Cause for concern

Overview

This procedure is designed to assist all staff in identifying students and helping them when faced with a difficulty. Primarily it’s use will be to ensure students are proactively supported and referred appropriately.

Over the period of their study students might face a number of issues that can affect their studies and as a diverse group of people the needs and pressures can vary depending on circumstances. Many staff across the institution are capable and experienced in providing support directly to a student, however, we all need to be aware of when a student’s need for support goes beyond what we are personally able to deal with.

This procedure outlines what to do when you are concerned about a student, and the various support services in place to provide guidance and/or assistance.

Aims

The aims of this guidance are to

- Enable staff to facilitate equal access for students to the relevant advice and support
- Identify levels of response and what action is required

Who is involved in identifying and helping when students are facing a difficulty?

Everyone has a role to play in identifying when a student is facing a difficulty, including other students, as part of the university learning community.

However, in reality some staff and students are more involved than others. They are academics, course leaders, personal academic tutors, student support services, residential advisers, student union advisers, school office managers, halls managers. These staff should take responsibility for knowing what the range of support services is and how to advise others.

Other frontline staff, student residential advisers, mentors and learning support tutors are also frequently the early contact for a student, and they should be able to seek advice from others where the need arises.

The key message here is ‘you are not on your own’ – seek advice and support from others.

When should you be concerned about a student?

There are usually four main sources of information on which to base your decisions about students who may give cause for concern:

- Information disclosed to you by the student – could be through words, behaviours or actions.
- Your own observations
- Information disclosed to you by a third party
- A referral from another student

What might be the issues?

These could be financial hardship, bereavement, visa expiry, being a victim of crime or sexual harassment or assault, being subject to a criminal investigation, being a victim of bullying or
harassment, being a victim of domestic violence, physical ill-health, mental wellbeing, becoming an addict, radicalisation, difficulty in forming relationships and/or socially withdrawn.

What might be the indications?

Below are the most common types of behaviour and conditions you may notice in a student, which have sometimes resulted from the issues above. The circumstances, how well you know a student, and your own experience will all affect how you handle the situation.

The most common are emotional and psychological difficulties. They include anxiety and depression, an inability to concentrate and produce academic work and meet deadlines, acute exam stress, panic attacks, drug and alcohol issues, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, effects of separation and living in a different country.

These difficulties may be noticed directly or indirectly through behaviours such as: absenteeism, lateness, self-neglect, dips in academic performance, agitation and irritability, lack of motivation, social withdrawal, and obsessive attitudes towards work, perfectionism or unrealistic preoccupations with failure.

Some students will have a diagnosed mental health issue, and may be receiving outside care, and in others this begins at university. These can be bipolar-affective disorder, severe personality disorder, severe depression and/or anxiety, social phobia and body image disorder.

Other signs to look out for are, inappropriate or bizarre behaviours, poor self-care, restlessness, confusion, distorted sense of place, time or person, suspiciousness, hostility, a sense of being out of touch with what is real, social withdrawal, hearing voices and possibly lack of insight.

Some personality problems can be difficult to define, but might involve threatening or bizarre behaviour, obsessional or anti-social behaviours which disturb or disrupt other students and staff.

Taking action

It is important to do something when you become concerned. There are various responses and it will be dependent on the analysis of the issue and seriousness of the situation. It is a measurement of risk.

In many cases, being prepared to listen may be all that is required. This does not mean taking on the role of a counsellor or doctor, and there are limitations to what you can do dependent on your role, and on the issue. It is unwise to make promises or to assure confidentiality because you do not know what will be disclosed. What can be given is reassurance that any information which is passed on is done with discretion, and on a ‘need to know’ basis, and ideally with the consent of the student.

Confidentiality

In many situations disclosure of an issue comes with the expectation or implicit expectation of confidentiality. This may not be possible, and you may need to explain to the student that there are some things you will need to disclose to others.

If in doubt speak to someone else about your concerns, rather than keeping them to yourself. This can be done on a ‘no names’ basis. Seek advice from staff with professional training and/or from more experienced colleagues (see cause for concern framework).
Information should only normally be disclosed where;

- The individual to whom the information relates has consented
- Disclosure is necessary to safeguard the individual or others
- Where there is a legal duty to do so, such as a court order
- Where there is a duty in respect of concern about child safety,
- Prevent, a duty on public bodies to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”
- Where the student is either under 18 years or an adult at risk.

Levels of response

Level 1 – Enabling self-help

- Listen to the student, establish rapport in order to better understand
- If you have an appointment/cannot make the time offer an alternative such as another colleague, or student support and guidance tutor, – know the referral options
- Direct the student to on-line information and advice, or encourage them to seek early help from support services
- If you are in doubt/concerned about the student, seek advice from more experienced colleagues or someone in the various support services

If a concern has been passed on to you by a third party, endeavour to get a view of the seriousness and encourage the third party to pass on information about services available, or ask permission to contact the student directly.

Consider following up at a later date with the student, or make yourself a note (keeping it factual i.e. name, date, action proposed) in order to potentially refer to it in the future.

Level 2 – Cause for concern - facilitating internal/external referral

If there is a moderate to serious level of distress or a student reports a friend/fellow student experiencing distress then the advice is to do one or more of the following

- Attempt to establish rapport and gain a better understanding of the issue. Sometimes a student can appear to be very distressed yet having time to listen is all that is required
- Inform the student of the services available within the university, and help them to access these. This may require more assistance than just signposting as above, but ideally if a student can make their own appointment they should be encouraged to do so. An alternative might be to see their doctor/GP
- If the student concerned refuses to seek further help you might feel you need to let them know that you will contact student support about them
- You might feel the need to discuss the situation with a colleague, or consult staff in student services

Students ultimately have the right (if over 18) to decline an offer of support, but it is important they know what is available and how to access different forms of assistance. They might prefer to speak to someone externally, use a specialist service, seek help from their GP, or talk to a chaplain.
Keeping a record

If you wish to highlight the level of concern but do not feel calling emergency services is appropriate then you should raise the issue with the most relevant person on the cause for concern framework Cause for Concern Framework. If this is not an option then a call can be made to Student Services on 01273 642895 who will be able to advise on the best course of action while maintaining relevant levels of confidentiality.

Level 3 – an emergency situation where external referral is necessary

If you have evidence to indicate a student poses an imminent risk to themselves or to others then this is an emergency situation, where immediate support from the police and emergency services is necessary.

You should dial 999 and explain the situation. You do not need the students consent.

Do not leave the student alone until the emergency services arrive. If possible seek assistance from colleagues in the vicinity so you are not handling the situation on your own. It is not necessary to accompany a student to hospital, however, as soon as possible complete an incident form and let your Head of Department/School know.

Student death

If a student is reported to you to have died please follow the procedure Student Death or Major Trauma procedure.

Communicable or notifiable diseases

A communicable or notifiable disease should be reported to Student Services. The GP or hospital has the duty to inform Public Health England (PHE) and PHE will advise if any further action needs to be undertaken by the university. It is important to have an overall record of cases to consider if any raising awareness messages and communications to students are advisable. Also on the student’s return to study there maybe situations which require disclosure to the course for Health and Safety considerations, or which require interim adjustments for the student concerned.

What other types of situation might require a referral of the case to Student Services and, if occurred outside the UK, may require a university response

- Serious illness or injury resulting in the student being taken to hospital
- Contact from a student’s friend or relative informing you that they have sustained a serious injury or illness
- International crisis causes immediate concern for students receiving funding from the affected country
- Where a student is subject to a criminal investigation, or has to intermit or withdraw as a result of an investigation
- Where you are approached by the police about a student
- Where the student is a victim of crime, bullying or harassment

Out of hours

Brighton University does not have an out of hours support service. If you have an urgent concern about a student between 5.00 p.m. and 9 a.m. during weekdays or across the weekend then you
should refer them to the emergency services. Alternatively there is a list of external services listed here....... SS_useful_contacts and Cause for Concern Flowchart.