

MODULE 4.4

HELPING INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS

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Helping individual students

Objectives

- School staff have knowledge and skills for initiating conversations with students they are worried about.

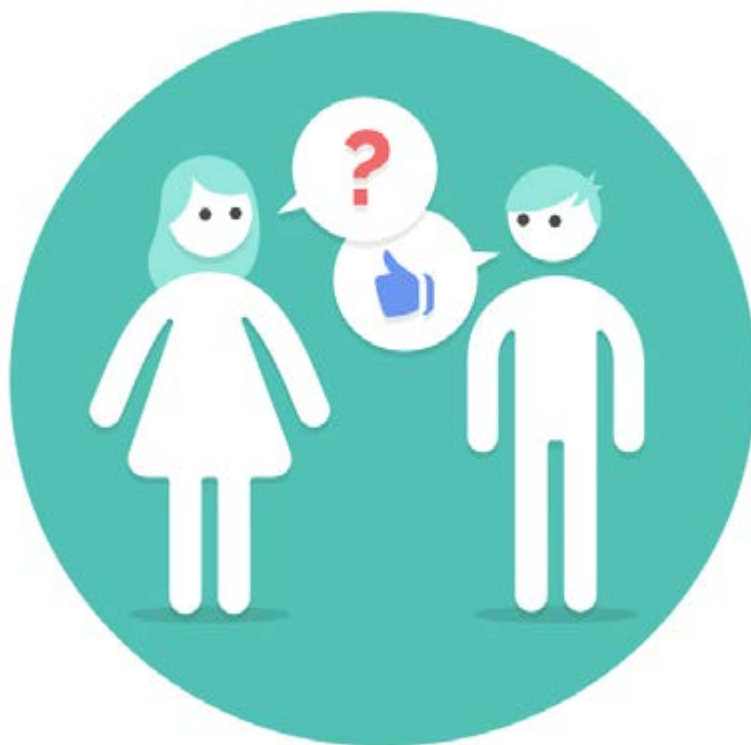
Outcomes

- School staff consult with senior staff when sufficiently worried about a student's wellbeing and act within the school's policies and procedures.
- School staff have the knowledge and skills to ask students they are worried about if they are OK and to help them to access support if required.
- School staff understand their general role boundaries in providing support to students experiencing difficulties.

Key messages

- Being able to initiate conversation with a student when worried about their wellbeing may be the most significant support a school staff member can provide.
- It is imperative that concerns about a student's wellbeing are discussed with appropriate staff such as welfare staff or the school principal.
- Understand confidentiality, and its limits, with respect to student conversations.
- Be aware of, and look after, your own mental health.

Discussing concerns with students



The prospect of having a conversation with a student about their wellbeing can seem daunting. You may well worry that you'll make things worse, or that the young person won't want to talk about their problems. However, most young people report feeling relieved once they talk about their problems and are grateful that someone cares enough to take the time and ask if they are OK.

If you have concerns about a student, it is important they are given the opportunity to have a conversation with an appropriate staff member. You need to consider who might be the best person to have the conversation – it may not be you. Does the young person have a particular staff member they trust, or are more likely to open up to?

Know your role

As a school staff member, you spend a substantial amount of time with students. You are in a unique and important position to notice changes in a young person, and to detect if they're struggling with their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and to facilitate support if needed.

It is important to remember however, that your expertise is in education and that you are not expected to be a mental health professional. Talking to a student about what might be going on for them does not mean that you have to have all the answers or the solution to their problem. It is not appropriate for you to diagnose or seek to 'treat' mental health problems.

Talking with the student is about:

- helping them to work through or resolve any minor issues (friendship issues and study demands are some possible examples)
- helping them to access professional support, either internally (school counsellor) or externally if the problems appear complex or have a significant impact on the student
- providing general understanding and support, particularly so as to keep them engaged in their schooling.



Mental health myth:

“I can't do anything to help a young person experiencing mental health difficulties.”

In fact, school staff are often the first to notice when students are struggling. Showing you are concerned and helping a young person to access support may be the most significant thing you do.

General guidelines for conversations with students

Introduction

Sometimes conversations about mental health issues happen incidentally or are initiated by the students themselves. For example, you may observe a student who is clearly distressed or a student may come to you upset about something that has happened to them. In situations such as these, it will be clear that a conversation is needed and you will be able to respond by providing or organising emotional support to help students work through any issues.



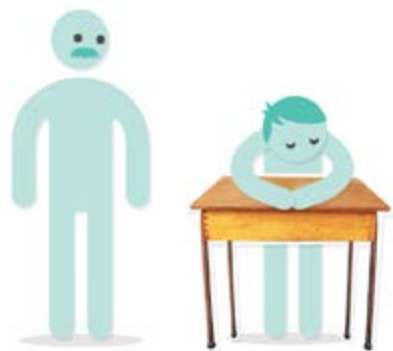
However, it is often the case that you and other school staff notice worrying changes in a student's emotions, behaviours or thinking patterns. For example, behaviours such as 'shutting everyone out and wanting to be alone', or 'being more sensitive to things they would normally brush off' may indicate the student is struggling with their mental health (see **Module 4.3 When should I be concerned?** for more information). In situations like this, it is important that you are able to initiate a conversation with the student if sufficiently concerned.



We know that young people are often poor at seeking help when struggling with personal or mental health issues. This can occur for a variety of reasons:

- They may be struggling to understand what is happening to them or not have the words.
- Often it is about feelings of shame or embarrassment of what others will think. Young people may think they are the only ones who are having such difficulties and no one can possibly understand or help.
- Sometimes it is about not knowing who they can talk to or preferring to deal with problems themselves.

It is well known that when young people do seek help, they tend to reach out to friends, family and trusted adults such as school staff, rather than to a health or mental health professional (Rickwood, et al., 2005). For this reason, initiating a conversation with a student you are worried about, and asking if they are OK, can be the most significant thing you do for a young person.



Identifying your concerns

It can be helpful when you have concerns about a student to reflect on what you are specifically worried about. Consider what changes you've noticed about the student. How long the changes have been occurring? How are these changes affecting the student's ability to study and work, to function or to continue with usual personal relationships? As a general rule, the longer the problem has been going on and the greater the distress the more cause there is for concern (see **Module 4.3 When should I be concerned?** for more information).

Consult with others

In addition to being clear on your own concerns and observations, it is prudent to discuss these with senior staff – particularly those with specialist roles in student mental health. This will help you to clarify your concerns and think through whether you are best placed to have this conversation. It will also help you determine whether the concerns you have are better raised with parents in the first instance, rather than the student.

Your school will have clear policies and procedures regarding which staff to speak to about concerns for a student's mental health.

Talking to relevant senior staff:

- helps you to understand whether others share your concerns
- ensures you are not dealing with the issue alone
- enables you to problem solve with others about how best to approach the issue
- provides better monitoring of the issue.

You should always consult with a senior staff member or welfare/wellbeing staff if you feel that a student is at risk of harming themselves or somebody else. You can develop a plan together about who else needs to be involved and how you will involve parents or guardians.

For more on this information gathering stage, please see **Module 4.3 When should I be concerned?**



Having the conversation

If you believe you need to have a conversation with a student about your concerns, there are some factors to consider that will help support successful communication. These are discussed below.

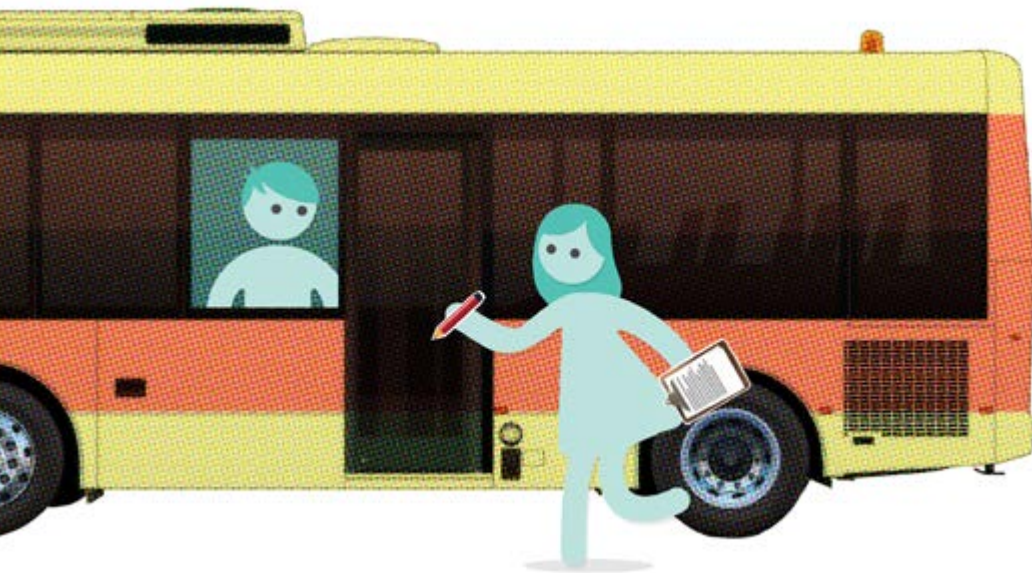
It's important to remember the general intent of the conversation is to indicate to the student you have noticed some things that have worried you, and you want to know if they are OK and whether there is anything you can do to help.

Selecting the right time and place

Before the conversation has even begun, a quick way to get off on the right foot is to select a good time or place to bring up your concerns.

Consider the timing of your conversation

- *Is it the right time for you?*
Ensure you have enough time if the student does want to discuss things. You do not want to be cutting them off because you are running late to teach another class.
- *Is it the right time for the student?*
The end of the school day when the young person has a bus to catch may not be the best time, for example.



Also, it is a good idea to delay a conversation when emotions are running high (staff member's and/or student's) – particularly when one or other party is angry about something. Under such circumstances the student will find it difficult to think and reflect on any concerns that you raise.

Select an appropriate place to talk to the student.

- Adolescents often find it less threatening and easier to communicate while engaging in another task, such as art or sport. Consider having the conversation over a game of basketball or another activity you know the student has an interest in.
- Choose a place that is quiet enough that you can be heard and have a chat but still has others around. Moving away from a busy corridor, where other students are within earshot, may encourage the student to open up.
- Choose a place where you are not alone with the student but are still be able to have a private conversation.



Initiating the conversation

Getting a student to open up can be difficult. Below are a few tips on how to start the conversation, set them at ease and encourage full responses.

- **Explain why you have concerns.**
It's important to set the context and let the student know why the conversation is taking place. Describe the things that you have noticed to encourage them to tell their story.
- **Use a 'noncritical but concerned' approach.**
Instead of saying "Your grades are dropping in maths" or "You're not getting enough sleep", approach the conversation with what you have noticed. For example, "I've noticed recently you've had trouble concentrating in class and you're tired. I'm getting a bit concerned about you and was just wondering if everything is OK?"
- **Use open-ended questions.**
Open-ended questions invite the student to expand instead of providing just 'Yes' and 'No' answers. For example, "What's been going on for you?"
- **Acknowledge the difficulty of talking about issues.**
Be as genuine as possible and acknowledge that this is a difficult conversation to have. For example, "This stuff can be difficult to talk about for everyone, I imagine it might be difficult for you – let's try to work through this together."
- **Let them know that it's OK not to talk.**
If the student doesn't want to talk to you, let them know that's OK – they don't have to. Let them know you will be available for them if ever they need someone to talk to or want to have a think about what they might want to say first. Ensure you make yourself available if they do approach you.



Mental health myth:

“Mental illness is ‘all in your mind’. The only way to get over it is to ‘snap out of it’”.

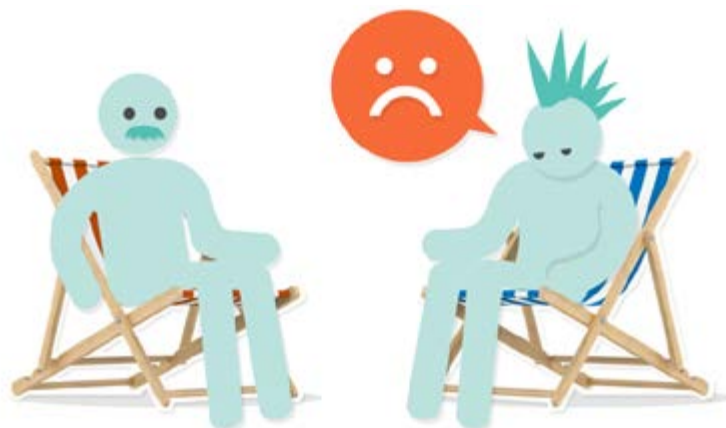
All mental health concerns need to be taken seriously. Dismissing or ignoring students’ concerns can make them feel embarrassed, stigmatized and reduce the likelihood of them seeking help in the future.

Responding to your student

If the student does want to talk, consider your response to what they are telling you. Your response consists of more than your verbal communication. It includes silences, tone of voice and your body language. Below are some of the things to consider.

- **Listen.**

Allow time for the young person to get out what they need to say. This might be the first conversation they have had with anyone about their concerns and they may take some time to find the right words to describe how they are feeling.



- **Be non-judgemental.**

Be aware of not expressing your own opinions or jumping to conclusions. Instead, listen to what the young person is saying and try to understand it in the context of their experience – not yours.

- **Body language.**

It is also important to be aware of your body language and reactions to what the young person is telling you. It is possible they are already quite anxious about opening up to someone so a shocked reaction, for example, will not encourage them to continue talking.

- **Acknowledge what the student is saying.**

It is helpful to acknowledge the feelings behind what the student is saying rather than focusing on whether their views are right or wrong. For example, when a student with a body image or eating issues says “I’m fat”, it is generally unhelpful to agree or disagree with this statement or compare the young person to their peers to try to prove they are not fat. Instead, acknowledge their feelings and say something like, “I’m hearing that you feel like you are fat at the moment and it’s really upsetting for you, so much so that you are not eating. That must be really hard for you.”

- **Reflect and clarify.**

Summarising what the student has told you ensures that you understand what they have said correctly. It also demonstrates to the young person that you have not only listened to them but have understood them. This helps build a positive relationship and trust.

- **Provide support and information.**

'Normalise but don't minimise.' It is important to let the young person know they are not alone and that many young people struggle with their thoughts and emotions. However, be aware not to minimise the young person's experience. Try not to say, for example, "Don't worry, heaps of teenagers feel depressed from time to time, you'll be fine." Instead say something like, "It can be common for people to experience these kind of feelings, especially when they are going through difficulties. Perhaps we can work out together how we can get some information or help."

It is important to avoid 'diagnosing' a student even if you think you have an idea of what they may be experiencing. This is not the role of the staff member and the student may feel labelled. Remember, worrying changes in a student's mood or behaviour may reflect a relatively 'normal' response to a stressful life event and may resolve naturally over time.

- **Help students to access information or professional support when concerns are significant.**

Many young people worry about going to see a school counsellor or mental health professional. This can be for a variety of reasons, such as not wanting to involve their parents, not wanting to be labelled as having a mental health problem, shame and embarrassment and concerns over confidentiality.

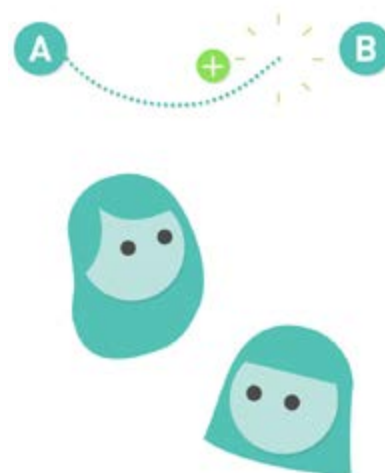
It is reasonable to check out their perceptions or previous experiences with mental health professionals. It may be that students have some unrealistic fears about what will occur or what treatment will involve, if required. They may believe that medical professionals will make them take medications against their will. You can also help them to access information from reputable websites about specific mental health issues and support options



- **Promote hope, and follow up.**

Adopt a positive attitude about the future for the young person and consider their strengths. Be aware not to make promises or be too unrealistic. Avoid saying things like, “All your problems will go away when you get some help”. Instead say, “I’m confident that with some support you will start to feel better one day at a time”. Help students to understand that in deciding to talk about their problems, they are probably doing the most important thing they can to protect their mental health.

Ensure you check in with the student on how they are going and if they are getting the support they require.



- **Discuss confidentiality, if required.**

As a general staff member, you should not be looking to explore complex issues. If the student begins raising challenging issues, you may need to explain that there are certain circumstances where you must advise others of your concerns. This is particularly the case where you feel their safety, or someone else’s safety, is at risk.

It is important to familiarise yourself with your local school policies, as well as state and territory guidelines, so you are clear under what circumstances you are required to report your concerns to parents, child protection or other statutory authorities.



Debriefing

Always look to discuss any concerns with appropriate senior staff following conversations with students – particularly if the student became distressed or angry (see ‘Frequent concerns’ below). It is also important to ensure you receive support to manage the situation and to know where you can access support services.



Diversity

It is important to appreciate that students from different cultural backgrounds, and students with different life experiences, are likely to see and experience certain issues quite differently. Be aware of diversity and seek guidance from experienced professionals if needed.

Frequent concerns



What if a student doesn't want to talk?

Unless you have identified any immediate risks it is OK to leave it. Let it sit with them. At least now the young person knows you have noticed there is something wrong and it may have got them thinking about talking to someone or getting support. Let them know they can approach you if they change their mind or that you will check back in with them at a later stage.

What if a student gets distressed or angry?

Most students will respond positively to someone asking if they are OK, particularly staff members they trust and respect. Nevertheless, it is possible that some students will become distressed or even angry at such a conversation. It is important to remember that this may be because they do not want to acknowledge there is a problem or do not want anyone to notice they are struggling. If the student becomes greatly upset, you should help them to access support as early as possible, particularly if the issues appear significant.



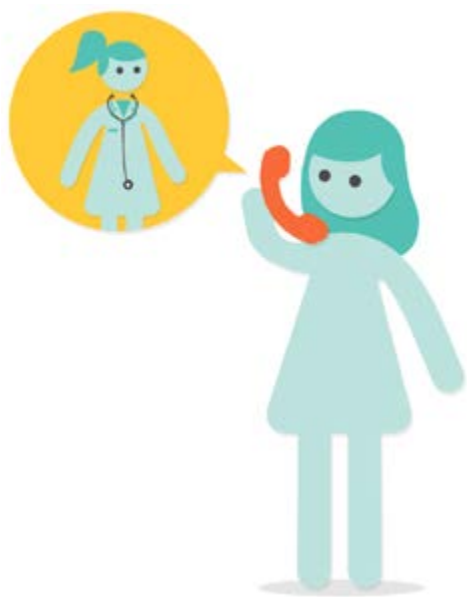
If a student becomes angry, reaffirm that you have asked out of concern. It may be best to have a chat at another time when things are calmer or arrange someone else to speak to them. Staff self-care is important. If the student has a history of being verbally or physically aggressive to you (as a general staff member), you are probably not the best person to initiate such a conversation.

Ensure you consult with others if the student has become angry. Take any threats seriously and discuss whether anyone needs to be notified of any risks, such as threats made to yourself, other members of staff, students or parents.

What if a student asks me to promise not to tell anyone?

Never agree to keep secrets up front. If pressed to do this by a student, explain to the student that their privacy is important to you and while you will do your best to maintain their confidentiality, this is not always possible. For example, if the student seems at risk of hurting themselves or others or there are issues of abuse it will be necessary to share this information.

You should always consult with a senior staff member or welfare/wellbeing staff if you feel that a student is at risk of harming themselves or somebody else. You can develop a plan together about who else needs to be involved and how you will involve parents or guardians. Be clear with the student about what you will need to tell, who you will tell and why. Offer for the student to be involved in this conversation, if appropriate, so that they will feel part of the process.



What if a student tells me they are self-harming or thinking of suicide?

Take threats of self-harm and suicide seriously. Check if they require immediate medical attention and ensure medical follow up if required. Don't leave the young person on their own if they have told you they have immediate plans to harm themselves. If you can't stay with them, you need to arrange someone to ensure they are safe. Ensure you consult with senior staff or welfare/wellbeing staff to work out a plan to ensure the young person is immediately safe and receives some ongoing support.

What are my mandatory reporting requirements?

If staff have significant concerns about the wellbeing of a young person, it is a mandatory requirement to report this to child protection services and to notify the school principal or a member of the school leadership team.

Guidelines may vary in different states and territories. It is therefore important to familiarise yourself with your state or territory guidelines and your local school policies and procedures.

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

References and key readings

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