

Studying during a crisis

How can you help your students?



Seezeit – PBS Konstanz

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PREFACE

We are living and working in challenging times. Students, too, often struggle with having fewer opportunities to meet others, missing their everyday routines and working in unsuitable places.

This can make it difficult for them to study, as you may have already noticed (directly or indirectly) in your work with students. It seems like more students are having difficulty organizing their studies and concentrating on their work. Many also feel socially isolated and miss the in-person discussions that take place in and around on-campus courses – with other students as well as with their teachers. Some even face personal crises.

Teaching staff have noticed an increasing number of students who seem to be experiencing a crisis. This is cause for concern, but it can also overwhelm those who have contact with students who are under strain and, maybe even, distraught and crying.

But what can you do or say to support strained or exhausted students? How can you structure this kind of contact, since it is much more personal than the usual teaching tasks.

This brochure can help you interact with students who are under pressure. It is often a big help already if you can refer students to a qualified point of contact for their specific questions. Such contacts are listed at the end of the document in sections 5 and 6!

Our team will be happy to help if you have questions or need more information. Please also contact us if you would like to have flyers and brochures to pass along to students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Warning signs for psychological problems	3
2	What can I do?.....	3
2.1	Reacting to students sharing their personal problems with you or breaking out in tears	3
2.2	Talking to students about warning signs you have noticed:.....	3
2.3	Structuring the conversation	4
3	What to do in acute danger situations (suicide, amok, violence)?.....	5
4	When helping becomes a problem – self-protection for helpers.....	5
4.1	Together – not alone	5
4.2	Help for helpers	5
4.3	Be patient!	6
5	Psychotherapeutic Counselling (PBS).....	6
5.1	What is PBS?.....	6
5.2	Offers and counselling scope.....	6
5.3	Who is PBS for?	6
5.4	Counselling topics.....	6
5.5	What is special about PBS consultation services?.....	6
5.6	Course of the consultation in the PBS	7
5.7	Contact and reachability	7
6	Other points of contact at the university and in the city.....	7

1 WARNING SIGNS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The following behaviours give justified cause for concern if they go beyond individual quirks and everyday fluctuations:

- Problems with motivation and concentration: Difficulty working on tasks, difficulty staying on task and not interrupting one's work (at the moment, possibly as the result of missing everyday routines and/or the lack of a quiet place to work)
- Feeling overstrained, exhausted, weepy, stressed, harried, overwhelmed, unable to relax, and experiencing a lack of appetite or trouble sleeping
- Loneliness, withdrawal, isolation: complete social isolation
- Depression: feeling dejected or downcast, showing signs of slowdown, having difficulty making decisions, expressing hopelessness and futility, agonizingly brooding, perceiving one's life or self as a "burden"
- Poor physical shape (e.g. pale, emaciated, exhausted, tired), unkept appearance, rings under the eyes, obvious injuries, use of alcohol/drugs
- Strange or inappropriate behaviour, e.g. odd ideas (a system of thinking that can be logical but is not shared by others), strange physical posture/stereotypical bodily movements, no/reduced/bizarre reactions to surroundings, inner restlessness, erratic thinking, unrestrained flow of words
- Strong feelings of test anxiety that go beyond normal "stage fright" and block access to learned material over the long-term, nervous breakdowns, signs of strong physical and psychological strain, black-outs, shaking
- Expressing suicidal thoughts, behaviours and actions in preparation for a suicide (e.g. suicide notes)

Important

These warning signs must take place often, persistently or regularly and indicate that important aspects of the person's life suffer as a result (e.g. studies, social relationships, mental/physical health, job).



2 WHAT CAN I DO?

2.1 Reacting to students sharing their personal problems with you or breaking out in tears

During your office hours, students can open up to you and share their personal problems or break out in tears over an (apparently) work-related matter. It can help if you have prepared a good strategy ahead of time for managing this sort of situation. We have put together a few tips that can make it easier for you to have this kind of conversation (section 2.3).

2.2 Talking to students about warning signs you have noticed:

It takes a good amount of courage to talk to someone about his/her personal challenges: Is it too personal of a matter? Am I the right person and am I responsible? There is no single "right person" for feedback. On the contrary, it is much more dangerous to let too much time pass before problems can be addressed, which might cause them to become larger or worse and the person involved to isolate him/herself more and more from his/her social relationships and everyday activities.

So show your students that you notice their struggles and use (or create) opportunities to talk to them about the situation.

Give specific feedback: Talk to them about your concerns and what behaviours give you cause for concern. State what specifically you have noticed.

2.3 Structuring the conversation

In a professional relationship, like the one between teachers and students, it is not always easy to talk about personal difficulties. The following tips can help you to do this:

- **Provide structure:** Your role is to structure the conversation. Communicate as transparently as possible. Say what you can offer and what you can't. Where can students get additional support (see points of contact in sections 5 and 6)? How much time do I have? What is part of my job as a teacher (set limits)? Conclusion: What are the next steps (next appointment or point of contact)? Activate the student's resources (ask if the student can talk to family or friends).
- **A model conversation structure:** What is your problem? What have you tried to solve it yourself? What would you need from me? How else could I help? What's next?
- **Be prepared:** Have informational material (print or digital) about the most common study-related topics on hand, e.g. about writer's block, procrastination (e.g. from the Writing Centre) or personal topics. Inform yourself about points of contact (at the university and elsewhere) and what to do in cases of acute crises.
- **Helping means asking questions** (and not giving answers): Listen to your students and take time for them. Ask questions to understand their situations better.
- **Show your openness:** Signal to your students that you are interested and willing to support them with improving their study situation. Use your eyes and voice to show empathy (not physical contact in an in-person meeting!).
- **If there are tears:** offer the student a tissue; during a videoconference: ask the student to get a tissue or have a sip of water.
- **Set boundaries:** Make it clear to your students that you can "only" help them within certain limitations (no offers for help that you cannot/do not want to provide or that is not part of your role as their teacher).
- **Offer specific support:** If your students have work-related problems, short but frequent meetings could be helpful (if necessary, via email).
- **Suggest other professional help services:** Mention options for professional help (e.g. Seezeit Psychotherapeutic Counselling (PBS), other counselling services, family doctors or specialists etc.), and encourage your students to get help there. It might be helpful if you made the first appointment on behalf of your student (taking the first step is often difficult for them). Some students find it very helpful to get started by visiting the PBS website and getting an overview of the available services. Many still have prejudices and reservations about using psychotherapeutic help. This is why it is so important that you as a teacher are well-informed and can pass on the relevant information to your students. In section 5 you will find an overview of our advisory services and the way we work.



What you should avoid

Try not to talk students out of their feelings or trivialize the situation ("that's no reason to be so down", "it's not that bad", "it'll be okay").

Do not take over the responsibility for your student.

Do not push advice and solutions that were helpful for you.

Do not offer support that is not in keeping with your role as a teacher, would be impossible for you to provide or might demand too much of you.

3 WHAT TO DO IN ACUTE DANGER SITUATIONS (SUICIDE, AMOK, VIOLENCE)?

Acute threats that require your urgent action include: concrete announcements, intentions, preparations and actions aimed at harming oneself or others. This is separate from general feelings of anger, annoyance, disappointment, weariness with living, senselessness or hopelessness which are not accompanied by concrete ideas and possibilities of causing harm.

If in doubt, please ask your student if and to what extent he/she has specific intentions of committing suicide or violence, and maybe even is already prepared to implement these plans (how? where? when?). Clearly speak about your specific concerns. Generally speaking: The more specific and feasible the student's ideas are, the bigger the danger and, consequently, the need to take action.

The University of Konstanz has published a guide (in German) on what to do in such a case:

(Document only available for members of the University of Konstanz)
seezeit.com/unikn/handlungshilfe-suizidgefahr



Important

If you get the impression a student is about to kill or harm himself/herself or others, **call the police by dialling 112**. The immediate emergency response will be coordinated there.



In all cases that do not involve acute danger, please contact Psychotherapeutic Counselling (PBS) (contact information in section 5).

4 WHEN HELPING BECOMES A PROBLEM – SELF-PROTECTION FOR HELPERS

Only in very rare cases will it be necessary to protect yourself from physical assault. More often and importantly, you will have to keep from becoming overburdened yourself. For most people it is difficult to bear helplessness and to have to watch someone suffer and run the risk of failure (despite good personal pre-requisites). Helpers themselves get into emotional distress when they overburden themselves and disregard their own emotional boundaries, energy level and time limits.

Sometimes the helper tries even harder than the affected person to solve the problem (and suffers more as a result of the situation). This requires a lot of effort and wears the helper out without actually resolving the problem. This is why it is so essential to protect yourself and set boundaries if you wish to be able to help others.

4.1 Together – not alone

Talk to your colleagues, ask them what their impression of student X is. Who has a good connection to him/her, or has the opportunity to talk personally to him/her? More pairs of eyes see more, more shoulders can bear the burden more easily and share the responsibility. Get a colleague to help you discuss difficult topics with the student (e. g. forced exmatriculation), if possible, and record the contents of the discussions.

4.2 Help for helpers

If you are unsure what to do or have any questions (even “small” ones), you are very welcome to contact Psychotherapeutic Counselling (PBS). We can give you information, advice, and, if required, also join you when meeting the student you are concerned about. Our services are not only for students facing difficult times, but also for helpers who have questions or need support.

4.3 Be patient!

Help will not always provide immediate relief and is not always met with gratitude. Sometimes offers of help are (initially) not accepted, advice is ignored and offers of conversation are rejected. This makes helpers feel helpless, disappointed and frustrated, if their well-meant help is not accepted. But do not give up, sometimes it needs some time and repeated feedback until someone can take the step and accept help. From your own experience (e.g. with New Year’s resolutions, dental appointments, quitting smoking) you certainly know that behavioural changes usually require some lead time, even if they seem so sensible and would significantly improve the quality of life.

5 PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC COUNSELLING (PBS)

5.1 What is PBS?

Psychotherapeutic Counselling (PBS) is provided by Seezeit student services. A team of four psychologists with different qualifications in psychotherapy provides advice to students facing a study-related or personal problem.

5.2 Offers and counselling scope

- Psychotherapeutic counselling sessions on campus
- “Red Medical” video consultations
- Phone consultations
- Anonymous online consultations via “Beranet”
- Crisis intervention
- Workshops/presentations/information events for all university members

5.3 Who is PBS for?

Our services are available to:

- All students at any university served by Seezeit
- Fellow students, partners, parents and teachers who are concerned about students and would like to help them

5.4 Counselling topics

You can contact the PBS for guidance with addressing any study-related or personal problem, e.g.:

- Difficulties with studying (problems with working, concentrating, taking exams)
- Problems with relationships (conflicts between partners, loneliness, difficulty connecting with others), conflicts within the family
- Issues involving emotional or physical health
- Crises, fears, feelings of desperation
- Concern for a student and the desire to help him/her

5.5 What is special about PBS consultation services?

PBS consultations:

- are free of charge
- can be arranged easily, flexibly and on short notice
- are confidential
- are provided by psychologists with qualifications in psychotherapy
- are customized to fit the particular challenges students face while at university

5.6 Course of the consultation in the PBS

In a first conversation, students provide an overview of their study/living situations, personal challenges and goals for change.

After that, counselling sessions will be scheduled as necessary. We also connect students with other applicable forms of professional help (e. g. ambulant psychotherapy providers, clinics, addiction advisory services, etc.).

Consultations generally take place by appointment, but in acute emergencies we try to provide counselling on short notice as well. Please feel free to call us if you encounter students whom you are concerned about, or who seem threatening or in need of help.

5.7 Contact and reachability

Seezeit Studierendenwerk Bodensee
PBS Konstanz
Building K, Floor 3
Universitätsstraße 10
78464 Konstanz

Office hours:
Mon, Wed, Fr 11.00–12.00 hr
Tel. +49 7531 - 9782 230
pbs@seezeit.com
seezeit.com/en/pbs



6 OTHER POINTS OF CONTACT AT THE UNIVERSITY AND IN THE CITY

- Advisory service guide Uni KN (German) www.uni-konstanz.de/beratungsnavigator
- Central Student Advisory Service Uni KN www.uni-konstanz.de/en/study/advice-and-services/central-student-advisory-service/
- Advisory service guide for students HTWG www.htwg-konstanz.de/en/academics/advising/advising-guide
- Central Student Advisory Service HTWG www.htwg-konstanz.de/en/the-university/facilities/student-advising-center/contact
- Academic Staff Development provides coaching services for teaching staff and doctoral researchers www.uni-konstanz.de/en/asd/services/coaching-and-advice/coaching/
- Advisory services provided by the city of Konstanz (German) www.service.konstanz.de/Lebenslagen/Lebenslage-Detailansicht/?id=5000155
- Nightline e.V.: Listening and information services for students by students www.nightline-konstanz.de

