



# Student Counselling

A Guide for Staff Supporting Students



Some students will talk relatively easily and openly to you about their difficulties while others are more guarded and find it more difficult or avoid asking for support. In these instances a change in personal habits or uncharacteristic behaviour, poor course attendance or deterioration in academic performance can indicate they are experiencing difficulties

If, despite your support, the student is unable to address or successfully resolve the problem, or the situation is beyond your ability or level of comfort, you may consider making a referral for counselling.

The Counselling service is also available to staff for informal advice and guidance to manage a situation and help resource and encourage a student to access appropriate support.

**Key Contacts:**

**Kara Bailie, Head of Student Welfare**

Email: [kara.bailie@qub.ac.uk](mailto:kara.bailie@qub.ac.uk) or Tel: 028 9097 2893

**Freephone helpline available 24/7, 365 days a year:**

**0808 800 0016**

## When should I be concerned about a student?

- You notice a significant deterioration in the standard of their academic work or performance, or frequent failures to attend classes or meet course deadlines.
- They report to you or someone else, often a peer, that they have a problem or are experiencing difficulties.
- Other people express concern about their wellbeing e.g., friends, room-mates, colleagues.
- You notice a change in their demeanour - they may become atypically quiet, passive or reserved or alternatively become unusually loud, boisterous or agitated. You notice a notable and sustainable change in or fluctuation in their mood from what is usual for them (unusually elated – high or, low - flat, apathetic, hopeless).
- You notice a change in their weight or personal hygiene.
- You often notice a smell of alcohol / non-prescribed drugs.
- Student seems isolated, withdrawn / and experiences difficulty joining in with the wider class group.
- They report self-harm, thoughts of life not worth living, suicidal intent or talk of planning to end their life.

In these circumstances it is often better to take a proactive approach and check if a student is experiencing difficulties, to determine the level of distress. If in doubt, confide in and share your concerns with a colleague rather than keeping them to yourself. This can be done with a student's consent, or on a 'no names' basis.

## How should I talk to a student about getting help?

- Find out if they have accessed support services before – sometimes students have an existing, well established relationship with Disability Services, International Student Support, a counsellor or other member of staff in student welfare, and may be happy for you to get in contact with that person.
- Normalise seeking support, frame it as a strength not a weakness – it is not unusual for students to experience difficulties and everyone needs support at some point in their life.
- Encourage them to take responsibility for arranging counselling themselves, though offer to help them to make the first telephone call if they are apprehensive.
- Avoid using 'should' and 'ought', rather suggest 'How would you feel about talking to a counsellor?'
- Seeing a counsellor does not mean that they are 'having a breakdown' or 'are crazy'.

## How should I suggest counselling?

- Counselling can be seen as an added support structure, alongside support from the School, Disability Services, Careers or Learning Development to support them to get the most out of their academic experience.
- Reassure them about the confidentiality of the counselling service – a counsellor will not tell anyone, even the School, if a student has attended sessions, or disclose what they have said.
- Examples of phrases that can explain to a student how counselling might help them: 'regain perspective and develop some alternative strategies', 'talking to someone independent to help work out a different approach / new ways of thinking', 'work with you on managing the current situation', 'help you to develop tools to allow you to feel better and focus on your studies'.
- It sometimes also helps to equate looking after mental health to looking after physical health – if you were feeling physically unwell, you would visit a doctor. A counsellor can help you look after your mental health and wellbeing.
- Encourage the student to ring Carecall while with you - **0808 800 0016** (free from mobile or landline).
- If you have immediate concerns for a student's wellbeing or safety, ask the student to access immediate counselling support. Let the counsellor have some time on the phone to assess the student's risk and protective factors – if possible allow the student some space to have this conversation.

## How should I respond to someone who is upset or causing concern?

- Stay calm, listen to the person and acknowledge the problem.
- Recognise the person's feelings and communicate your understanding of what they are saying.
- Show that you are concerned and can offer support. – but be clear about and maintain your own professional boundaries.
- Avoid getting over-involved or being critical or judgemental.
- Be direct and clear, especially about confidentiality and the limitations of your role.
- Take threats of self-harm or suicide very seriously. Contact Carecall or the Head of Student Welfare immediately if you are concerned that the student is at immediate risk to themselves or others.

## What can a counsellor help with?

Counselling can be helpful for a multitude of difficulties including personal issues which are having a negative impact on a students' ability to study or preventing them from making the most of student/academic life. Students can come to counselling for many reasons including:

- Abuse
- Bereavement
- Cultural issues
- Depression
- Dilemmas & difficult decisions
- Domestic violence
- Eating disorders
- Exam related stress
- Family problems
- Generalised anxiety & panic
- Homesickness
- Identity issues
- Procrastination
- Relationships
- Self-harm
- Sexuality
- Trauma or assault

## About the Counselling Service

Counselling through the University service is short term and solution-focused. A counsellor may speak to a student about using the support as an interim measure, while other longer-term support options are identified and accessed.

Counselling support is only for current students. If difficulties are identified relating to a prospective / graduated / withdrawn / suspended student, contact the Head of Student Welfare to discuss.

- Freephone 0808 800 0016
- Answered 24/7, 365 days a year
- Self-referral, though tutors may encourage referral
- Immediate telephone counselling support available
- Staffed by professional, qualified & experienced personnel at all times
- Appointments available within 3 working days
- Networked with over 100 counsellors across NI
- Time limited, practical & solution focused
- Clear boundaries of confidentiality. Carecall will not report back to you on whether a student has attended. You can ask a student if they are attending counselling, and if they feel it has helped.
- Moves from analysis of the problem to identifying own skills, strengths & resources

