

Protocols for assisting
distressed students:
Essentials course (Staff
course)

PROTOCOLS FOR ASSISTING DISTRESSED STUDENTS: ESSENTIALS COURSE (STAFF COURSE)

RMIT MENTAL WELLBEING
INITIATIVES

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In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture it is respectful to formally womin djeka (welcome) people to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander country or land. At RMIT we do this with the following acknowledgement:



'Luwaytini' by Mark Cleaver,
Palawa.

“We would like to
acknowledge Wurundjeri
people of the Kulin
Nations as the Traditional
Owners of the land on
which the University
stands. We respectfully
recognise Elders past,
present and future.”

At RMIT we recognise and respect the unique culture and contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring to our communities. We are also proud to provide study, cultural, & personal support to our Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander students in their learning journey. We womin djeka you to further explore and experience more about Australian Indigenous culture by visiting our Indigenous education

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centre – Ngarara Willim Centre and interacting with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students.

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RMIT Mental Wellbeing Initiatives. (2018). *Assisting students in distress: Essentials course*. RMIT University.

Cover design

By Dr. Lisa Cianci

RMIT Indigenous design : 'Luwaytini' by Mark Cleaver, Palawa.

ADAPTING THIS MODULE

Thanks for your interest in our Assisting Students in Distress: Essentials module. We've made an effort to make this module easily adaptable for use in other institutions, and hope it's of use to you. Throughout, we've added text boxes with instructions for adapting, or with generic text between pairs of asterisks to be filled in during adaptation. Below are examples of both kinds of instructional text.

On this page, add your Institution's contact details.

Learning Institution wants to create an environment that assists students to have healthy functioning.

At times, we have included examples of audio, video or text quotes from members of our RMIT community. We'd encourage you to replace these with content from your own learning institution community, although you can leave ours in if preferred.

***Learning Institution* protocols for assisting distressed students: Essentials course**

Teaching and professional staff are often the first to respond in times when study and life have overwhelmed a student. To assist, we have created this course to build staff confidence in responding to students in distress in a way that respects the boundaries of their role.

Before you get started

In this course you'll be completing 3 modules covering

- Student distress and your role,
- Responding to student distress, and
- Looking after yourself

Distress can be a sensitive topic for staff. Please consider whether now is the right time for you to be completing the course. Remember you can exit or pause the course at any

time. *Learning Institution HR Contact and Employee Assistance Program, or similar staff supports* are available if you require further support.

PART I

MODULE 1: STUDENT DISTRESS AND YOUR ROLE

A STAFF MEMBER'S STORY OF URGENT STUDENT SUPPORT

On this page, insert a video or narrative with similar content of a staff member assisting a student, including hand-off to appropriate services, and demonstrating the importance of supporting students. An example is provided below.

A story of urgent student support (1:52 min)



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(“A story of urgent student support” by RMIT Wellbeing)



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MODULE 1: STUDENT DISTRESS AND YOUR ROLE

Welcome. This course offers information about how to assist students in distress at *Learning Institution*. Because this can be emotional and challenging work for staff, the course also provides advice about how to look after yourself while supporting students.

In this first module, we'll build an understanding of student distress and how you might become involved through your work at *Learning Institution*.

Throughout this course, we use the term 'distress' to refer to a range of upsetting or unpleasant thoughts and feelings that significantly impact a student's state of wellbeing. Distress includes, but is much broader than, related terms like 'mental health condition'. For example, a student might be distressed because of a negative life event – but not experiencing a mental health condition.



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Gouw on
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YOUR STARTING POINT

Let's take a moment to think about your current knowledge. How confident are you in assisting students in distress? **Select where you are on your learning journey from 0-5, with 0 being 'no knowledge' and 5 representing 'very confident'.**



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WHEN STRESS BECOMES DISTRESS

Imagine a bucket as representing a student's ability to cope with the pressures they're facing. The size of their bucket is influenced by a range of factors, including previous significant life events, genetics, temperament, personality, and family experiences. Stress is like water being poured into their bucket. And there's no shortage of stress for students.

On this page, insert audio or quotes from one or more students talking about factors impacting mental health and ability to engage in tertiary education – e.g. working in addition to study, being away from family, differences from previous education experience, assessment timelines/workload.



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Some stress is good for us and helps us rise to the challenges we're facing, but excessive and prolonged stress can be damaging. Distress is the point at which demands have exceeded a student's capacity to cope.

What does this mean for understanding students in distress?

- Distress is what happens when the amount of water (stress) pouring in has exceeded the capacity of a student's bucket. A student may then be seeking, in helpful and sometimes unhelpful ways, assistance in reducing the amount of water (stress) in their bucket.
- It's hard to see inside a student's bucket until the point of overflow. Big reactions from students have a history greater than the event that triggered it.
- To increase coping, there are actions a student can take to reduce the amount of new water (stress) entering or remove some already in their bucket. Over time, students can also work on increasing the capacity of their

bucket, or building in regular ways of reducing the fullness of their bucket.

STUDENT DISTRESS

Most students will have moments of distress during their study.

Think about the students you interact with in a typical day. Like all of us, each of them is sitting somewhere along this wellbeing continuum at any given time. Students move along this continuum depending on the demands they're facing, their coping skills, and the supports available to them. If a student spends too long in the continuum areas of 'significant distress' they might be experiencing a mental health condition. 1 in 4 students will experience a mental health condition during their study.

Click the points on the continuum below to read about the experience of students at different levels of distress and wellbeing



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Learning Institution wants to create an environment that assists students to have healthy functioning. This course is designed to build capability in staff to recognise and respond when students start moving along the continuum towards severe distress. However, it's not a staff member's role to diagnose the cause of their distress, but simply to notice the signs and encourage the student to connect with professional support.

YOUR ROLE

You might be thinking, “*Hey, I’m here to teach or support learning – I didn’t sign up to be a counsellor!*” – which is a great point, because being a counsellor is not your job.

Read each statement below and think about whether it’s in your role, or outside it, when assisting students – then check by dragging and dropping the statements into the boxes.



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=58#h5p-3>

Learning Institution wants students to engage in their learning and get the most out of their studies. As a staff member, you can assist by noticing when issues are getting in the way of this happening. For students in distress, this means you can:

1. **Recognise the issue** when it shows up. If a student is distressed or acting strangely, or shares a concern with you – pay attention.
2. **Express concern**, encourage support seeking and communicate the limits of your role.
3. **Know the protocols** for how to respond to distressed students in urgent and non-urgent situations.

Taking these steps gives you peace of mind that you're doing all you can – while allowing you to focus on your main job of helping students get the most out of their studies.

STAFF REFLECTIONS

***Learning Institution* staff reflect on their role, and its boundaries, in assisting students in distress**

On this page, insert a video or narrative of staff acknowledging the complexity of managing their own responses when trying to assist a student in distress, while maintaining boundaries. An example is provided below.

Student distress and your role (1:44 min)



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(“Student distress and your role” by RMIT Wellbeing)



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=60#h5p-14>

LET'S REVIEW

Here are the key points to take away from this module:

- Students face a range of pressures that can build up and cause distress.
- 1 in 4 students will experience a mental health condition during their study.
- *Learning institution* staff have a role to play in recognising student distress, and encouraging support seeking.
- *Learning institution* staff should act within the boundaries of their role when supporting distressed students.



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PART II

MODULE 2: RESPONDING TO STUDENT DISTRESS

MODULE 2: RESPONDING TO STUDENT DISTRESS

Knowing that you're not underreacting or overreacting to student distress can be a challenge. So how do staff find the balance?

In this module, we look at how to best respond when you've recognised a student in distress and what supports are available at *Learning Institution*.

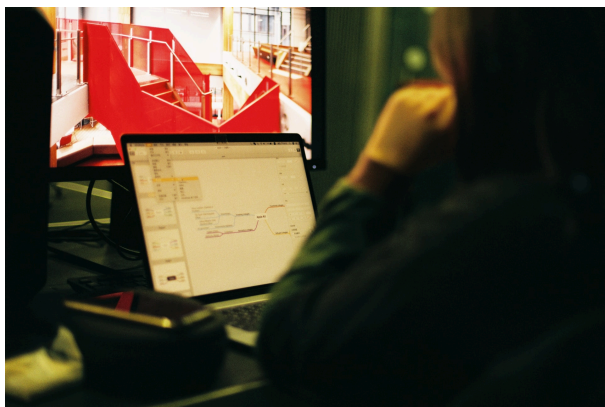


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1.

WHEN SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?

Student behaviour can be difficult to interpret. With so much going on, sorting out what is ‘normal’ for a student and what is something more concerning can be challenging.

Look through these three cards to understand more about ways that your concern might be raised.



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=132#h5p-5>

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When these situations occur, it may leave you wondering *how concerned should I be?* The general rule is that there is a greater level of concern:

- the longer the behaviour has **persisted**,
- the more **risky** or **intense** the behaviour is,
- the more the behaviour **interferes** with the student's study and life, and
- the more **distress** it causes the individual or others.

HOW TO RESPOND TO STUDENT DISTRESS

Once you have established your concern for a student, the type of action required depends on the severity of the situation.

Here, insert a handout for staff about identifying and responding, and about appropriate consultation services – an example is provided below.

The ‘Supporting students: Action guide for RMIT staff’ provides you with information to assist students in different levels of distress (download [Supporting Students: Action Guide for RMIT Staff PDF 326KB](#)).

Click to see the response protocols for high, moderate and low levels of concern.

*On this page, edit or adapt the following

information to match institutional guidelines about identifying and responding, and about appropriate consultation services.*



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=134#h5p-6>

About the Staff Line for urgent student support

The Staff Line for urgent student support is a phone line for *Learning Institution* Staff to contact when they hold serious concerns about a student's welfare or wellbeing and require timely assistance. ***RMIT staff line for urgent student support*** (2:34 min)



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(“RMIT staff line for urgent student support” by RMIT Wellbeing) Casual, sessional or specialist staff who may spend less time on campus are encouraged to contact the *Learning Institution* Staff Line to discuss any pressing concerns and how they may be attended to in their absence.

After hours response: If you are seeking assistance for a student in distress after hours (i.e. outside of 9am – 5pm):

- For safety concerns, contact *Learning Institution* Urgent Security – *phone number*
- For distressed students, contact *Learning Institution* Crisis Support Line – *phone number* or text *phone number*
- For distressed staff and for debriefing, contact *Learning Institution* EAP – *phone number* or through *other methods*.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Let's check your understanding of the Action Guide responses. The focus of this activity is what **support service** you might contact for assistance in different situations (separate to what you say to the student in the moment which is also addressed in the Action Guide and a following activity). Please note, these situations are general in nature and not based on individual *Learning Institution* students.

On this page, adapt the questions and answers to suit your institution's interactions with students and supports available.



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=137#h5p->

DIFFICULT CONVERSATION SKILLS

Whether online or in person, knowing the right support to call upon is important, but how you respond to the student's distress in the moment can make a difference too. Having these kinds of conversations doesn't come easily to everyone. You might be thinking *"I might make it worse"* or *"What if they get upset?"* or *"I don't have time for this"*. Keeping the following points in mind will help.

- **Stay calm** – as hard as it can be, when someone is distressed it's important we offer a calm response. If we become emotional ourselves, the situation is likely to escalate.
- **Listen & validate** – show you've heard what the student has told you by summarising what they've said. This also assists in moving towards a conversation about their options because it's clear you've heard the importance of the issue to them.
- **Explore options** – try not to take control, but work alongside the student to explore their support options. There may be different supports online to in-person and if in doubt contact *Learning Institution* staff line to

help with options

Tips for responding online

As well as the skills discussed above there are a few extra things to consider when responding to a distressed student online:

- **Reduce the audience** – Try to chat with the person individually. Suggest you speak in the ‘sandbox’ or contact students by individual chat or phone.
- **Start with strengths and supports** – When discussing options, start with the student’s own strengths and supports and then talk about the supports available at *Learning Institution* and beyond.
- **When safety is in doubt, ask** – Being online it can be hard to know about student safety. If unsure, ask.
- **Check in** – Before you end a difficult conversation, state the plan for action and set a time to see how they went with that plan. This is particularly important in an online environment as a lack of casual contact may leave you feeling worried.

Whether face to face or online, remember that if you are unsure how to assist the student always contact *Learning Institution* staff line via phone *phone number* or email *email address*. For more information visit *website wellbeing page*.

SHOULD I KEEP A RECORD OF THE CONVERSATION?

Making a brief note about your contact with the student is useful. It can help to demonstrate the manner in which you supported and directed the student, should this information be required at a later date. Consider documenting the following information, as appropriate:

- Basic information (e.g. time, date, location, student name)
- A brief description of what happened
- What you advised the student to do
- Whether other colleagues or Support Services are now involved as a result
- What follow-up is needed (if any)

For significant incidents, it's also important to make a report on *Learning Institution*'s system for incident or hazard reporting system, *link to Health and Safety incident management system/process*. Remember to seek support for

yourself if you need it. You can debrief with your manager or contact the Employee Assistance Program.

Duty of Care and Confidentiality

The confidentiality of any sensitive information a student discloses to you should be maintained. This means:

- You shouldn't talk to other staff members about a student's concerns without their permission.
- If you seek advice about a student's concern and don't have their permission, you should do so without identifying the student involved.

However, there is a duty of care to prevent harm or injury at *Learning Institution* that can override confidentiality. If you have any concerns about the safety of a student, then you must breach confidentiality and report your concerns. There are also mandatory reporting requirements for students under 18 years of age to be aware of – please contact the *Learning Institution* Safer Community team on *phone number* or *email address* for further information as soon as you become aware about the safety of an underage student.

LET'S REVIEW

Here are the key points to take away from this module:

- If a student is at immediate risk of harm, contact Emergency Services and *Learning Institution* Urgent Security.
- If you are unsure about the level of risk, or require timely support for a distressed student, contact the *Learning Institution* staff line for urgent student support on *phone number*.
- If a student is able to seek support for themselves, encourage them to contact *Student Services*.
- *Learning Institution* has a duty of care to prevent harm or injury that can override confidentiality. If a student has plans to harm themselves or others then you must breach confidentiality and report your concerns. If you are unsure about the level of risk, or require timely support for a distressed student, contact the *Learning Institution* staff line for urgent student support on *phone number*.
- Acknowledge any personal impacts and seek support if you need it. Debrief with your manager and/or contact the Employee Assistance Program.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- For more information on support available to students, visit [*link to Student Services*](#).
- [*Learning Institution*](#) is committed to creating an environment where we all feel safe, secure and respected. If someone makes a disclosure of sexual harm to you, there are additional issues to consider in providing an appropriate and supportive response. For more information and to access the training, visit [*appropriate service at your Learning Institution*](#).

PART III

MODULE 3: LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

MODULE 3: LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

On this page, insert a quote about self-care from staff member. An example is provided below.

“Staff report feeling pretty ill-prepared or inadequate in dealing with some of the concerns students raise. If staff are feeling overwhelmed, I’d encourage them to speak to a colleague. We’re only human after all, and it’s important we have a support network in place” – Chris, RMIT teaching staff

Self-care is about taking a moment to tune in to your wellbeing, noticing what is impacting on it and taking proactive steps to maintain or enhance it. It’s about acknowledging how much of yourself you are giving to students, and developing ways of recharging or topping yourself up as a regular part of your professional practice.

YOUR CURRENT APPROACH

Self-care

Take a moment to reflect on your current approach to self-care. Then, explore how far you might be along your own journey to maintaining wellness by clicking on the points on the image below.



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=88#h5p-8>

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WHY SELF-CARE?

While it is hard to prioritise ourselves when there is limited time, mountains of work, looming deadlines and urgent situations to manage, we know that we are most effective at assisting students when we have a good sense of personal wellbeing. Even though it can feel like we just can't fit another thing in, when we invest time in the self-care strategies that work for us, we have a lot to gain.

Effective self-care:

- reduces the personal impact of work-related stress and prevents burnout
- enables you to take charge of your own health and wellbeing
- maintains your passion for the job, and underpins a sustainable approach to working over your career.

Shared responsibility

There is a shared responsibility between you and *Learning Institution* to ensure that we are well placed to assist students in distress during their studies. A big part of this is establishing boundaries to your role, and drawing on the supports available to you at *Learning Institution*, as

outlined in this course. Self-care isn't about you having to learn to deal with excessive or unnecessary stress in the workplace, nor is it about workplaces taking sole responsibility for your self-care. Practicing self-care can assist in creating change by giving us all the energy to be productively involved in driving organisational improvements concerning culture, policies, and practices.

HOW ASSISTING DISTRESSED STUDENTS MIGHT AFFECT YOU

It can be distressing to support someone in distress. At one level, emotions are contagious and we readily feel what someone else is feeling during intense moments. A range of other emotions may arise too – some which may catch you off guard. You might feel:

- **Helpless** in being unable to help improve the student's situation
- **Worried** about the student's ongoing wellbeing and safety
- **Guilty** that your circumstances are more fortunate
- **Frustrated** at the time being taken away from your other duties
- **Incompetent** that you weren't able to handle the situation more effectively
- **Triggered** if you are having difficulties yourself which have been brought to the surface
- **Anxious** about this situation arising again, and avoiding the student involved.

These are all normal human responses. Being aware of them and recognising their impact is critical for self-care. Without support and self-care strategies in place, you may become emotionally fatigued from caring and supporting students over time.

PILLARS OF SELF-CARE

There are many things you can do to take care of yourself. Self-care is very individual – what works is different for everyone!

We've outlined some pillars (general areas) – of self-care that are relevant to work that involves supporting others, and to the stresses that come along with being a helper.



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<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=94#h5p-1>

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES: WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?

Take a look at these personal and professional self-care strategies and think about which would be most useful for you.



Self care:
what
works for
you.
(“Self
care:
what
works for
you” by
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What other *Learning Institution* staff are doing to take care of themselves

Here, insert quotes from staff about how to they take care of themselves – examples are provided below.

- Julia – “My best self-care tip is to do something you love to do. I will always do something during my day, or afterwards, just for me. It just gives me my space back.”
- Travis – “Make the time to spend at least 30 minutes away from the desk or classroom each day. Ideally in a non-work related space, or with colleagues in the break room. No work talk allowed.”
- Vanna – “When I get home I make an effort to mark the end of the work day. Changing my clothes makes a

physical shift out of work mode.”

- Julian – “Make your teaching fun for both you and your students. Set up activities that you enjoy doing as well.”
- Trish – “I use breathing techniques at stressful times to maintain my sense of wellbeing.”
- Michael – “I talk to my coworkers and manager when I notice things aren’t working well, and make sure processes improve.”

FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

Research shows there are five simple areas of behaviour that you can include in your daily life – for work, life, and play – to build resilience, boost your wellbeing and lower your risk of developing mental health problems.¹

These simple actions are known internationally as the Five Ways to Wellbeing: Connect, Give, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Be Active.

Regularly engaging in behaviours that are part of the Five Ways is beneficial for everyone to enhance our wellbeing when life is going well, and to support us when faced with stress.

Connect: Talk and listen, be there, feel connected.

- Strengthen relationships by sharing stories and encouraging each other
- Join a staff network, club, or union
- Connect spiritually through *add link to Learning

1. Aked, J., Marks, N., Cordon, C. & Thompson, S. (2011). *Five ways to wellbeing: New applications, new ways of thinking*. New Economics Foundation.
https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/d80eba95560c09605d_uzm6b1n6a.pdf

Institute chaplaincy service* with others

- Reach out for extra support early. Call the *Learning Institute EAP* to check in about your mental health

Give: Do something nice for someone, show your appreciation, do something nourishing for yourself.

- Become a mentor *insert link to student mentoring program*
- Volunteer through *Learning Institute* or in the community *insert link to volunteering resources on institution website*
- Create a small gift for a friend or neighbour

Take Notice: Pay attention to the present moment and remember the simple things that give you joy.

- Notice when you have reached your limits and prioritise what you need
- Notice the small achievements, not just the big ones
- Develop your skills in mindfulness *insert link to mindfulness resource*

Keep Learning: Be curious, understand different perspectives and grow through challenges.

- Learn something new or rediscover an old interest

- Embrace new experiences, see opportunities – try to surprise yourself
- Sign up for an *Learning Institute training/CPD resource – insert link*
- Learn how to support your wellbeing *insert link to mental wellbeing self-help resources*

Be Active: Moving our bodies supports our emotional and mental wellbeing.

- Step into nature and go for a walk
- Play a game
- Join a fitness class or social sport
- Learn how to dance *insert link*

If you'd like to learn more about the Five Ways to Wellbeing, check out more resources from the Mental Health Foundation (NZ) and Wellbeing SA.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR *INSTITUTION* STAFF

On this page, insert a quote from a staff member about the importance of self-care. An example is provided below.

“We’re constantly encouraging students to speak up and seek assistance – and we’re quite often the worst when it comes to seeking assistance and supporting ourselves. We can speak to colleagues, but at the end of the day, if that’s not enough, I’d certainly advise my colleagues who were struggling to seek external support.” – Chris, RMIT teaching staff

If you’re experiencing work or personal issues and would benefit from support, *Learning Institution* has a range of services for staff. Read on or follow the link below for information on the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Here, insert information about and link to EAP.

Learning Institution Human Resources/People support

HR consultation service provides managers and staff with advice and answers to human resources questions.

Contact:

Tel: *Institution HR consultation phone number*

Email: *Institution HR consultation email address*

BEFORE WE FINISH

How confident are you in supporting students in distress?

Let's take a moment to reflect again. Remember your starting confidence level in assisting students in distress. After completing the course, how confident are you in supporting students in distress? Has your confidence grown?



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://rmit.pressbooks.pub/assistingdistressedstudents/?p=103#h5p-13>

Photo by Christian Lunde on Unsplash

LET'S REVIEW

Here are the key points to take away from this course.

- Students face a range of pressures that can build up and cause distress.
- *Learning Institution* staff have a role to play in recognising student distress, and encouraging support seeking.
- *Learning Institution* staff should act within the boundaries of their role when supporting distressed students.
- If a student is at immediate risk of harm, contact Emergency Services and *Learning Institution* Urgent Security.
- If you are unsure about the level of risk, or require timely support for a distressed student, contact the *Learning Institution* Staff Line for urgent student support on *phone number*.
- Self-care acknowledges the personal impacts of assisting students, and enables you to recharge as a regular part of your professional practice.

Congratulations! You have now completed the course.

Thanks for being part of the *Learning Institution's* investment in mental wellbeing – an essential part of ensuring students are ready for work and life.

FURTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This online course is supported by a suite of professional development opportunities for staff at *Learning Institution* to enhance student mental wellbeing. This training will promote further skill development and discussion of the complex array of issues that arise when assisting students in distress. To find out more, contact *insert relevant contact email address for your institution*.

TAKE THE FEEDBACK SURVEY

Please complete a short feedback survey in the below form.

On this page, insert a link to your feedback survey – an example is provided below.

Learning Institution Protocols for Assisting Distressed Students: Essentials Course

Feedback Form

Thanks for taking the time to complete the course. We'd love to hear your feedback!

Your responses are anonymous, and will help us improve the course for other *Learning Institution* staff. If you would like to contact us directly about your feedback, please email us at: *email address*

Which setting do you work in?

- Higher Education
- Vocational Education
- Both

What is your primary role?

- Teaching
- Professional or Administrative
- Academic/Research
- Other

How long have you worked at *Learning Institution* ?

- < 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6+ years

About the course:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I found this course helpful					
I would recommend this course to other staff					
I feel better prepared to assist students in distress					
I know who to contact when I'm concerned about a student in distress					
I understand my role, and its limits, in assisting students in distress					

Would you like to add any other

feedback?

FURTHER READING

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- Orygen, *The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health. Under the radar: The mental health of Australian university students*. Melbourne: Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.
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- Stallman, H. M. (2008). Prevalence of psychological distress in university students: Implications for service delivery. *Australian Family Physician*, 37(8), 673.

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- University of Melbourne. (2011). *Guidelines for tertiary education institutions to facilitate improved educational outcomes for students with a mental illness*. University of Melbourne, Australia.
- Veness, B. (2013). *The wicked problem of university student mental health*. Report to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, Sydney, Australia.