychological nature at some time in our lives. These are usually an unpleasant but relatively normal aspect of human existence, but they can at times become so overwhelming that they impede our functioning. For students with deadlines to meet and crucial examinations to prepare for, such difficulties can have a very serious impact on their ability to sustain academic progress.

Students may experience periods of physical or mental illness, serious family problems, bereavement or the break-up of close personal relationships. There may be students who find the transition to university and separation from family and friends particularly difficult. Students can get into difficulties through the use of alcohol or recreational drugs, or they may be physically or sexually attacked or abused, or have an unplanned pregnancy.

The intensive periods of study required for successful completion of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree course can create their own particular pressures and these may exacerbate other problems, or even become the problem itself. Students can become very anxious about the standards of work expected from them. They may find that they do not have the appropriate study or time management skills needed to be successful at university. Some students who have previously been high achievers may put themselves under considerable pressure to try to remain at the top in a more competitive environment.

Snapshots of the impact of a wide range of study and personal issues on the stress levels of higher education students were obtained from extensive surveys undertaken at the University of Leicester in 1998 and 2001. Over 2700 students, most of whom were second year undergraduates, responded to the survey; Table 1 summarises some of the results that emerged from this study.

**Table 1: Some of the causes of concern in an HE student population**

Issue/concern	%*
<b>University, course and study issues</b>	
Ability to manage and complete course work	60
Dealing with severely inadequate finances	59
Ability to set priorities, make decisions and manage time	58
Dealing with concerns regarding study skills	52
Getting used to university life	41
Speaking in groups	40
Fulfilling parental expectations	30
<b>Personal concerns</b>	
Improving my self-esteem and confidence	45
Relating to friends	42
Dealing with concerns about illness in my family	39
Coping with sadness, depression or mood changes	38
The death of a significant person	37
Understanding and coping with loneliness	32
General worry about my health	24
Managing anxieties, phobias or panic attacks	23
Dealing with concerns about divorce/separation in family	21
Coping with racism	13
Dealing with concerns about drug use	13
Dealing with concerns about alcohol use	13
Concerns about a recent experience of sexual assault/harassment	7
Experiences of homophobia	5

\* Percentages indicate the proportion of the survey respondents (N = 2739) rating each issue as having a crucially or very important impact on their stress levels (see Grant 2002).

The University of Leicester survey results suggest that many students find aspects of both university life, including their financial position, and academic study very stressful. At the time of the 2001 survey, 25 percent of the respondents were working during term time, but we suspect that this proportion is very much higher at UEA now, particularly with the introduction of higher fees. It is perhaps no coincidence that time management and managing and completing course work were major concerns.

The Leicester results indicate the extent to which life events such as illness, bereavement, sexual abuse, racism and homophobia were affecting relatively small proportions, but nonetheless significant numbers, of students. The research also demonstrated increased concern and higher stress levels amongst particular student groups, including international students in general, and both home and international students from ethnic minorities. For example, fifty six percent of students from an ethnic minority background reported high levels of concern about fulfilling parental expectations compared to only twenty five percent of those from a Caucasian background. Other findings relate to the impact of the UK campus drinking culture on abstainers. Higher proportions of non-drinkers than of drinkers reported high levels of stress in respect of getting used to university, loneliness and relating to friends (Grant 2004).

The student surveys also gave a picture of the overall psychological health of the student population. The research suggested that at any one time, approximately 10-15% of students may have psychological health problems, most commonly depression, that might benefit from professional intervention; this is similar to the proportion that would be expected in the overall population of young adults. While some such students would have been aware of their difficulties and receiving ongoing support and/or treatment, for others, the problem may not yet be diagnosed and treated, or an earlier problem may have reoccurred. For further information about the research undertaken at the University of Leicester and the survey results, see Grant (2002; 2004).

## The pastoral role of university staff

Most students thrive and make good progress despite the stresses and strains of their university experiences and personal lives. However, high levels of stress and anxiety can be very debilitating or may exacerbate pre-existing health or other difficulties. When a student's problems block effective learning or impact on his or her ability to function normally, action may need to be taken by those who are in regular contact with that student. Universities and their employees do not have an *in loco parentis* role in relation to students, but they do have an important duty of care. At UEA one of the key elements in the discharge of this duty is its student advising system. UEA's commitment to this system was reaffirmed recently through an extensive review that resulted in a final report approved by Senate in March 2005. This report is available from the Learning, Teaching and Quality Office website at: [www.uea.ac.uk/l tq](http://www.uea.ac.uk/l tq).

If a School's advising system is effective, a student's adviser may be one of the first to notice his or her difficulties and be best placed to provide initial advice and support. Recent UEA research showed that the primary sources of help for students are their peers and their advisers (Anderson and Goodall 2002: 24), mirroring findings from the Leicester survey (Grant 2002: 95). Other School teaching, administrative and support staff members, and all those, including cleaning and security staff, who encounter students through their day-to-day activities can also play an important role in helping students, particularly by encouraging them to seek advice from UEA's central student services. While many students will find their way to these services without referral, others, and especially those who are feeling depressed, distressed or at a loss, may find it difficult to approach those they have not met before and may need the encouragement of someone they know first.

## Identifying difficulties

The first time academic staff become aware that a student is experiencing difficulties can be when a student is persistently absent from lectures or classes, fails to meet course deadlines or when his or her coursework marks drop significantly. Sometimes a student's problems may lead them to doing too much work, but ineffectively, rather than too little and this can also be a cause of concern.

**There is also a number of other warning signs that may be apparent to anyone who comes into contact with a student. These include:**

- behaviour that indicates that a student is persistently tense, sad or miserable
- loud, agitated or aggressive behaviour
- very withdrawn or unusually quiet behaviour
- erratic or unpredictable behaviour
- unkempt personal appearance, significant weight changes or decline in personal hygiene
- signs of fatigue, exhaustion and lack of energy
- limited concentration and inability to make decisions
- problems maintaining academic and social relationships
- visible bruising, cuts or scars.

Some students will tell you that there is a problem, or may readily respond if you express concern. Others may conceal their difficulties so successfully that the nature of their problems is difficult to detect. Many students feel embarrassed about their problems or concerned about the consequences of telling someone in their School, or they may hope that their problems will just go away if they do nothing.

If you are worried about a student it may be appropriate to ask colleagues or the student's friends if they also have concerns about their wellbeing. You can also seek advice from the Dean of Students' Office or the University Counselling Service, whose staff, while they will not be able to breach confidentiality, are happy to talk in general terms to anyone with worries about a student. If a student appears to have gone missing without reason or explanation and attempts to contact them draw a blank, you should contact the Dean of Students' Office.

*Figure 1 summarises the key issues raised in this section.*

## How should you respond?

The first step would normally be to talk to the student in order to find out more about their situation. You may discover that they are already seeing a counsellor, the student Mental Health Co-ordinator in the Dean of Students' Office, a doctor, or other Student Services staff and talking to the student and showing your concern may reassure him or her and allay your own worries. If you are not reassured by your conversation with the student, or you are unable to get the student to talk to you, then you need to consider how best to proceed. There are two main courses of action open to you: point the student to an appropriate source of help or offer support yourself.

### Identifying sources of help and advice

Within Student Services at UEA there is a number of specialist units with different areas of expertise. If you talk to students about their concerns and you are aware of the range of provision available you should be able to guide them to an appropriate service. Information to help you is given in the leaflet *Student Services at UEA* and the *Further information and resources* section at the end of this guide. Figure 3 gives some examples of the difficulties that students experience and the appropriate service(s) for student referral or for advice to help you respond appropriately. If you remain unsure, seek advice from the Dean of Students' Office.

It is important to remember that our students come with a very wide range of backgrounds and experiences and their reactions to difficulties may not be those that you predict. They may also feel more or less uncomfortable about seeking help from particular people or services. For example, some international students may be uncomfortable about the idea of counselling and reluctant to seek help from the Counselling Service, even if it seems to you to be the most appropriate place to which to refer them. If a student has already established a good relationship with any of the key student services, this might provide the most appropriate initial referral point - each service is very experienced in cross-referral if this becomes necessary.

What is most important is that you encourage students to make contact with the service that is acceptable to them. You should encourage them to take the initiative by contacting the service themselves - those who seek help independently are more likely to derive benefit than those who are pushed into doing so.

There may be times when a student finds it very difficult to make the first move, particularly when he or she is very depressed. In such circumstances it may be helpful to take a more active role by telephoning or emailing the appropriate service to ask for an appointment, preferably when the student is in the room with you. Afterwards, you could check with the student that they attended the appointment, and if, in the event, they did not feel able to attend, you could offer further encouragement and/or seek advice yourself about any other steps that might be appropriate.

If the student is agreeable, make a note of his or her concerns and difficulties and ensure that this is filed in their confidential file.

## Offering support yourself

When you have talked to the student about their problems, you may feel that you can offer the appropriate support yourself. In many cases, all that is required is to listen, provide reassurance and offer practical advice. Do not panic just because a student bursts into tears: tears are a reaction to an intense feeling but do not necessarily indicate an urgent need for professional help or an underlying problem that is of very serious concern. A few minutes of your time and your reassurance and the offer to the student that they can come to see you again may be all that is required.

Providing emotional support to a student can be very demanding, so before you offer to help make sure that you have enough time, that you have the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding and that you know to whom to turn for advice if you need it. It may be appropriate to offer support to help the student to manage their course work, but also to make it clear that you are not able to offer help with their personal or psychological problems. It is often helpful to be clear about how much time you are able to offer and by what methods you are happy for the student to contact you. We advise against giving students home contact details. If you feel that it might be important for a student to be able to contact someone out of normal office hours, the best number to offer is the **24 hour Security number (01603 592352)**; Security staff will, if appropriate, contact Dean of Students' staff on behalf of the student. Nightline (01603 503504) also offer a confidential listening and advice service for students each night during semesters.

It is very important both for your sake and that of the student that you do not let yourself get out of your depth or lose sight of the boundaries of your role. Your help and support can be both valuable and very important in helping a student to overcome their difficulties, but you are neither a surrogate parent nor a student services professional. Student services staff members have the benefit of specialist training and very broad experience to guide students appropriately, and to support them in learning how to manage their own lives.

Counsellors, doctors and DOS staff may sometimes contact a student's adviser (normally with the student's permission) for information, or discuss with the adviser ways of helping a student to manage their academic work during an emotional crisis or period of illness. In many cases a partnership approach can be very effective, particularly if the student is willing for information to be shared in this way.

## Friends and class mates

It is important to remember that a student's difficulties can have an impact on his or her friends, who may be carrying a significant burden, particularly if the student in question is seriously ill, self-harming or threatening suicide. You may be in a position to talk to the friends and to encourage them to seek help for themselves from the Counselling Service or the Dean of Students' Office. Students who have episodes of mental illness can sometimes disrupt lectures or tutorials making it difficult for other students to concentrate. If this happens it is crucial to take prompt action to address the problem in order to protect all involved.

## Responding to emergencies

Very occasionally a student exhibits behaviour that gives rise to very considerable concern. There may be evidence of:

- suicidal tendencies
- risk of serious harm to self or others
- serious physical illness
- alcohol or substance abuse or addiction
- hearing voices or holding fixed irrational beliefs
- a complete lack of functioning academically or in other areas of life.

In such cases the need for intervention on behalf of the student may be urgent. If the student will accept help then refer them to their GP (in most cases this will be the University Medical Service) or, if s/he is already a client, to the Counselling Service or the Mental Health Co-ordinator (DOS). You can either make an urgent appointment on the student's behalf, and, if appropriate, walk with them to the relevant office, or support him or her in referring themselves, perhaps by allowing them to phone from your office and then checking later that they have kept the appointment.

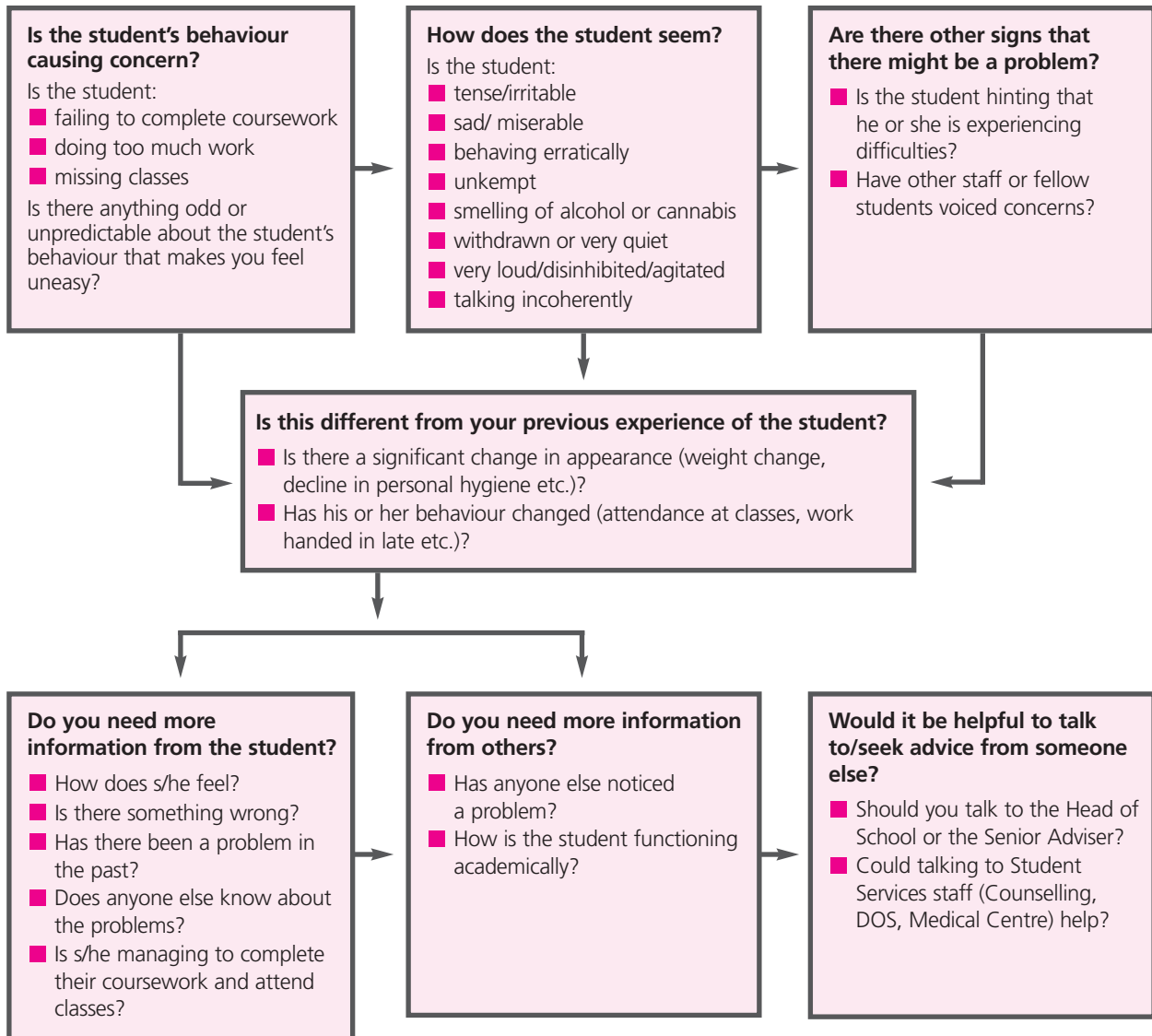
If the student will not accept help, then you should phone the Medical Centre, the Counselling Service or the Dean of Students' Office to seek advice. In the very rare situations when you believe that there is imminent danger of the student harming themselves or others, contact Security immediately and ask them to call an ambulance or the police. If you decide to contact the emergency services directly, also inform the Security Lodge so that they can direct the police or ambulance to the appropriate part of the campus when they arrive. If you have any anxieties about your own personal safety, make sure that you are not left alone with the student.

## When a student will not accept help

Except in the emergency circumstances described above, there is little that can or should be done if a student is not prepared to talk to you about his or her problems or to seek help from others. However, it is good practice to make sure that there is a note of your concerns in the appropriate School files, and that senior staff, including the Senior Adviser, are aware that there may be a problem. It would also be helpful to remind the student about the services available to them and, if you have one available, give them a copy of *Student Services at UEA*.

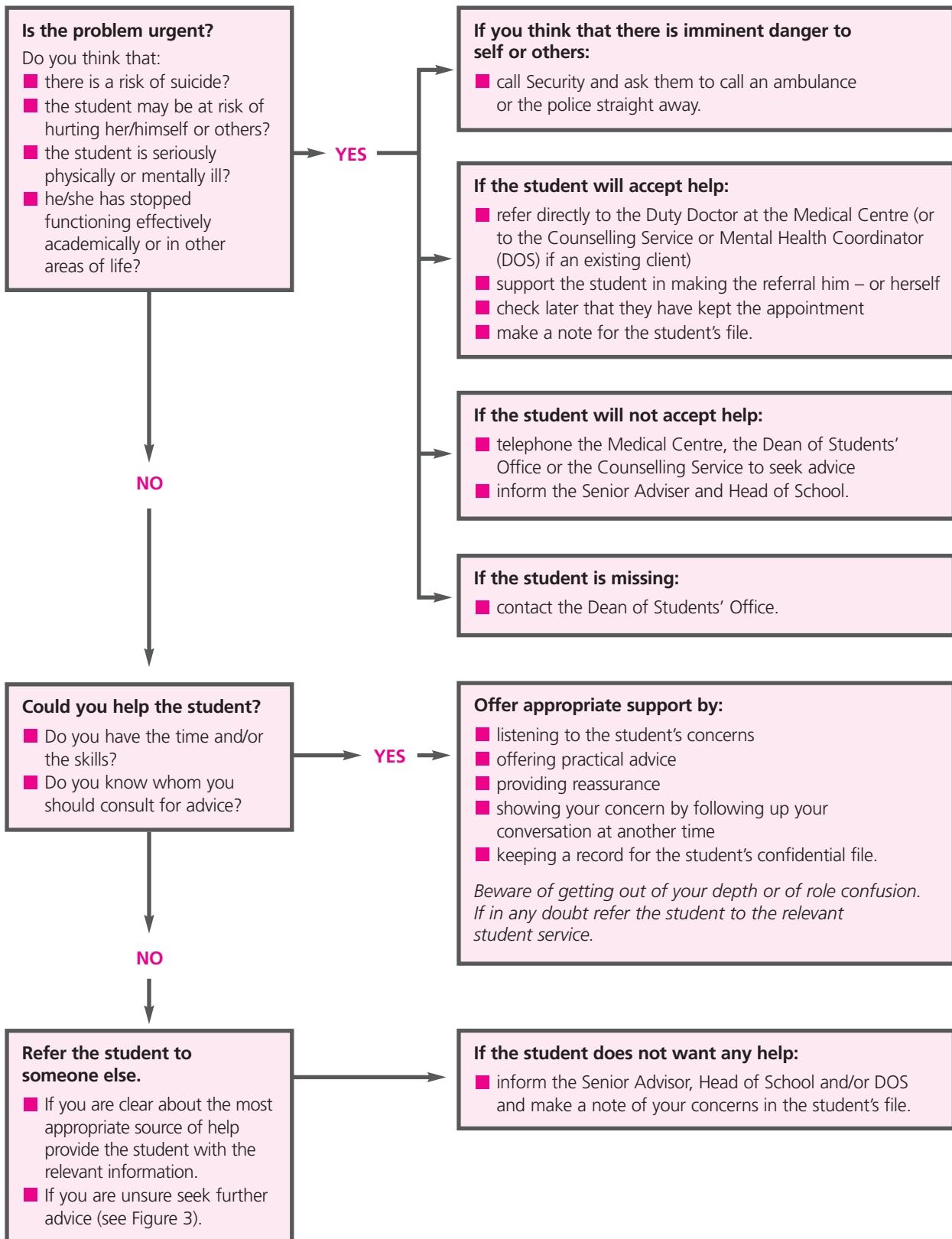
*Figures 2 and 3 summarise the main issues arising from this section.*

**Figure 1: How do you know there is a problem?**

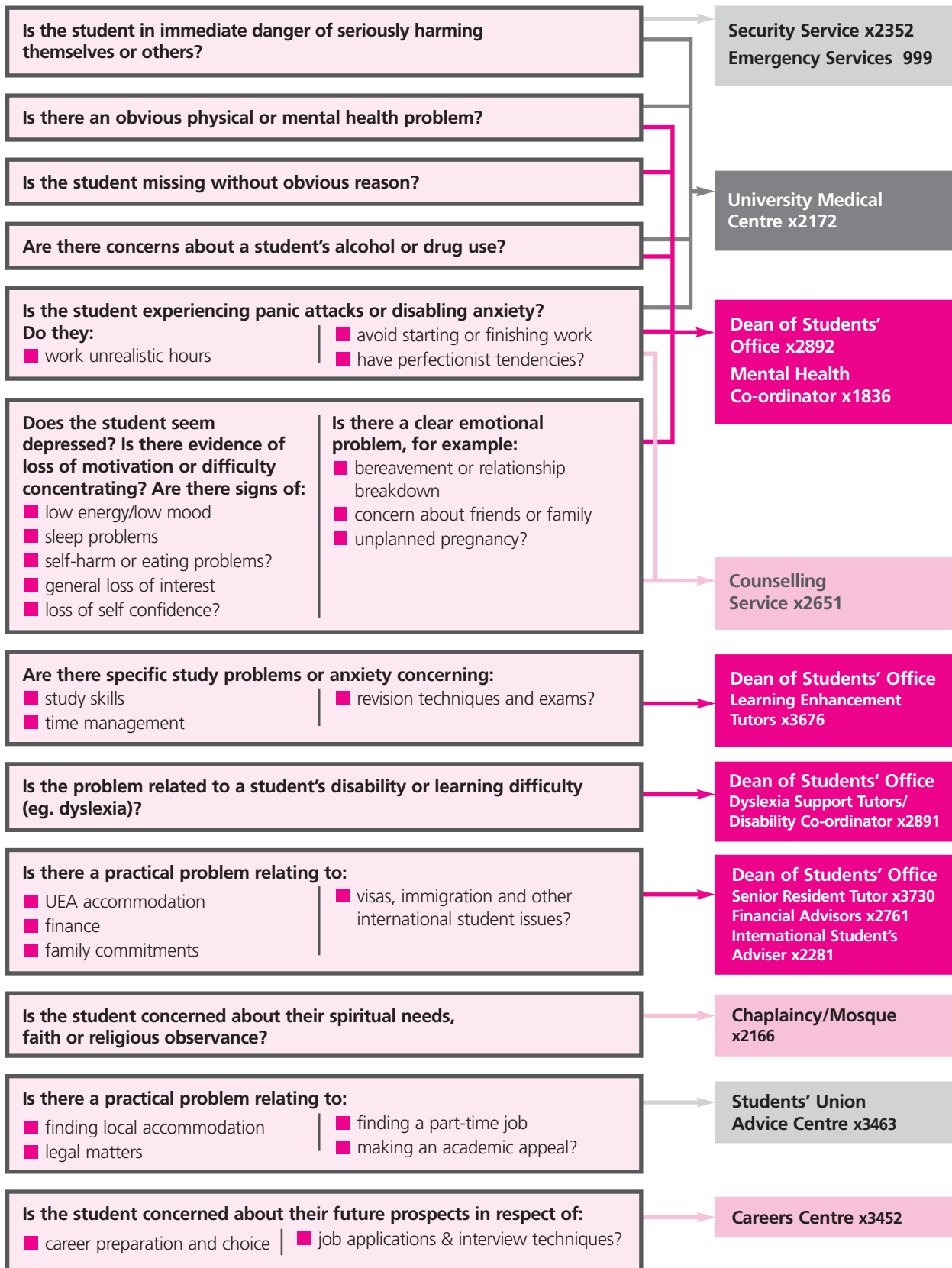


**Next steps: see Figures 2 & 3**

**Figure 2: What is the most appropriate response?**



**Figure 3: What is the most appropriate source of help?**



If you are in any doubt about the most appropriate service please contact the Dean of Students (x 2892).

## Confidentiality

This guide has suggested that it may be helpful for those concerned about a student to share their concerns with other colleagues, or even talk to a student's friends. Advisers and other staff do not have a duty to maintain strict confidentiality within the University in respect of students and a student's confidential file should include a record of any important information from any relevant source. Such information might prove crucial in helping to gain a full understanding of a student's difficulties, or might be used to support a request for intercalation or for extenuating circumstances to be taken into account at an exam board. However, it would normally only be used with the student's permission. It is very important that students feel that they can trust staff and talk freely to them and it is both expected and desirable that staff treat all personal information about a student with discretion.

Medical doctors, counsellors and clergy are bound by professional codes of practice to maintain confidentiality in most circumstances. Other student services staff at UEA will only pass on personal information about individual students when they judge it to be in a student's best interests, but will normally endeavour to obtain the student's permission first. However, student services staff members are happy to discuss particular situations in general terms and to offer advice to advisers and other colleagues.

Advisers and other School staff are sometimes contacted by concerned parents, asking for information about their sons or daughters. You may be able to offer a sympathetic ear but in most circumstances personal information about a student must not be disclosed to anyone outside the University, including parents, without the student's permission. You can offer to talk to the student and encourage them to get in touch with their parents or offer to forward a letter from the parent to the student concerned. Some parents may not be happy with this response, but it is important to remember that students have a right to privacy and they may have good reason for not wishing their parents, close family members or partners to have information about themselves, or even confirmation that they are a student at UEA. In general, any offer to pass on information should come with the proviso 'if they are a student at this University'.

**For further information about confidentiality contact the DOS office or consult the Student Services Confidentiality Policy, which is available on the Student Services website: [www.uea.ac.uk/students](http://www.uea.ac.uk/students)**

## Summary

Student life is inherently stressful but moderate amounts of stress can be motivating and energising. Very high levels of stress, anxiety and distress, however, can be debilitating and impede academic development and performance. University staff can play a very important role in helping students to cope with the stress of their lives and overcome their difficulties.

Often just listening to a student and showing that you are concerned is all that is required to alleviate an acute but temporary crisis. By being aware of the symptoms and behaviours that are indicative of serious emotional or psychological distress, and of the appropriate support services available to students, you can also help to prevent a student's problems escalating or leading to academic failure. Prompt and appropriate referral can also help to minimise the impact of a student's difficulties on his or her fellow students and friends.

## Further information and resources

**The Dean of Students' Office** offers advice to any member of staff concerned about the wellbeing of their students. The Mental Health Coordinator, who is based in the Dean of Student's Office, has particular expertise in mental health issues and is happy to talk to any member of staff with concerns regarding the wellbeing of students. The DOS Office can also organise training and information sessions on topics including mental health, disability and cultural awareness for groups of staff.

For further information contact the Dean of Students, Annie Grant: x2892; email [dos@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dos@uea.ac.uk) or the Mental Health Co-ordinator, Beckie Davies: x1836; email [beckie.davies@uea.ac.uk](mailto:beckie.davies@uea.ac.uk)

**The Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED)** also organises workshops on mental health and disability awareness for Advisers and other staff members.

For further information contact CSED on x3039 or consult their web pages at [www.uea.ac.uk/csed](http://www.uea.ac.uk/csed)

**UEA resources for students and staff.** The leaflet *Student Services at UEA* gives an outline of the wide range of information, advice and guidance services available to students and is available from the DOS Office.

Further information can also be found on the Student Services website [www.uea.ac.uk/students](http://www.uea.ac.uk/students) together with an electronic version of this guide.

**Self help resources.** There is a wide range of topic-based self-help resources for UEA students. Current topics addressed include:

- exam stress
- homesickness
- procrastination
- perfectionism
- concerns about friends.

There are also resources available on academic study skills, academic writing and maths and statistics topics. All these resources are continually reviewed and further developed and are available in both paper and web-based formats; paper copies can be obtained from the Dean of Student's Office and the Counselling Service; electronic versions can be downloaded from the Student Services website.

**Community resources.** Sometimes students prefer to seek help from external providers, including telephone help lines and internet sites. The Dean of Students' Office keeps an up-to-date list of key agencies and resources available in paper format in the open access area of the DOS Office. There are links in the *Health and wellbeing* section of the Student Services website.

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