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Western University · Canada

# Supporting Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty, Staff, and Student Leaders

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# Learning Objectives

- Learning Objectives:
  1. Understand the prevalence of mental health problems in University and the impact of mental illness on academic success.
  2. Recognizing students in distress
  3. Understand the role of empathy and compassion
  4. Empathetic Responding: How to respond and where to refer students for support

# Mental Health Concerns in University

- Mental health problems among University Students are prevalent:
  - Roughly 18.4% of students struggle with anxiety (CACUSS, 2016)
  - Roughly 14.7% of students struggle with depression (CACUSS, 2016)
  - Roughly 13.0% of students had considered suicide within the past 12 months (CACUSS, 2016)
  - 14%-20% of Canadian youth experience mental health challenges (Kessler et al., 2005).

# Mental Health and Academic Performance

- Untreated mental illnesses in students can negatively impact their academic performance (Kutcher et al., 2009)- **WHY?**
  - Difficulty focusing
  - Disorganized thoughts
  - Memory problems
  - Exhaustion
  - Lack of motivation
  - Sensitivity to external stimuli
  - Prolonged stress causes many physical illness (i.e., migraines, gastrointestinal problems...)

# Backpack Analogy

- What a student is carrying in their “backpack” can weigh them down emotionally, socially, cognitively, physically, and spiritually. The content/weight of their backpack can negatively impact their academics. Backpack contents may include:
  - Mental health
  - Trauma present or past
  - Grief
  - Disability (invisible or visible)
  - Poverty
  - Addiction
  - Identity
  - Housing instability
  - Care-giver issues (children or parents)



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# On The Front Lines

- Faculty, Student Support Services, & Student Leaders are on the front lines of student mental health (Ethan & Seidel, 2013; Kutcher et al., 2009).
  - Faculty hold an influential role in the lives and learning of students (Cook & Kilmer, 2010; Herman et al., 2009; Moor et al., 2000).
  - Students in distress turn to faculty, mentors, and student leaders (Ethan & Seidel, 2013)
    - 38.2% of students reported there was a “very good chance” they would communicate with their professors (HERI, 2010).

# Front Lines Con't

- You are not counsellors BUT you do hold an important role in (Trudgen & Lawn, 2011):
  - Identifying students in distress
  - Responding in an empathetic manner
  - Referring to campus support services
- Often front-liners feel overwhelmed and ill-prepared to address the mental health needs of students (Whitely et al., 2013).



# Signs a Student May Be In Distress

- LISTEN for verbal expressions of distress
  - Such as: stress, overwhelmed, grief, low mood, anxious...
- LOOK for visual signs of distress
  - Such as: difficulty concentrating, disorganized speech or writing, poor hygiene, crying, panic attack....
- JUST ASK-NOTE: often the signs are invisible
  - People can be really good at hiding their distress
  - If appropriate, we can check-in and ask (more to come on this topic)

# Role of Empathy

- What is Empathy:
  - Knowing, feeling, sensing, and understanding the experience of another person (Jordan, 2010)
  - An affective and cognitive skill
    - **Affective Empathy:** Feel what someone else is feeling (Nowak, 2014)
    - **Cognitive Empathy:** Imagining yourself in someone else's shoes (Nowak, 2014)

# Why Empathy?

- **Brené Brown on Empathy:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>
  - Both people are responding to, impacting, and mattering to one another (Jordan, 2010)
- **Sum:** Why is Empathy important?
  - Decreases isolation
  - Leads to affective and cognitive growth
  - Grows connection

# Empathy: What's in it for me?

- **Doctors who provide empathetic care to their patients are shown to have** (Dowden, 2013):
  - Increased well-being and reduction in burnout
  - Reduction in errors
  - Fewer malpractice claims
- Leads to cognitive and affective growth
- **BE CAREFUL WITH EMPATHY.....(see next slide)**

# Empathy: Cautions

- Too much empathizing can lead to:
  - **Burnout:** emotional exhaustion, helplessness, and negative attitudes towards self, work, life, and others (Wilkinson et al., 2017).
  - **Compassion fatigue:** a form of burnout, it's a state of tension and vicarious trauma, may include: avoidance, numbing, anxiety (Figley, 2002)
    - Internalizing the problems/distress of others as your own

# Role of Compassion

- Defining Compassion and Self-Compassion:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tyl6YXp1Y6M>
- 3 Components of Compassion (Kristin Neffs, 2020):
  1. Notice suffering/distress in yourself or others
  2. Offer a kind and caring response to yourself or others
  3. Remember suffering is normal and its ok, we all go through it.

# Benefits of Self-Compassion

- Whether you are offering compassion to yourself or others the benefits may include (Bluth & Neff, 2018):
  - Increased kindness
  - Decreased judgement or criticism
  - Decreased isolation
  - Increased mindfulness
  - Increased wellbeing
  - Decreased over-identification of distress (a.k.a: a buffer that protects us from over empathizing)

# Empathetic Responding

- WE NEED BOTH Empathy and Compassion
- Empathy allows you to feel what another person is feeling. **Empathy is Feeling WITH**
- Compassion separates you from taking on others feelings and allows you to acknowledge, offer kindness/help, and normalize experiences. **Compassion is Feeling FOR**
- YOU must cultivate your own self-empathy and self-compassion



# Cultivating Self-Empathy & Self-Compassion

- **Adopt a Mindfulness COAL attitude** (Kabat-Zinn, 2014):
  - Practice **C**uriosity, **O**penness, **A**cceptance, & **L**oving-kindness (a.k.a. non-judging) of your experiences
- **Notice your suffering** (Neff, 2020):
  - Notice how you are affected with a COAL mindset
- **Notice your own level of stress/distress** (Dowden, 2013)
  - If feeling high stress/burnout>practice self-care and self-compassion (see 3 components on slide 14)
- **Acknowledge your limitations and biases** (Dowden, 2013)
  - We all get stressed and overwhelmed-THAT'S OK

# Empathetic Responding: How-To

- **Active Listening:**
  - Offer non-verbal cues to convey listening:
    - Eye contact, leaning in, head nods
  - Offer verbal cues:
    - “ah, yeah, yes, yup, ok, I get that, or mmm-hmmm”

# Empathetic Responding: How-to

- Conveying **E.M.P.A.T.H.Y** by Reiss, 2012
  - **E**ye contact
  - **M**uscles of facial expression: show care on your face
  - **P**osture: open and relaxed body language
  - **A**ffect: name the emotion (see next slide)
  - **T**one of voice: calm and relaxed tone
  - **H**earing: convey understanding and non-judging
  - **Y**our response (see next slide)

# Empathetic Responding: Step 1

- **Step 1: Acknowledge emotion in a way that conveys compassion & empathy.**
  - Practice active listening/E.M.P.A.T.H.Y skills
  - Use short statements that acknowledge the clients emotions (Robertson, 2004).
    - “I can hear how difficult that must have been”
    - “That is really hard/awful”
    - “I can imagine how frustrating that would be”
    - “I would be upset too if that happened to me”
    - “I get that”

# Step 1 Considerations

- NOTE: verbal statements **MUST** be spoken with sincerity and honesty (Robertson, 2004).
  - DO NOT fake empathy/compassion because it will come across as insincere.
  - **It is OK to be lost for words**, and it is OK if you cannot do Step 1 without sincerity, **remember Brené Brown's advice** *"I do not know what to say but thank you for sharing with me"* > then skip to Step 2.

# Empathetic Responding: Step 2

- **Step 2: Offer support and refer if needed:**
  - ASK: “How can I help”
    - But: know your boundaries/role (i.e., not to fix/treat) and refer to appropriate service

And/or

- CONNECT the student with King’s or Western support services
  - Example: “Please let me help you with that. (Insert Student Support Service) can offer you some support, can I please... (walk or provide service information)”

# Empathetic Responding Considerations

- **Avoid The Opposite Of Empathy** (Riess, 2012)
  - Interruption or speaking before listening
  - Assumptions or judgements
  - Sharing your own personal stress/distress
  - Giving advice instead of understanding
  - Trying to minimize, deny, ignore, or disregard the person's emotions

# Empathetic Responding: Step 1 & 2 Together

- Putting it all together: 1<sup>st</sup> acknowledge emotion and 2<sup>nd</sup> offer support by referring to services

1<sup>st</sup>: “I can hear how hard this is for you.”

2<sup>nd</sup>: “Thank you for sharing. I would like to offer you some support, but honestly I am not sure what to say. I do know King’s Personal Counselling Services can offer you some support to help you through this difficult time, would it help if I walked you there (or “would you like me to provide you their contact information”- offer ACSD website/phone/email)?



# Campus Referrals Tips

- Know the various student support services so as to make appropriate referrals
  - Avoids ping-ponging
- When in doubt refer to **Accessibility, Counselling, and Student Development (ACSD)**:
  - Accessibility, Personal and Career Counselling
  - Learning Skills

# Academic vs Accessibility Counselling

Academic Counselling	Accessibility Counselling
In the department of the Academic Deans Office	In the department of Student Affairs-Accessibility, Counselling, and Student Development
What they do: Program and course planning, resolve academic issues, and offer degree information	What they do: recommend classroom and exam accommodations for students with accessibility needs
In: Dante Lenardon Hall DL 104	In: Wemple 151
Web: <a href="https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/facts-and-information/administrative-departments/academic-deans-office/">https://www.kings.uwo.ca/about-kings/facts-and-information/administrative-departments/academic-deans-office/</a>	Web: <a href="https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/accessibility-services/">https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/accessibility-services/</a>
Phone: 519-518-2907	Phone: 519-433-3491 ext.7800
Email: <a href="mailto:Academic.Counselling@kings.uwo.ca">Academic.Counselling@kings.uwo.ca</a>	Email: <a href="mailto:acsd@kings.uwo.ca">acsd@kings.uwo.ca</a>

# When in Doubt Refer to ACSD Services

- **Where:** Wemple 151 (Monday to Friday 9:00am-4:30PM)
- **Web:** <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/acsd-appointment-request/>
- **Phone:** 519-433-3491 ext. 7800
- **Email:** [acsd@kings.uwo.ca](mailto:acsd@kings.uwo.ca)

# Same Day ACSD Appointments

- Same Day Telephone Appointments for Accessibility and Personal Counselling
  - Monday to Friday from 1:30PM-3:30PM
  - To book:
    - Call: 519-433-3491 ext. 7800
    - Stop by Wemple 151

(Note: offered only during the Fall/Winter term and closed for Fall/Winter reading week and Holiday closure).

# Accessing Services

## New to Services

- ❑ Complete the online intake:  
<https://acsdintake.kc.uwo.ca/ClockWork/custom/misc/home.aspx>
- ❑ Complete appointment request form:  
<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/acsd-appointment-request/appointment-request-form/>

## Returning to Services

- ❑ Complete the appointment request form:  
<https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/acsd-appointment-request/appointment-request-form/>

# Mental Health & Wellness Resources at King's

- <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/current-students/student-affairs/mental-health-and-wellness-at-king-s/>
  - List of apps
  - Wellness groups
  - Tips/FAQs
- Reflection Room: on 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of Student Life Centre
- Fitness Room: on lower level of Student Life Centre
- Campus Ministry: <https://www.kings.uwo.ca/campus-ministry/>

# King's Library Resources

- King's Library Resources:
  - Self-help books
  - MUSE:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ1TtFw3xlo>
  - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) lamps

Note: MUSE and SAD lamps are available only for an inter-library loan in a study room- ask the library front desk staff.

# Western's Health and Wellness Services

- **Web:** <https://www.uwo.ca/health/>
- **Phone:** 519-661-3030
  - Medical/Physical Health Care: UCC Room 11
  - Counselling and Psychiatry
  - Group Care and Workshops
  - Sexual Violence Support
  - Enhancing My Wellness





# Western Resources Cont'd

- **Peer Support Centre:**

<https://westernusc.ca/services/peer-support-centre/>

– In: UCC Room 76

- **The Wellness Education Centre:**

<https://westernusc.ca/wellness-education-center/>

– In: UCC Room 76

– Phone: 519-661-2111

# TAKE CARE

## After Hours Support

### **Good2Talk**

Call 1-866-925-5454 or  
Text GOOD2TALKON to  
686868

24/7 professional counselling,  
information, and referrals for  
post-secondary students.

### **Anova**

1-800-265-1576 or  
519-642-3000 24/7

Call if you are in crisis or  
seeking information  
about leaving an abusive  
relationship/safety plan.

### **St. Joseph's Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Treatment Program**

519-646-6100 ext. 64224  
268 Grosvenor St.  
London, ON

### **Women's Rural Resource Centre**

1-800-265-5390 24/7  
145 Beech St.  
Strathroy, ON  
[www.wrrcsa.org](http://www.wrrcsa.org)  
Community resource in  
education, prevention and  
support for women and  
children impacted by abuse.

### **ReachOut247.ca**

Call 519-433-2023 or  
1-866-933-2023

Text 519-433-2023

Call or web chat 24/7 with a  
professional who can provide  
information, resources, and  
mobile crisis support.

### **Zhaawanong Women's Shelter**

Crisis Line 24/7

1-800-605-7477

256 Hill St. London, ON

519-432-2270

Emergency shelter and  
support for Indigenous  
women and their children.

### **Hope for Wellness Helpline**

1-855-242-3310 24/7

[www.hopeforwellness.ca](http://www.hopeforwellness.ca)

Offers immediate mental  
health counselling and crisis  
intervention to all Indigenous  
peoples across Canada.

### **Victim Support Line**

1-888-579-2888, or

416-314-2447

24/7 Victim Support Line.

### **CMHA Crisis**

#### **Counselling**

Support Line 24/7

519-601-8055 or

1-844-360-8055

Walk-in mental health and  
addictions support available  
24/7 at 534 Queens Ave.

London, ON

519-434-9191

#### **LGBT Youthline**

Call 1-800-268-9688,

Text 647-694-4275

or Web Chat

[www.youthline.ca](http://www.youthline.ca)

Confidential, non-judgmental  
and informed LGBTQQ2SI  
peer support.

#### **Together All**

[www.togetherall.com](http://www.togetherall.com)

Online peer-to-peer support  
community for your mental  
health.

#### **Addiction, Mental Health and Problem Gambling Services**

1-866-531-2600

or Web Chat

[www.connexontario.ca](http://www.connexontario.ca)

Provides information about  
support and treatment  
services in your community.

# Summary of Learning Objectives

- **1. Prevalence and Impact:**
  - Mental health problems are prevalent
  - Mental health challenges negatively impact learning
  - Student Leaders are often a first point of contact
- **2. Recognizing students in distress:**
  - Don't try to diagnose, notice people, listen, ASK & REFER (use empathetic responding)

# Summary of Objectives Cont'd

- **3. Role of Empathy and Compassion:**
  - Empathy: Knowing, feeling, sensing, and understanding the experience of another person
  - Compassion: Notice and acknowledge distress, offer kind/caring response, and remember distress is normal
  - Balance empathy with compassion
  - Cultivate your own self-empathy and self-compassion
  - **Key to empathetic responding is: Active Listening**

# Summary of Objectives Cont'd

- **4. How to respond empathetically and where to refer**
  - Responding is a 2 step-process:
    - **1. Acknowledge emotion**
      - Be sincere, try “I can hear how difficult....”
    - **2. Offer support & refer to campus service**
      - “Let me help you with that...” provide service information
      - Avoid: minimizing, judgements, personal disclosures, or advice
  - Refer to: offer service information or walk the student to the service (where applicable)
    - Kings ACSD (W151)
    - Western’s: Health and Wellness resources

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