



SOS Digital – Student Distress Guide



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I. Introduction

This Guide was created as a part of the implementation of the project SOS Digital – Providing Support to Students in Distress. The *SOS Digital* project is composed by a consortium of 4 Higher Education Institutions, from 4 different European countries: (1) University of Minho (UMinho - Coordinator) - Braga, Portugal, (2) Adam Mickiewicz University (UAM) - Poznań, Poland, (3) University Santiago de Compostela (USC) - Santiago de Compostela, Spain, (4) University Trento (UniTrento) - Trento, Italy.

Besides this Guide, the consortium behind the SOS Digital project produced a State of the Art document (<https://www.sosdigital.uminho.pt/en/StateOfTheArt>) with examples from various European countries regarding the implementation of good practices that respond to the needs of students in distress/psychological crisis. The examples include a wide range of activities aimed at providing support to students, academic and non-academic staff in response to crises that occur at universities.

The examples provide information on systemic solutions to provide effectively adequate assistance to students and university staff through (1) effective use of university resources, the involvement of professional staff from various disciplines such as psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, educators, etc. and (2) the involvement of counselling services functioning in the local environment, (3) methods of raising awareness of the threats affecting students and developing the competence of adequate response to threatening situations among students and employees, (4) ways of disseminating information on emergency procedures, about the available help offer and how to get it, (5) online platforms for assistance in situations of psychological crisis or at-risk/distress situations.

Student wellbeing has become a growing concern with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) broadly acknowledging the importance of implementing proper tools to support students in distress. Recognizing signs of distress and responding timely and appropriately are critical factors in supporting a healthy campus community. In this sense this Guide aims to offer clear guidance and direction on how to support students in distress, namely to identify distress situations, to identify resources available and to set out the reporting procedures for those who observe crisis scenarios.

It is important to underline that **this guide does not replace specialized help**, the goal is only to raise awareness on the recognition of warning signs and offer an effective first response to students who show distressful behaviours.

II. Mental Health & Well-Being

“Mental illnesses arise out of a complex mix of psychological, social, and biological influences. They are not the result of personal weaknesses, poor upbringings, or a lack of character or intelligence. People from all walks of life—regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, income, etc.— may experience mental illness.” (Reference: A Guide to Supporting Students in Distress at OCAD University)

Some numbers in the world:

- ✓ 12% of diseases worldwide are of mental origin, rising to 23% in developed countries.
- ✓ Depression disorders are the third leading cause of diseases (first in developed countries) and are expected to become the world's leading cause by 2030, followed by an expected increase of related suicide and parasuicide rates.
- ✓ Five of the top ten causes of disability and psychosocial dependence are neuropsychiatric disorders: depression (11.8%), alcohol-related problems (3.3%), schizophrenia (2.8%), bipolar disorder (2.4%) and dementia (1.6%).
- ✓ 165 million people in Europe are affected by illness or mental disorder annually.
- ✓ Only a quarter of patients with mental disorders receive treatment and only 10% have treatment deemed appropriate.
- ✓ Illness and mental disorders have in recent years become the leading cause of disability and a major cause of morbidity in societies.

(Reference: The Portuguese Society of Psychiatry Mental Health (<https://www.sppsm.org/informemente/guide-essential-guide-journalists/perturbacao-mental-number/>)

Different studies indicate the existence of a large scale of mental problems among university students (eg., Duffy, M., Twenge, J, & Joiner, T.E., 2019; Mental Health Stigma Survey; Mental Health in Higher Education Students - Experience of Psychiatry Consultation at São João Hospital). According to these studies, many of the most common mental health problems are related to occasional stress and adaptation factors, in which timely intervention is essential. However, most university students do not look for help due to several factors such as: concern for privacy and stigma, fear of discrimination, lack of perception of the need for treatment, difficult access to the information and procedures to be followed, among other. Therefore, some students, mainly those without social support network, may experience psychological crisis.

**Knowledge on how to deal with students in distress/crisis is crucial
Information and procedures need to be easily accessible to all the academic
community.**

III. How to take Action

As a member of the academic community your role **IS NOT** to serve as a counsellor, diagnose a student or solve the student's problems.

Your role is to:

1. **OBSERVE** and recognize possible manifestations of distress.
2. **COMMUNICATE** with the student.
3. **REFER** to the appropriate support

1. OBSERVE

Distress – “Great mental or physical suffering, such as extreme anxiety, sadness, or pain, or the state of being in danger or urgent need” (Cambridge Dictionary)

POSSIBLE MANIFESTATIONS of DISTRESS

Academic Indicators:

- ✓ Increased absence from classes
- ✓ Lack of participation
- ✓ Missed assignments, exams or appointments
- ✓ Deterioration in quality/quantity of work
- ✓ Extreme disorganization
- ✓ Inconsistent performance
- ✓ Lack of concentration

Cognitive, Emotional & Physical Indicators:

- ✓ Sadness
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Aggressivity
- ✓ Sleeping problems
- ✓ Changes in appetite
- ✓ Memory problems
- ✓ Lack of concentration

The presence of one of the indicators alone does not necessarily mean that the student is in serious difficulty. However, the more indicators are noticed, the more likely the student is to need help.

2. COMMUNICATE

General tips

- ✓ Conversation must take in a safe and private place
- ✓ Do not interrupt and listen attentively
- ✓ Be judgement-free
- ✓ Avoid problem solving or making promises
- ✓ Do not be afraid of silent moments during the conversation
- ✓ Do not make assumptions or offer advice
- ✓ Set a positive tone
- ✓ Ask direct questions
- ✓ Express concern and care

If you do not feel comfortable in establishing a direct conversation you should contact the relevant Advising services to ask for guidance.

3. REFER

In non-emergency situations, it is important to encourage the seeking of professional help. Should the student agree, you can make the referral to the relevant support services. In case of refusal of referral, it is important to stress the positive impact of seeking for adequate help and end the conversation in a way that allows for follow up.

In crisis and emergency situations, you need to **ASK for HELP**, following the established protocol.

IV. Student Crisis Support Protocol

Student Crisis Support Protocol only applies to students/staff from UMinho/ UniTrento /USC/AMU.

- ✓ If you are a student/staff from UMinho please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from UniTrento please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from USC please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from AMU please click [here](#)

V. Contacts

For relevant contacts please consult the “Student Distress Guide” available at the national pages.

- ✓ If you are a student/staff from UMinho please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from UniTrento please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from USC please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a student/staff from AMU please click [here](#)