Possible signs that may indicate potential mental health problems include:

- Progressive or sudden deterioration in attendance, attention, participation or quality of work;
- Progressive or rapid deterioration in appearance (sad, ill, unkempt, dramatic increase or decrease in weight);
- Deterioration in social behaviour. Unusual behaviour or appearance;
- Dramatic swings in expression of feeling or social engagement;
- Flat or exaggerated emotional responses that are inappropriate to the situation;
- Concerns expressed by peers;
- Seemingly outrageous claims or personal statements;
- Inappropriate or untimely responses;
- Repeated requests for special consideration;
- Something odd or unpredictable about their manner which makes you feel concerned or uneasy.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH STUDENTS WHO MAY BE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

If you have concerns about a student’s well-being it is important to broach the subject with them. Do not avoid the situation or pretend that nothing is wrong. It is obviously important to approach the student in an empathetic and understanding way. People with mental health difficulties have often experienced rejection in the past and establishing a good relationship with plenty of encouragement can in itself be useful.

The general principles of effective communication apply in this context – making sufficient time; a private space; a non-judgemental attitude; active listening; use of open-ended questions and clarification.

Simply asking the student how they are might provide them with an opportunity to discuss their problem/situation/illness with you. Getting this initial information then assists you in making an assessment about what has to happen next.

Confidentiality

Ensuring confidentiality is vital in encouraging students to seek help when appropriate. Students should be advised that any information they give will be treated with respect and will only be passed on to those who need to know. Information should be shared with others only for the purposes of providing care, support or protection. The student should always be asked to give (informed) consent before information is shared.

However, it is important to state that there are also limits to confidentiality (no-one has a duty to maintain absolute confidentiality in any circumstance). As a general rule, if you have serious concerns about the student’s safety or well-being, or the safety or well-being of others, you have a duty of care to disclose information.

Referral

Teaching and counselling are very different roles. It is important to recognise your own boundaries and to refer to the Counselling and Disability Services when this is appropriate. Tutors and frontline staff are often the first point of contact for a student experiencing problems, so it is essential that you are aware of support networks and procedures.

For further details see flow chart in “Counselling & Disability Services” information sheet.
TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

As with all students with a disability, flexibility of teaching is pivotal to students who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

The UWS Disability Service ascribes to the principles of Universal Design as adopted by the AVCC. The Centre for Universal Design promotes general principles which were devised to guide and educate designers of environments, products and communications so they can create more usable products and environments.

The key principles which can be related to learning material production are summarised below:

- Design for equitable use. Products should be identical or at least equitable in every way for all users.
- Design so that products can be used flexibly by people with different tools or access, or abilities.
- Design simply and consistently.
- Distinguish between important information and supporting information, and give some thought to providing alternative paths to key information
- Think about users and how they will use a product before it is designed. Try to pre-empt any misinterpretations and provide clear instructions.

In the delivery of a unit of study this relates to where lectures and tutorials are held, how a course is delivered and how learning is assessed. The principles of universal design in the educational environment imply the provision of options for all students, not just students who have identified themselves as having a disability or mental health problem. The overall guiding principle is - if a provision is made for one student who has a disability, then all students benefit.

There are some practical steps you can take to help a student who is experiencing mental health difficulties:

- Understand the facts about mental illness;
- Ask what support the student may need. Often the student will know exactly what specific assistance will make a difference;
- Assessment time is stressful for all students, but for students with a mental illness, this stress can trigger an episode. Try to accommodate the student’s special needs as much as possible;
- Be aware of the range of accommodations that are possible to support students with disabilities.

The kinds of academic support which are likely to be required by students with mental health difficulties are:

- good general academic advice, support and encouragement;
- speedy and clear feedback on assignments;
- the possibility of extra tutorial support to enable the student to catch up on missed coursework. To this end, the UWS Disability Service promotes the ‘Bright Sparks’ tutor scheme, which allows students with a disability to access affordable peer tutoring. Details of this are available from Dianne Worthington - d.worthington@uws.edu.au
- the possibility of extra time in exams or an alternative assessment;
- using alternative assessment strategies (eg, some students may not be able to manage oral presentations);
- the possibility of re-negotiating deadlines for submission of work;
- taping lectures and placing notes on WebCT;
- students may need a break from their studies (due to hospitalisation) and therefore flexible study options may be required.

Where students have an Academic Integration Plan these provisions can be included as a matter of course.

Lecturers should try to spread work evenly and avoid ‘bunching’ of deadlines. This may be unavoidable if you have no control of the demands of other units. A few deadlines close together can be particularly stressful for a student experiencing mental health difficulties. In these cases, it may be necessary to be flexible with your unit deadlines if a student is struggling to complete a piece of work due to their illness or condition.

TEACHING RESOURCES

- The Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training (ADCET) is a web-based information source that provides information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, accommodations and support services for students in higher education. www.adcet.edu.au
- Inclusive assessment practices and approaches to teaching that will help students with mental health issues to learn—University of South Australia. unisa.edu.au/regdisability/teaching_students.htm
- Providing Learning Support for Students with Mental Health Difficulties Undertaking Fieldwork and related activities. www.uws.edu.au/students/ods/counsellingservice
- www.uws.edu.au/students/ods/disabilityservice

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