



Staff Guide to  
Supporting  
Students with

# Mental Health Difficulties



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Compiled by: Centre for Student  
Counselling and Development (CSCD)

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## Objectives

This Staff Guide to Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties is one of a number of initiatives at Stellenbosch University (SU) aimed at promoting a campus environment conducive to mental well-being. Staff who have been on the front line of student care for many years will already be familiar with much of what follows. However, many staff members encounter such issues infrequently. This guide is primarily intended for them.



## Aims

- Raise awareness among staff of the range of experiences, behaviours, and characteristics that may indicate a student may be experiencing mental health concerns.
- Provide a step-by-step guide for staff on how to respond in such situations, particularly in a crisis.
- Outline available resources for further advice, information, and support for both staff and students.

# 1. Introduction

The coordination and overseeing of student welfare within the University, falls under the Responsibility Centre of the Dean of Students, within which the Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD) is located. The CSCD consists of four units – Psychotherapeutic and Support Services, Academic Counselling and Development, Graduand Career Services and Disabilities. Each unit provides specialised support and services. Scan the QR code below to book a session with one of our units.



## 1.1 Disability Unit

The Disability Unit offers a range of services to students with disabilities, from advice on appropriate academic support solutions and access to tailored study materials. The Unit's activities are informed by the SU Disability Access Policy. The Unit also aims to create an enabling environment that empowers students with disabilities to achieve their full potential. We do this by raising awareness and by enabling their effective integration into campus life and the student community.

The Disability Unit offers various training opportunities for students and staff. These include the accredited Lead with Disability course and the Siyakhula staff training sessions hosted by the Human Resources Division.



### 1.1.1. Learn SA Sign Language

You can learn South African Sign Language through the Language Centre. For more information, contact Michelle Pieters at [michellep@sun.ac.za](mailto:michellep@sun.ac.za).

### 1.1.2. Lead with Disability



Lead with Disability is a transcript-recognised course for students that covers universal access, universal design, and reasonable accommodation from a disability perspective. Sessions are held over lunchtime during the first and second semesters on the Stellenbosch Campus and are free of charge. For more information, email [disability@sun.ac.za](mailto:disability@sun.ac.za).

### 1.1.3. Staff training

SU's Human Resources Division hosts Siyakhula training sessions for staff. The Disability Unit presents the session on universal access, universal design, reasonable accommodation and discussions about disability inclusion on campus.

### 1.1.4. Test and exam concessions

The Disability Unit coordinates the test and exams concessions function at the CSCD and works in liaison with the Assessments Administration, Academic Records and Graduation (AARGO) office, specifically Assessments Administration.

## 1.2 Unit for Academic Counselling and Development

The Unit for Academic Counselling and Development equips students with the skills to reach their potential by means of various services, including counselling and work sessions focused on academic success.



### 1.2.1. Work sessions

The Unit offers a variety of interactive work sessions to registered students. These sessions cover themes about study skills, time and stress management, self-motivation, self-development and preparing for tests and exams. The work sessions are presented either online or in person. Please refer students to [studysuccess@sun.ac.za](mailto:studysuccess@sun.ac.za) for more information, or share the following QR code or [link for students to enroll](#) in the various workshops offered:



### 1.2.2. Academic Counselling sessions

All students are welcome to schedule a 1 on 1 intake appointment with one of our counsellors or educational psychologists. The presenting academic need will be explored, after which further recommendations will be made regarding appropriate support interventions to enhance academic performance. Sessions are approximately 45 minutes.

**To book an appointment, contact:**

**Stellenbosch: 021 808 4707**

**Tygerberg: 021 927 7020**

**Email: [studysuccess@sun.ac.za](mailto:studysuccess@sun.ac.za)**



**Please include several available dates and times as well as your class schedule.  
We will respond within 24 to 48 hours.**

### 1.2.1. Career counselling

The Unit offers a career counselling service to registered students who are uncertain about their current degree programmes, who want to change their current degree programme or who want to explore different career opportunities. Students can schedule an intake session during which the counsellor/psychologist will assess their needs and ask questions relevant to their career development. The intake interview can be followed-up with psychometric assessments that will help students learn more about their interests, personality, strengths and aptitude. After the psychometric assessment, the counsellor/psychologist will explore the results with the student and make recommendations regarding possible career options. A more explorative/narrative approach can also be followed. Students can schedule an appointment with a registered counsellor or psychologist by visiting us at 37 Victoria Street, emailing [studysuccess@sun.ac.za](mailto:studysuccess@sun.ac.za) or calling 021 8084707.

## 1.3 Unit for Graduand Career Services

The services of the Unit for Graduand Career Services are geared towards supporting registered SU students to make the transition from education to employment. The Unit works closely with potential employers, focusing on facilitating opportunities for students and graduate recruiters to connect. For more info or to book a session, please email [careerservices@sun.ac.za](mailto:careerservices@sun.ac.za)



### 1.3.1. For employers

Employers can recruit and connect with SU students through various events, activities, and platforms: participating in SU career fairs, conducting on-campus recruitment interviews and assessments, advertising opportunities in our Graduate Recruitment Programme booklet, and more. To participate in any activities or events, please call us on 021 808 3568 or e-mail us at [careerservices@sun.ac.za](mailto:careerservices@sun.ac.za).

Employers can also register on our careers portal, [www.gradlinc.co.za](http://www.gradlinc.co.za) to advertise job vacancies, connect with students and register for events. *If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Gradlinc at [support@gradlinc.co.za](mailto:support@gradlinc.co.za) or alternatively give them a call on 021 137 1744.*

### 1.3.2. For students

SU students have access to services assisting them with the job-seeking process. These services include guidance on CV writing and honing your interview skills, tips for optimising their online brand and LinkedIn profile, and networking opportunities with employers. For more info, students may call us on 021 808 3568 or e-mail us at [careerservices@sun.ac.za](mailto:careerservices@sun.ac.za).

To access online career opportunities, register on Gradlinc ([www.gradlinc.co.za](http://www.gradlinc.co.za)), the University's official recruitment platform, where available opportunities are advertised. Through the platform, students will be able to view and apply for relevant positions. For any assistance with the platform, students may contact Gradlinc directly at [support@gradlinc.co.za](mailto:support@gradlinc.co.za) or on 021 137 1744.

### 1.3.3. Our services

#### a) Curriculum vitae (CV) and cover-letter writing

We have a dedicated team member to help students write and design their CV and cover letter. It is important that these documents contain up-to-date, high-quality information that will entice and convince employers to invite a candidate for an interview.

#### b) Interview skills

The Unit provides thorough work sessions on preparing students for industry interviews. We take students through various interview scenarios, including online interviews and interviews conducted on virtual reality platforms. We also prep for competency interviews, which are designed to test a candidate's skill and competency levels.

#### c) LinkedIn profile & Personal branding

Being visible on social media and online recruitment platforms is essential in today's job market. The Unit has a dedicated expert who will share valuable insights and practical tips on how to develop a strong LinkedIn profile that attracts recruiters locally and internationally.

As recruiters increasingly use social media to identify potential candidates, it is important for job seekers to cultivate a compelling online presence. Our sessions cover the do's and don'ts of personal branding, as well as strategies to enhance your digital footprint and improve your searchability.



## 1.4 Unit for Psychotherapeutic and Support Services

The Unit for Psychotherapeutic and Support Services provides professional counselling and support to students facing personal, academic, or mental health challenges, including emotional distress and trauma.

Our team of qualified psychologists, counsellors, and social workers offers both individual and group interventions. In addition, support extends to students in need of welfare assistance, including food support and emergency relief.



### 1.4.1. Our services

The Unit offers free and confidential individual and group counselling to students experiencing a range of challenges, including emotional distress, mental health difficulties, trauma and loss, and substance use.

Our dedicated professional staff are available to support registered students at both Stellenbosch and Tygerberg campuses. Additional support includes assistance with the Work Study Programme and access to food relief for students in need.

**To book an appointment, contact:**

**Stellenbosch: 021 808 4994**

**Tygerberg: 021 927 7020**

**Email: [supportus@sun.ac.za](mailto:supportus@sun.ac.za)**



### 1.4.2. Screenings

Before our registered counsellors can direct a student to the correct form of therapy or group intervention, they need to conduct a thorough screening to conclude what challenges are being experienced and how they can best help. To make an appointment, phone us on 021 808 4994 (Stellenbosch) or 021 927 7020 (Tygerberg), or e-mail us at [supportus@sun.ac.za](mailto:supportus@sun.ac.za).

### 1.4.3. Individual counselling sessions

Short-term individual counselling or therapy is offered to SU students only. Once a student has been screened and the nature of the challenge has been identified, the counsellor or clinical/ counselling psychologist will work with the student towards the best solution possible.

To make an appointment, phone us on 021 808 4994 (Stellenbosch) or 021 927 7020 (Tygerberg), or e-mail us at [supportus@sun.ac.za](mailto:supportus@sun.ac.za).



#### **1.4.4. Group counselling sessions**

Certain challenges are better managed in a group setting, where you can find support from peers who are experiencing similar problems or challenges. The Unit hosts several therapeutic and support group sessions, each with a very specific focus. During the screening session, the counsellor will advise the student on the group process and make the necessary referral.

#### **1.4.5. Online Psychological Skills Training Group**

Students are invited to join the online Psychological Skills Training Group facilitated by our professional and trained psychologists and counsellors. The skills you will learn are grounded in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and will assist you in dealing with depression and anxiety. During your screening session, the counsellor will advise you on the group process and make the necessary referral. To register for a group session, scan the QR code or use the [registration form link](#):



#### **1.4.6. Food assistance**

We realise that many students face challenges regarding access to food. The Unit has food assistance programmes in place to assist you if you need support. Please apply at the Unit, or e-mail us at [supportus@sun.ac.za](mailto:supportus@sun.ac.za), or phone us on 021 808 4994 (Stellenbosch) or 021 927 7020 (Tygerberg).

#### **1.4.7. Work Study Programme**

The Work Study Programme allows students to gain work experience while studying, and to earn a minimal monthly income to assist with their financial needs. For more information, e-mail Lizzie Witbooi at [lgwitbooi@sun.ac.za](mailto:lgwitbooi@sun.ac.za).

## 2. Potential indicators of mental illness

Staff, tutors and mentors are in a good position to detect early signs of trouble, especially in smaller classes. Very few mental illnesses of a serious nature occur without a great deal of warning, though some may be of only a few days' duration.

### **Look out for the following indicators:**

- deterioration in quality of work;
- lateness for or absence from classes or other academic appointments;
- regular late submission of work;
- changes in social interaction – especially avoidance or withdrawal;
- increasingly unsightly appearance;
- noticeable deterioration in personal hygiene; and
- concerns raised by other students and/or staff.



Often staff will know that a student is experiencing mental health difficulties only if the student tells them. Some students conceal their difficulties, and the nature of their problems will not be detected easily. In some instances, it may be appropriate to ask a student's friends if they, too, are concerned about his or her well-being. Please just remember that you do not have to counsel them – this is not your role.

If there seems to be reason for concern, the first step is to talk to the student to find out a bit more about their situation. In some cases, staff find that a student is already in contact with a counsellor, doctor or psychiatrist. Talking to a student and showing concern may reassure them and allay one's own worries.

If staff remain worried after having talked with a student, or are unable to coax a student into talking, the most appropriate course of action probably is to inform the student about the sources of help that are available and to request that the student inform the staff member when, and with whom, they have made an appointment. If the student fails to do so, the staff member may offer to refer the student. Remember to have the contact details on hand or saved somewhere.

# 3. How to respond to a student experiencing mental health difficulties

## Is this problem urgent?

### Do you think any of the following apply?

- There is an immediate risk of suicide.
- The student may be at a serious risk of hurting themselves or others.
- The student is physically seriously ill.
- The student has stopped functioning academically and/or in other areas of their life (e.g. cannot get out of bed in the morning) – see par. 4, "Emergency Procedures".



YES

NO

## How can you help?



- Do you have the time and / or the skills?
- Do you know who you should consult for advice?

NO

YES

## Refer the student to a support service



- If you are unsure which service the student requires, consider referring them to the CSCD.
- Where appropriate, encourage the student to make an appointment by using the phone in your office, or assist them in completing the booking form immediately via the QR code below:



- Arrange a follow-up meeting with the student to check up on the situation and monitor academic progress.

## If the student will accept help

- Students may be escorted or directed to 37 Victoria Street (CSCD Reception), where a walk-in crisis service is available from Monday to Friday, 08h00-16h00.
- Contact the CSCD at 021 808 4994 (Stell) or 021 927 7020 (Tyg) to consult a psychologist or the Deputy Director in case the student is already known at the Centre (student's permission required for disclosure).
- If the risk is not acute, assist the student to contact one of the above persons (CSCD/Crisis Counsellor) themselves. Ask the student's permission to help them contact the appropriate service in order to ensure that contact has been established. It needed
- Should the situation require it, or if the incident occurs outside of CSCD hours or over the weekend, please contact emergency services: **ER24 – 010 205 3024. You may also request to speak to a crisis counsellor once on the call.**

## If the student will **not** accept help

Telephone the CSCD yourself to seek advice.  
Email the student the CSCD contact/book details.  
In exceptional circumstances, where someone may be at risk, you may contact ER24 without the student's consent.

## Offer appropriate and targeted support



### This may include the following:

- Listen to the student's concerns.
- Offer practical advice.
- Provide reassurance.
- Arrange a contract of support by referring the student to the CSCD and/or offering academic support at agreed times.

Be mindful of working beyond your scope and of potential role confusion.

### Resources:

CSCD Mon-Fri (08h00-16h00) 021 808 4994 (Stell) 021 927 7020 (Tyg) | ER24 010 205 3032  
CSDd: (Mo to Fri 08:00-16:00) 021 808 4994 (Stell) 021 927 7020 (Tyg) | ER24: 010 205 5032 (after hours).

If the student refuses all help, make a note of your concerns in the appropriate departmental files.

# 4. Emergency procedures: Coping with mental health emergencies

## Situation



## Management

### Panic



- Temporarily unable to function as expected.
- Suffers under intense apprehension or fear.
- Breathes through the mouth, or gags.
- Feels spaced out or dizzy.

- Give reassurance in a firm manner.
- Help the student calm down by letting him / her take deep breaths, in and out, counting to 4. Gradually extend up to the count of 8.
- When the student has calmed down, escort/refer the student to the CSCD Crisis Counsellor at 37 Victoria (between 8am-4pm). Call ER24 after hours and weekends

### Confusion



- Is muddled, restless, irritable.
- Speech may suggest dissociation from reality.
- Refuses to cooperate.
- Is disoriented and fearful.

- Speak simply and clearly.
- Provide adequate lighting.
- Contact/Refer to the CSCD/Crisis Counsellor, ER24 & Campus Security.

### Drowsiness



- Mental or physical functioning has slowed down completely.
- Gives no spontaneous responses.
- Is unable to interact.

- The student may hear what is being said around him / her; keep reassuring the student.
- Call ER24 ambulance or go to Campus Health, Contact Campus Security and CSCD if needed.
- While waiting, stay on the line with ER24 for instructions until assistance arrives.

### Memory loss



- It may have been caused by illness.
- If it happens suddenly, shock is the likely cause.

- Speak simply, clearly and reassure the student.
- Call ER24 or escort the student to Campus Health. You can also escort the student to the CSCD Crisis Counsellor at 37 Victoria Street between 8am-4pm.

### Self-harm



- (e.g. cutting)
- Suffers acute distress.
- This is a cry for help.
- Is possibly suicidal.

- Do not criticize or judge.
- Ask if the student wants to talk about it.
- Call for medical assistance if necessary (ER24)
- Refer/Escort the student to 37 Victoria Street to see the CSCD Crisis Counsellor available between 8am-4pm.
- Call ER24 or Campus Health.
- While waiting, stay on the line with ER24 for instructions until assistance arrives.
- Keep pills & bottles to show ambulance crew and ask the student what they have taken.
- Ask student about contacting family / friends.

### Suicide attempt



- (e.g. overdose)
- May have made previous attempts.

## Resources:

CSCD: (Mo to Fri 08:00-16:00) 021 808 4994/4707 (Stell)

021 927 700 (Tyg) | ER24: 010 205 3932 (after hours).

Campus Health: 021 808 3994/6 (Stell) | 021 927 7020 (Tyg)

076 431 0305 (24-hours emergency line)

Campus Security: 0800 02 58 27 (Stellenbosch)

0800 00 67 67 (Tygerberg)

# 5. Confidentiality

Not all staff are strictly bound by the same codes of confidentiality as a psychologist or counsellor. However, should you wish to share information about a student with other SU staff as part of your efforts to help that student, first seek the student's consent.

In certain instances, a student's personal data may be released to specified third parties for specified purposes. These include emergency situations such as illness or serious injury, or circumstances affecting personal safety. University staff have a duty of care to disclose necessary information where unreasonable failure to do so would probably expose others to risk of death or serious harm.

A staff member may protect a student's interests by disclosing the least information required in the circumstances to as few people as possible. Disclosure to doctors, psychologists or counsellors (themselves restricted as to what they may disclose according to the applicable code of ethics) qualifies as protecting the student's interests in this cautious way.



Without a student's consent, the University does not release information to parents, relatives, friends or any other third party. The fact that someone might be severely depressed, for example, does not of itself constitute an emergency situation and a staff member would be no right to contact the family without obtaining the student's permission.

**At the Centre for Student Counselling and Development we treat information received from students and staff with the utmost respect and confidentiality.** The Centre is guided in particular by the principles of ethical practice as stipulated by the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the South African Council for Social Services Professions, and in general by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974, the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011 and the Code of Good Practice on Handling Sexual Harassment Cases in the Workplace 2005.



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