DEALING WITH STUDENT DISTRESS

Distressed, disturbed or threatening behaviours

Occasionally, you as an ANU staff member may encounter students who are distressed or disturbed or have behaviour, which is threatening or difficult to manage. This brochure from the University Counselling Centre provides general information on how to deal with specific kinds of distressed or disturbed student behaviour.

Support for Staff

There are several resources for ANU staff in these circumstances:

1) Internal support from within the College, Centre or Administrative Unit. In particular, it may be useful to approach the person who is designated as the ‘Prescribed Authority’ (PA) in your area.

2) Support / advice from services within the University including:
   - Counselling Centre x52442;
   - Health Centre x53598
   - Adviser to Staff x53616 or 52442
   - Disability Services Unit x55036
   - Academic Skills and Learning Centre x52972
   - International Education Office x54643
   - Security x52249
   - Registrar x53634
   - Deputy Registrar x 70110
   - Dean of Students x54184
   - Legal Office x58489
   - Human Resources x53349

You may discuss any concerns about students with these ANU services / individuals without breaching privacy legislation. However, University Counselling Centre, Health Centre and Disability Services Unit staff are not in a position to exchange information they may hold about a student without the student’s permission, unless there is a serious and imminent threat to the life or health of the individual, or serious threat to another person.

The Counselling Centre can offer

- Individual support/advice to you on how to respond to the student’s behaviour
- Strategies to assist you with referring a student to the Counselling Centre, or elsewhere for support
- If you come directly to the Counselling Centre, in the company of the student, we may speak with the student (alone or sometimes with you present if it is likely to be helpful)
- In an emergency we may be able to see the student at the Centre, although if the situation involves an imminent threat to life or health of anyone, we would
advise you to contact the Police on 000 or the ACT Mental Health Crisis Assessment team (1800 629 354), or we would contact them on your behalf. It may also be appropriate in some instances for you to contact ANU Security.  

The Counselling Centre is open Monday to Friday 9am - 1pm and 2pm - 4.45pm. Each weekday, the Counselling Centre holds several half hour appointments for emergencies, which are taken on a first in, first served basis on the day, so students can usually be seen within 24 hours of a referral by you. We are located upstairs in Building 18 (next door to the Purple Pickle café).  

University Procedures  
Not all situations are best resolved through counselling. Some behaviours may be disruptive to the broader University community (eg conduct of tutorials, behaviour towards other students or staff on campus), requiring a coordinated University response. Some behaviours may be disciplinary issues under the ANU rules. Some behaviours may be illegal and require the involvement of Police. If you are in doubt about which is the appropriate course of action, you could contact the Dean/Director of your area or the Head of the Counselling Centre (x52442) or the Adviser to Staff (x53616) or the Dean of Students (x 54184).  
Relevant procedural information can be found in the following:  
- Student disciplinary rules  
- Student Complaint Resolution  
  Guidelines on managing difficult students  

Useful information about privacy and discrimination issues is available in:  
- Privacy policy  
- Disclosure of information by students with a disability or illness  
  [http://policies.anu.edu.au/policies/disclosure_of_information_by_students_with_a_disability_or_illness/policy](http://policies.anu.edu.au/policies/disclosure_of_information_by_students_with_a_disability_or_illness/policy)  
- Frequently Asked Questions on Privacy  

DEALING WITH SPECIFIC PROBLEMS  
Being at University is a unique and challenging experience. Most students experience stress during their University career, and while many cope successfully, others may struggle at times.  

The Distressed Student  
Students may be distressed for many reasons, including poor health; psychological problems like anxiety or depression; family difficulties; relationship problems; pressures of juggling work and study; trauma; grief and drug/alcohol use.  

If a student approaches you and is showing signs of distress, here are some responses to consider:  

**DO:**  
- Listen carefully and compassionately  
- Remain calm
• Let them briefly describe feelings and thoughts (obviously within reason, given your role). Often this relieves a great deal of pressure
• Acknowledge their distress and try to repeat back to the student the essence of what you have been told
• Ask if the student is receiving any help with their concerns and mention availability of student support services
• Consider the option of allowing the student more time for essays or consideration during examinations (this may be the main reason they have come to see you)
• Encourage the student, as much as possible, to make his/her own decisions
• Be clear about your time constraints, and set limits if the student appears to be asking for ongoing support from you
• If student is very distressed or expressing suicidal thoughts, take the student’s concerns seriously. Advise them that you think it would be best if you could talk with the Counselling Centre about these concerns, and try to do this while the student is present.

DON’T:
• Be afraid of tears. They are a natural way of releasing pent-up emotion
• Try to solve the student’s problem for them
• Overwhelm the student with ideas and information
• Be intrusive
• Be argumentative with the student
• Become their main source of support, that is, don’t say ‘come and see me whenever you are distressed’. This is not your role.
• Make well intentioned but insensitive comments like ‘cheer up’, ‘things will get better’, ‘it can’t be that bad’.

The Disturbed Student
Some students may develop complex problems while they are at University. Here are some examples: They may be self-harming or misusing alcohol and drugs. They may have a mental health problem where they appear to lose contact with reality, and have illogical, confused and disorganised thoughts. They may develop ‘over-the-top’ behaviours, appearing elated, excited, over-confident and over-familiar. They may appear very oversensitive or suspicious and mistrustful over minor oversights or insignificant occurrences. Their behaviour may appear strange or inappropriate to the situation, for example, talking to invisible people. Many students in these circumstances do not see themselves as needing help.

DO:
• Respond as calmly as you can. Frequently mentally disorganised students will mention something like missing sleep, feeling scared, having trouble thinking, self-harming. Such comments can give you a natural opening for suggesting that they seek counselling or medical attention to help feel safer or sleep better – feel more like themselves.
• Acknowledge your concerns and state that you can see that they need help, for example, ‘It seems very hard for you to integrate all these things that are happening, and I am concerned about you. I think you may need some help to sort this out’.
• Seek advice from the Counselling Centre or colleagues if the student is sending disorganised, disturbing letters or email
• Consider raising the student’s behaviour with the relevant ‘Prescribed Authority’ in your College, Centre or Administrative Unit, as 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 after the problem has become repetitive or escalated.

If you become alarmed:
• Keep at a safe distance
• Explain calmly that you will call Security, if you feel the situation is getting out of hand
• Call Security if the situation does not settle down

DON'T:
• Argue or try to convince the student of the irrationality of their thinking. This will generally make them defend their perceptions more.
• Play along – for example, don’t say, ‘Yes, I can hear the voices too’, or agree with mistaken or inappropriate ideas
• Encourage further revelations of disorganised thinking
• Chastise or lecture
• Demand, command, order or raise your voice
• Expect customary emotional responses

The Threatening Student
Threatening behaviours may involve: verbal aggression, harassment, bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination, threats to self-harm or suicide if certain conditions are not met, stalking, physical violence or property damage, threats to kill or harm others or so on. There may be a single incident, or a series of incidents.
Threatening behaviour should always be taken seriously.
There may be many reasons for a person acting in these ways – stress; feeling a situation is beyond their control; a belief their behaviour is justified or has been forced upon them; limited understanding of the impact of such behaviour on others, sometimes due to mental illness or the effects of drugs; or a misuse of power.
However, reflecting on the motives for the behaviour is NOT relevant in the face-to-face situation where safety for all is the primary consideration.
DO:
• Make safety the priority. Do not put yourself at risk for the sake of property. Be ready to withdraw from the situation if aggression escalates. Be conscious of whether there are others who may assist you. If you know in advance that a potentially threatening student is likely to be meeting with you, ensure colleagues are aware and available in the event of any difficulty, or have one accompany you at the meeting
• Stay calm. Talking in a slow, low voice can help to defuse a situation. Using the person’s name can be helpful
• Listen to the student’s concerns
• Acknowledge their frustration (anger, distress) and try to repeat back to the student the essence of what you have been told
• Invite the person to a quiet, but preferably public, space to discuss their concerns
• Indicate what you can and can’t do, and offer other suggestions for how you may help them
• Negotiate for time to consider your response
• Avoid threatening, humiliating or intimidating responses

If you become alarmed:
• Keep at a safe distance
• Explain calmly that you will call Security, if you feel the situation is getting out of hand
• Call Security if the situation does not settle down

DON’T:
• Get into an argument or shouting match
• Become hostile or punitive
• Press for explanations or reasons for their behaviour
• Mislead the student, or make promises you won’t want or be able to keep
• Look away and not deal with the situation
• Touch the person or block access to the door

After the Disturbing or Threatening Incident
Any disturbing or threatening incident requires follow-up action. The aim is to develop strategies that might prevent an ongoing pattern of behaviour by the student that interferes with his/her studies or causes distress for you and others on campus.
Follow-up may involve both informal and formal actions:
• For the safety of those in the immediate area, you should advise your academic supervisor or unit manager about the incident ASAP. It may also be appropriate to advise the relevant ‘Prescribed Authority’ in your College, Centre or Administrative Unit.
• Because events like this can be distressing, it may be useful to convene a meeting of those affected by the incident. The meeting would provide an opportunity to discuss what happened and plan how to manage possible future incidents.
• Staff particularly affected by the situation are able to seek support through the University’s Adviser to Staff (x 53616) or the Employee Assistance program http://info.anu.edu.au/hr/salaries_and_conditions/Staff_Counselling.asp
• Occupational Health and Safety in the University requires a formal report of any threatening incident on the appropriate form (Incident Report) within 24 hours. http://policies.anu.edu.au/forms/incident_notification_form_ohs/form
This report becomes the formal record of the event. You may choose to maintain additional brief factual notes of the event in a personal diary or store them in the ‘Prescribed Authority’s’ confidential files.
• Security and/or the Police and Legal Office may need to be advised if there is concern that there may be further incidents, or if the incident was illegal or seriously endangered others.

Student support/case management/safety plans may be put in place through:
• Contact with the Dean of Students. See the Protocol entitled Disruptive Behaviour: A Coordinated ANU Response. Guidelines on managing difficult students (www.anu.edu.au/counsel/adviser_to_staff/index.php). Services that may become involved in these processes include the Counselling and Health Centres, Legal Office, the Disability Services Unit, Academic Skills and Learning Centre, Halls/Colleges and Security.

Disciplinary procedures may be commenced by discussion with the relevant ‘Prescribed Authority’ in your Faculty, Centre or Administrative Unit.