

HELPING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

A guide for supervisors

Warwick

Researcher
Development

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- What support is available at the university?
- What can you do in to help the student in urgent situations?
- Your roles and responsibilities
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- Key internal contacts for student's mental health and wellbeing

THIS SHORT GUIDE WILL:

Recognise	Help you to recognize when a student is experience mental health difficulties
Advise	Provide you advice to help you to respond and signpost students appropriately and effectively
Remind	Introduce you or remind you of the sources of support within the university and beyond
Be aware	Raise awareness of issues relating to student mental health

Introduction

As a supervisor and faculty member, you are in a unique position to identify and help those students who experience mental health distress. Your role as a supervisor is also crucial as students may see you as a trustworthy to turn to you for guidance or help, as some student will not seek help from their peers, colleagues or family members. Therefore, your expression of concern may be a crucial factor that can help students with their personal and academic difficulties. Besides, your actions may also help to prevent student's further mental health deterioration and may even save a student's life. The main purpose of this guide is to provide you with information that can help you to recognise some of the symptoms of student distress and help you to identify what sources of help and support exist within the University of Warwick and beyond.

Mental health and wellbeing of student population

Being a student for most undergraduate or postgraduate students is an enjoyable period where they develop their social and academic skills. However, this particular period is also followed by a number of stressors that can easily overwhelm their ability to cope and affect their academic performance or their mental health and wellbeing. Most prevalent sources of stress include transition to university, feeling homesick, academic and career concerns or difficulties, social relationships, family issues, loneliness and financial problems. It is also important to emphasise that some students may already have mental health difficulties, lack of resilience and resources to manage their mental health and wellbeing effectively. All these factors may contribute to students feeling overwhelmed and experience mental health distress or mental health crisis. Consequently, the sense of being overwhelmed or faced with mental health difficulties can lead to a sense of hopelessness and further decline, which can also disrupt their academic performance, lead to substance misuse, self-injury or even suicide.

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood (Source: Mental Health.gov)

What is mental health crisis?

A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's actions, feelings, and behaviours can lead to them hurting themselves or others, and/or put them at risk of being unable to care for themselves or function in the community in a healthy manner. Situations that can lead to a mental health crisis can include stress at home like conflicts with loved ones, exposure to trauma, or violence. Stress at work or school and other environmental stress can also contribute to a mental health crisis.

Individuals with diagnosed mental illness are at greater risk of experiencing a crisis, but too often, a crisis occurs before a mental illness has been diagnosed. *"When crisis strikes, it's not a switch that can be turned off. The body and brain may be working against our own goals and desires. Seeking professional help is the safest way to address the underlying medical issues. Once addressed, other therapies and treatment services can be used to prevent future crisis and address underlying issues."*¹

Student Mental Health prevalence data in the UK

In 2018/19 308,000 students said they had a disability of some kind - this was 16.2% of all home students. Within this 82,000 said they had a mental health condition; 4.3% of all home students. The number saying that they had a mental health condition was two and a half times as high as in 2014/15². Higher rates of mental health conditions were reported among:

- Women
- Undergraduates
- Full-time students
- Those in their second or later years

¹ James Roberson (www.kvc.org/blog/what-does-a-mental-health-crisis-look-like/)

² <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>

In 2018/19 59,200 female students said they had a mental health condition or 5.3% of all female students. This rate was almost double the rate for male students of 2.8%.³

Similarly, a survey⁴ found that approximately 38,000 students in 2018 reported:

- 9% of the student population thinks about self-harm often or all the time
- 43% of the student population reported being worried often or all the time
- 33% of students reported being lonely often or all the time
- 45% of students stated the use of alcohol and drugs to cope with their problems
- 34% student population reported experiencing a serious personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problems and a need for more professional help
- The most commonly reported problems were depression (10%) and anxiety disorders (8%)

According to the recent report, if students are exposed to a lack of support and treatment, their mental health can further deteriorate and lead to increased risk of students dropping out of university, or in most severe cases, death by suicide⁵.

Prevalence data⁵:

- A record number of students committed suicide in 2015, which represents a 79% increase between 2007 and 2015 (75 to 134)
- Suicide is often linked with the presence of underlying mental health conditions
- 25% of students who committed suicide in the UK were in contact with mental health services a year before their death
- 1180 student in 2014/2015 dropped-out of university due to their mental health problems (an increase of 210% compared to 2009/2010).

³ UK domiciled student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2018/19, HESA

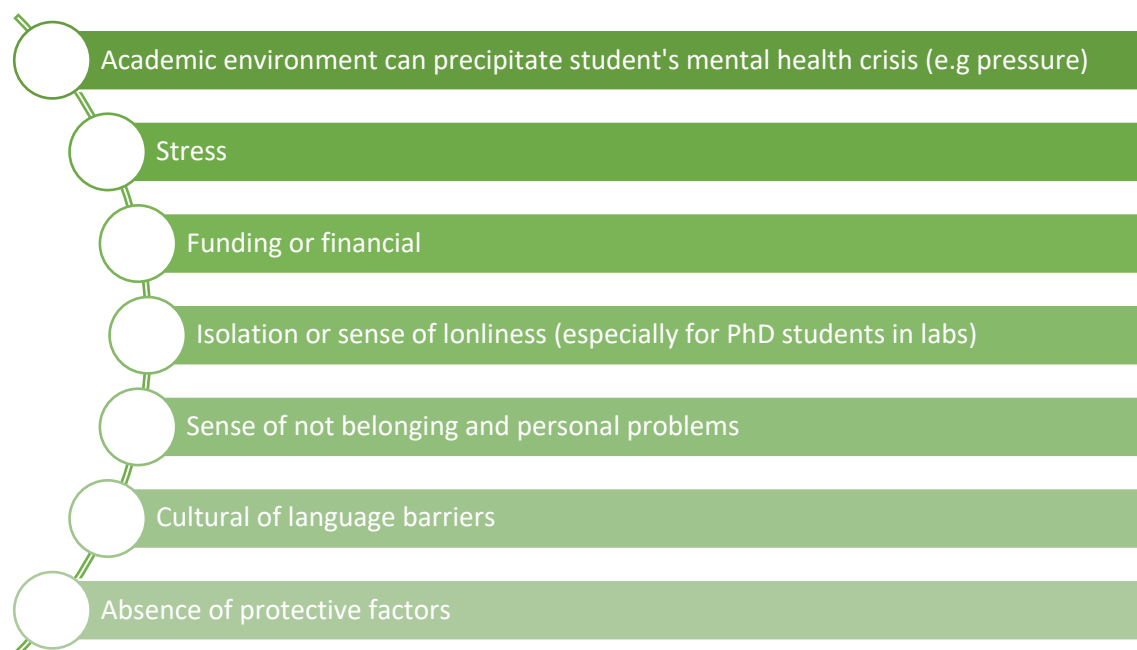
⁴ Largest survey of its kind reveals extent of university students' struggles with thoughts of self-harm, loneliness and anxiety, 5 March 2019

⁵ House of Commons, Support for students with mental health issues in higher education in England (2020)

- 94% of University in England reported an increase in the demand for counselling and wellbeing services
- In some universities in England, every 1 in 4 students is using or waiting to access wellbeing services

From these prevalence data it is evident that overall prevalence of mental illness is increasing in student population. It is also evident that there is an increase in help-seeking behaviours in student population from their universities for their mental health difficulties. Lastly, it is also evident that a significant level of mental health distress exists among the student population.

Factors that trigger or precipitate student's low mood and mental health difficulties

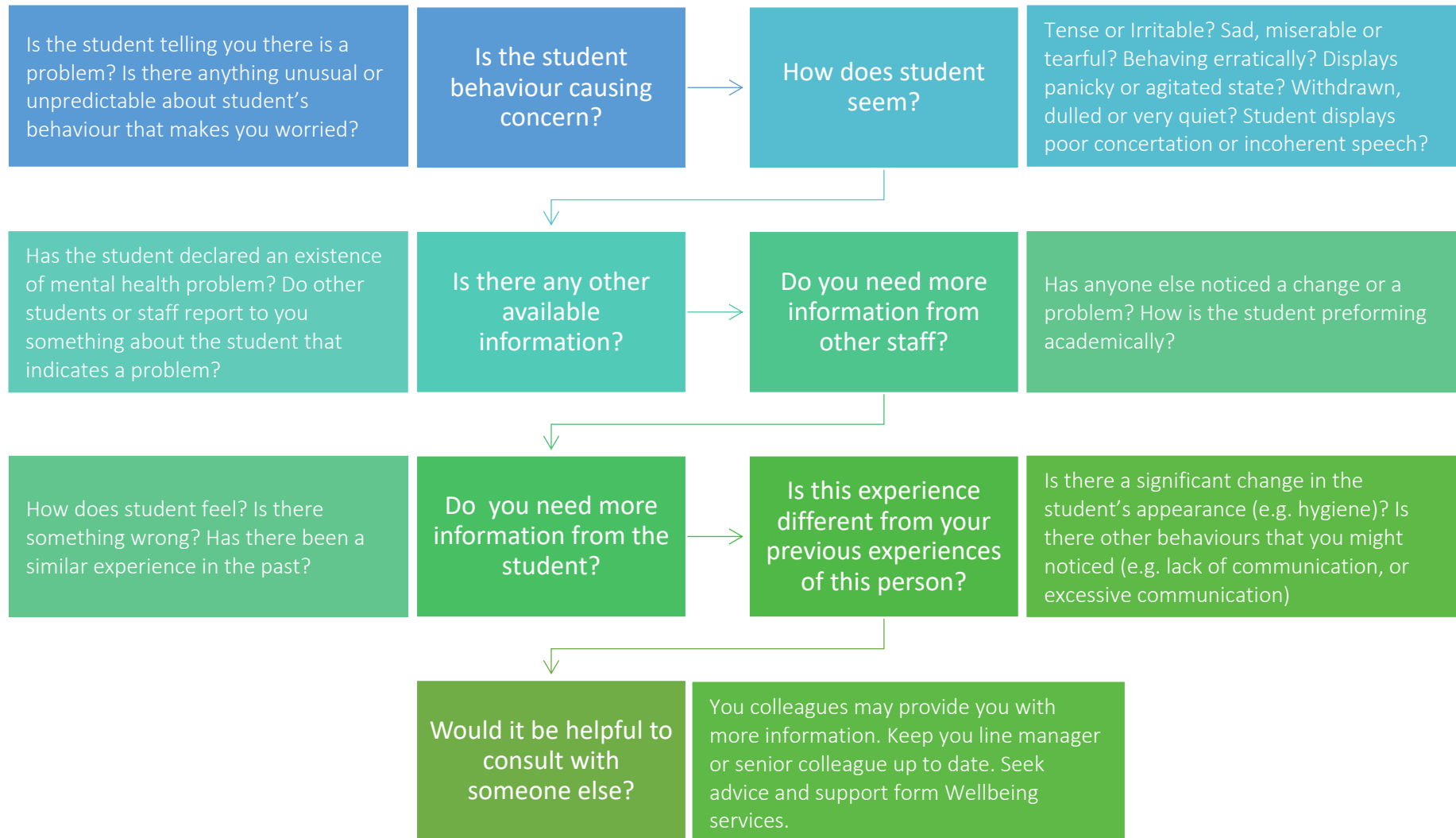


Impact of Covid-19 and lockdown also can additionally precipitate student mental health difficulties

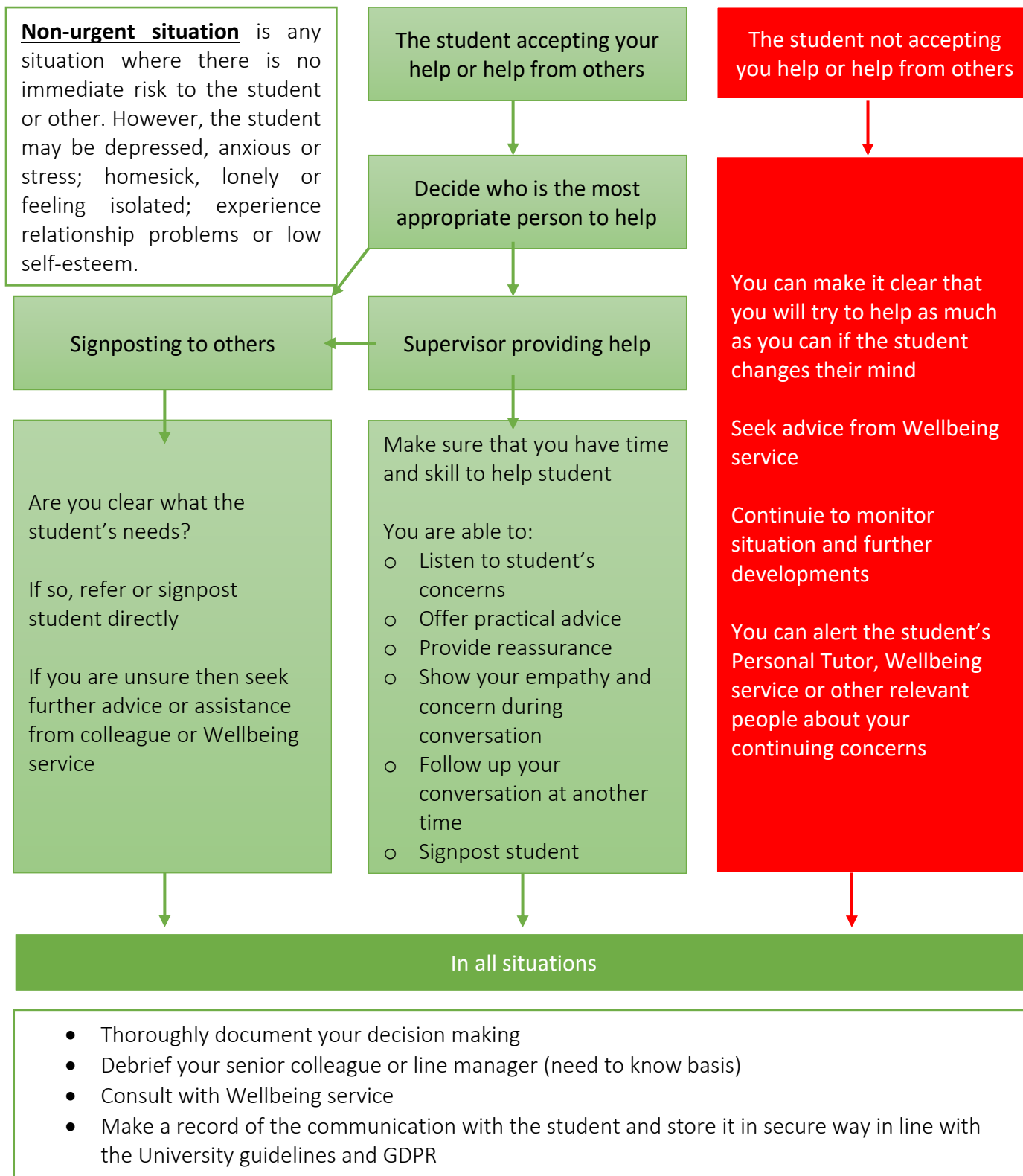
Recognising students in distress

Minor Distress	Moderate Distress	Severe Distress	Mental Health Crisis
Students experiencing some mental health distress may not display disruptive behaviours. However, some student behaviours can be an indicator that student requires help and support	Students in moderate distress may exhibit behaviours that indicate significant emotional suffering. These students may also be reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for personal help.	Severely distressed students exhibit behaviours that signify an apparent crisis and necessitate emergency care. These problems are the easiest to identify.	A mental health crisis can display in a variety of ways. There is no one indicator that a person is experiencing a mental health emergency or may attempt suicide, but here are some signs to look for.
<p>Behaviours may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Change from good to poor academic performance ○ Frequent unexplained absences from class attendance or supervisions ○ Changes in interactions with tutors, colleagues or supervisors ○ Changes in their physical appearance, such as being unkempt, fatigued, unable to concentrate and display a range of changes in their mood. 	<p>Behaviours may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions ○ Unusual or exaggerated emotional responses which are inappropriate to the situation ○ Other characteristics that suggest the student has trouble managing stress successfully are: depressed mood; swollen red eyes, lethargy; falling asleep in class; very rapid speech; and changes in how the student looks or dress 	<p>Behaviours may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Highly disruptive behaviour (e.g. hostility, aggression, or violence) ○ Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts) ○ Loss of contact with reality (hearing or seeing things which others cannot see or hear) ○ Stalking behaviours ○ Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, email messages, or harassment) ○ Overtly suicidal thoughts (including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment) ○ Threats to harm others 	<p>The student may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Unable to complete daily tasks like getting dressed, brushing teeth, bathing, etc. ○ Verbally saying, writing or insinuating that they'd like to kill themselves and/or talking about death ○ Withdrawing from friends, family and their typical social situations ○ Showing impulsive or reckless behaviour, being aggressive ○ Having dramatic shifts in mood, sleeping or eating patterns

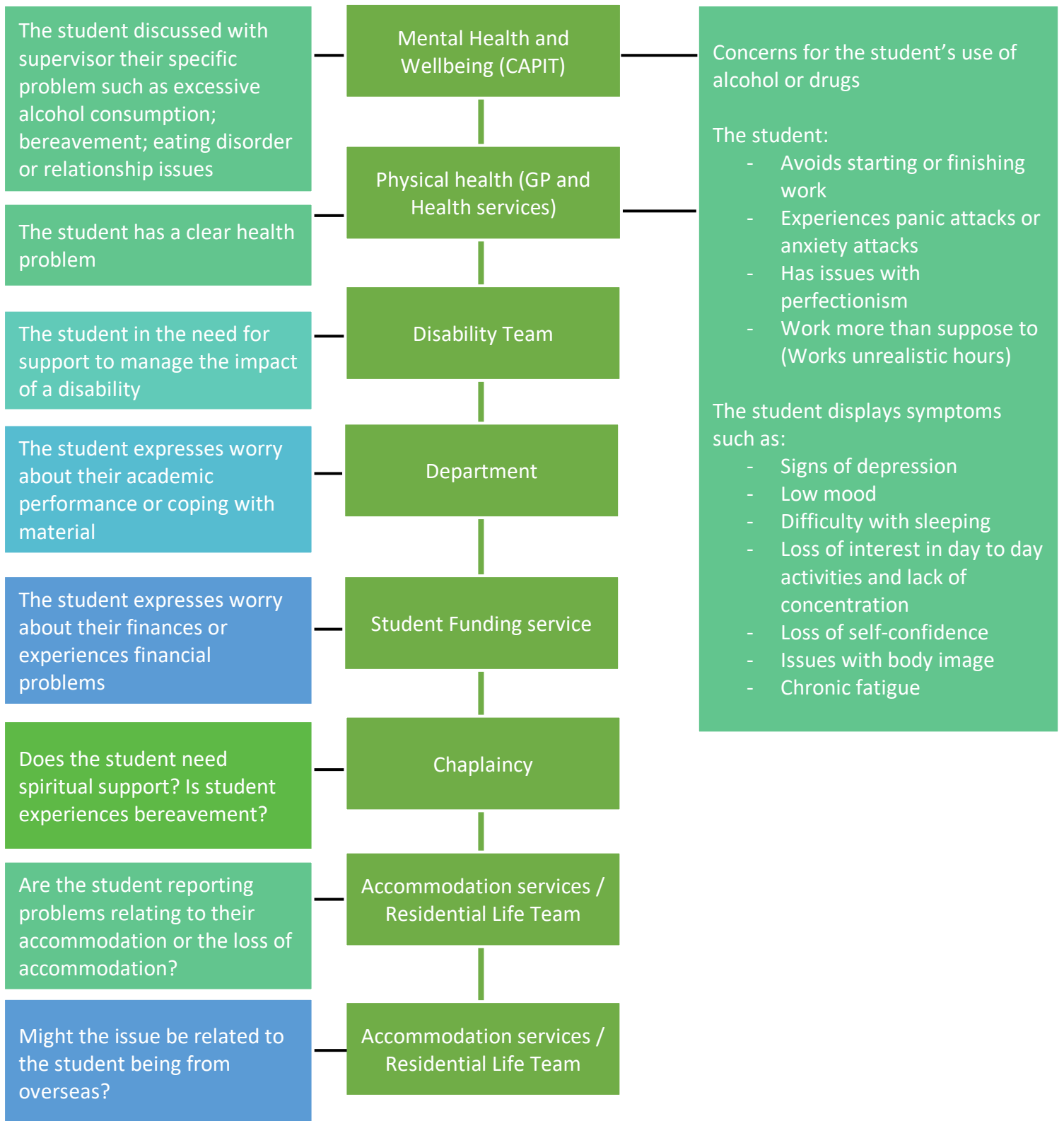
Is there a problem (Risk assessing)?



What you can do in non-urgent situation?



Internal signposting for student's mental health and wellbeing needs



Help is out there

Samaritans: call **116 123** free 24/7

Safe Havens: Out of hours mental health support in Warwickshire, available to anyone aged 16+. Email: warwickshiresafehaven@mhmm.org.uk

PAPYRUS: Free service for young people. Call **0800 068 4141** 9am-10pm Mon-Fri /2pm-10pm weekends or visit www.papyrus-uk.org

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) call **0300 111 5065** 9am-9pm Monday to Friday or visit www.uksobs.org

MIND Coventry and Warwickshire: Help and support for mental health problems. Call **024 7655 2847** or visit www.cwmind.org.uk

Change Grow Live Coventry: Free and confidential drug and alcohol service for adults, families and affected others. Call **02476 010241** 9am-5pm Mon/ 9am – 8pm Tue/ 9am – 5pm Wed-Fri or email coventry.info@cgl.org.uk

Compass: Substance misuse service for children and young people in Warwickshire. Call **01788 578 227** 9am – 5pm Mon-Thur/ 9am – 4.30pm Fri

The Recovery and Wellbeing Academy: Free courses and workshops to help people in their recovery. Call **0300 303 2626** or visit www.recoveryandwellbeing.covwarkpt.nhs.uk

The Kaleidoscope: Suicide Bereavement Support Services. Call **0121 565 5665** or visit www.kaleidoscopeplus.org.uk

Veterans' Mental Health TIL Service: Call **0300 323 0137** 24/7

RISE: Emotional wellbeing and mental health services for children and young people. Call **0300 200 2021** 8am – 6pm Mon-Fri or visit www.cwrise.com

It Takes Balls To Talk: Campaign to encourage people to talk about mental health issues. Visit ittakesballstotalk.com

Download our Stay Alive app

Provides help and advice on staying safe in a crisis.

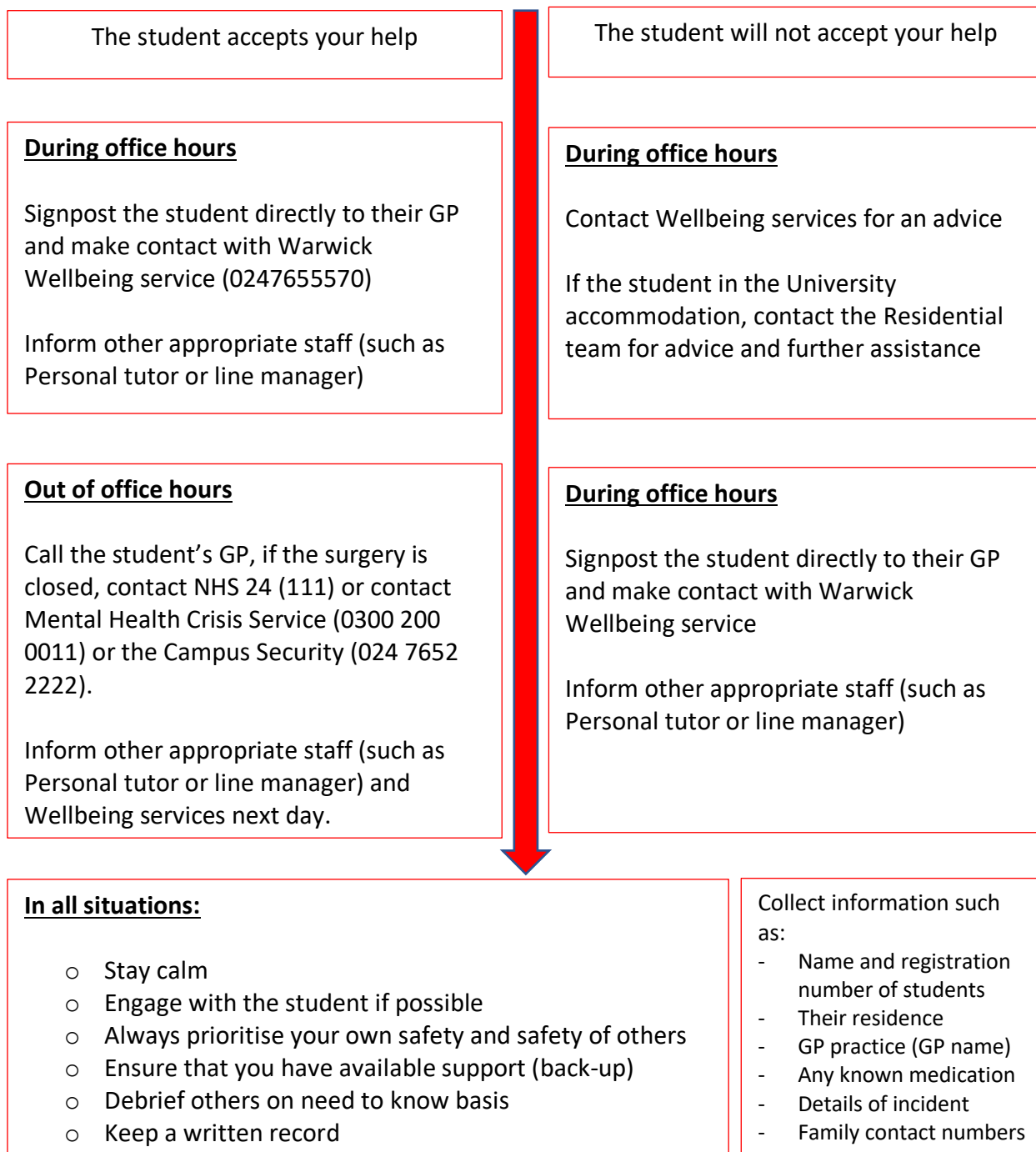
Available free at the App Store or Google Play



What you should do in urgent situation?

The situation is considered as urgent if the student may be at risk of harm to themselves or others, and if you are concerned for one or more of the following reasons:

- The student may be at risk of serious self-harm
- The student is violent or threatening violence
- The student has completely stopped with normal functioning
- The student seems disorientated and out of touch with reality
- The student is behaving out of their usual character
- The student expresses suicidal thoughts or visible signs of self-injury



Your role and responsibility

Provide initial help and support

If you decide to offer support try to ensure that you have sufficient time within the context of your other commitments to do this, and that this support does not conflict with other aspect of your role. Ensure also that you seek help from others if you have persistent concerns about student. **REMEMBER** – you are not solely responsible for a student’s emotional or mental health

Signpost

It is not always possible to judge correctly what support the student may most benefit from. The student may have more than one problem, or the initial problem may not be the most central. The most important is to signpost student to somewhere that is acceptable to them. A further referral can be made later, if appropriate.

Confidentiality

Make sure to not disclose any personal information about students to anyone (Need to know basis) including parents, without the student’s explicit consent. If the parents wish to contact a student, you can offer to forward a communication or tell the student they have been in touch. Treat any personal information about student with discretion. Do not promise student absolute confidentiality and advice the student that you may have to consult with a colleague.

Think about your own mental health

- If you feel impacted by the event, make sure to seek counselling or psychological support
- Talk to your line-manager or other college about the impact of the event on you
- Do not brush the experience under the carpet
- See more on: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/staff-wellbeing>

Final Advice

Talking to a student in distress

If in doubt – ask the student if they are okay (in private)

Use empathetic approach

Accept and respect what is said

Focus on an aspect of the problem that is manageable

Avoid easy answers

Help identify resources needed to improve things

Help student recall constructive methods used in the past to cope

Trust your insight and reactions

Encourage the person to seek help

Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree



Let others know your concerns



Attempt to address the person's needs and seek appropriate resources



But don't attempt any counselling (do not act above your competencies)



Do not swear secrecy or offer confidentiality



Encourage the person to seek help



Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree

Helping Students in Distress
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Please let us know if you have any feedback regarding usefulness of this document and how this document can be further improved

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Warwick

Researcher
Development

WELLBEING

SUPPORT SERVICES

WE LISTEN WE SUPPORT WE ENABLE

WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK