



# **Student Counselor`s Guide University of Ruhuna**

**By**

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**University of Ruhuna**  
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# Forward

Student counseling is considered as one of the most important activities in our universities. Students should carefully be counseled because it is the process by which students are guided on how to deal with emotional conflicts and personal problems at the university and how to incorporate the same in their day to day life to become a successful person. Sometimes student counseling involves academic and career guidance where students are advised on which courses to do and which jobs to expect when one does a particular course. The following are some of the advantages of having a successful student counseling service in a University:

1. Students are directed to find solutions on how to deal with psychological problems which might affect their studies. Through this, the students are able to develop problem solving skills which to an extent help them deal with particular issues surrounding their lives.
2. Students are advised on how to cope with different situations facing them in their university life. For instance, on how to develop relations with their peers.
3. It helps to shape a student's behavior and inculcate discipline in students. Students who are guided and counseled in a right way tend to know what to do and how to do such things.
4. Students get to learn how to live in harmony with others within the university community. In so doing, they also learn to appreciate the people around and come to harmony with their environment.
5. It bridges the gap between the students and the university administration, since they can channel their problems through student counselors to the university administration.
6. Students get comprehensive pieces of advice on career development, courses and jobs which enable them to have an informed choice on what to do after the graduation.
7. It allows students to talk about various things which they feel uncomfortable talking about with their parents which include things like love affairs, drug abuse suicidal attempts etc.
8. It also allows the students to become better people because they are taught by the counselors about how to behave in a proper manner.

The role of the student counselors is to provide all above mentioned benefits and much more to the students. For that university student counselors also need some kind of guidance since they are not followed any professional counseling course. Therefore, the booklet titled "Student Counselor's Guide" prepared by our Senior Student Counselor, Dr. Saman Chandana Ediriweera and the Deputy Vice Chancellor Dr. Nayana Alagiyawanna will immensely benefit to improve the quality of the student counseling service of the University of Ruhuna. I take this opportunity to thank both Dr. Saman Chandana Ediriweera and Dr. Nayana Alagiyawanna for their well-timed effort.

Prof. Gamini Senanayake  
Vice Chancellor  
University of Ruhuna.

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## ***The Problem***

University students frequently experience high levels of stress. Majority of students successfully manage with university life. However, some students become beleaguered. A significant number of university students have their education and personal lives disrupted by psychological problems. When psychological difficulties go untreated, the results can be serious and may include academic failure and even withdrawal from the university. University students when they start their studies in the university usually face two stressors.

- Development stressors
- Environmental stressors

They start to live in a totally new environment where some students might find it difficult to cope with. The new academic life affects student thinking and intellectual capacity where some students will feel uneasy with these new developments. A research has shown that usually university students face several challenges during their course of study (See below).

- Leaving home physically as well as psychologically
- Establishing intimate relationships
- Planning a career
- Maintaining an adequate number of credits
- Managing time
- Learning study skills
- Dealing with financial stressors

Given below is a list of issues concerned and interfered with the studies of university students.

- Worries about grades
- Procrastination
- Studying effectively
- Pressure as a result of deadlines
- Managing time
- Preparing for exams
- Stress from overload
- Sleeping too little
- Remembering what they had read
- Feeling nervous and tense

In the worst scenarios we may expect some of the following situations among affected students.

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Alcohol abuse
- Eating disorders
- Violent behavior
- Mental Illnesses

Most psychological problems have high rates of recovery if suitable help is received in time. Unfortunately, many students fail to get the help they need for any number of reasons, including lack of knowledge about the early signs of psychological difficulties, denial, and lack of information about university resources that can provide help.

## **Role of student counselor**

Actually, many students suffer owing to one or more situations listed above. The problem is there. Student Counselors should show some skills in identifying such students.

Student Counselor can play a key role in identifying and responding to distressed students. As a Student Counselor, you often get the first glance of students in trouble and may be the first person who students turn to for help. Responding to students in distress, however, can be confusing and overwhelming. This guide will help you to find a way.

In your career as a Student Counselor you will find different types of students with various social, cultural and economic backgrounds. This guide indicates almost all the types of students those who need counseling and help.

The Student Counselor should develop strong listening skills and unbiased approach when dealing with student matters. Records should be maintained of every student encountered. The problem, action taken and progress should be recorded for future references. It is important to train students to meet you at a specific time frame of the day or week. Confidentiality should be maintained. It is important to guide students to meet a Student Counselor of same gender whenever requires.

The student counselors should never try to implicate as the Proctor. Nevertheless if any student violates the rules and regulation of the university damaging the university image and other students life you must take necessary action to obtain the intervention of the proctor.

You can play a very vital role in preventing student conflicts and resolving student conflicts. It is important for you to have some information network where you can obtain information of some student activities in advance. This will be extremely helpful for you to understand and assess situations beforehand.

Your availability on the working place is essential to do a better service as a student counselor.

A list of different types of students those who need help is indicated below.

### **The demanding student**

Demanding students can be disturbing and persistent and may require much time and attention.

Demanding traits can be associated with anxiety, depression, and/or personality problems.

#### **Characteristics of demanding students include:**

A sense of privilege	Difficulty in dealing with ambiguity
An inability to understand	Difficulty with structure and limits
A need for control	Fears about handling life
Perfectionism	Dependency

#### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Talk to the student in a place that is safe and comfortable.**
- **Remain calm and in control.**
- **Set clear limits and hold the student to the allotted time for the discussion.**
- **Emphasize behaviors that are and aren't acceptable.**
- **Respond quickly and with clear limits to behavior that disrupts class, study sessions, or consultations.**
- **Be prepared for manipulative requests and behaviors.**

#### **AVOID**

- **Arguing with the student.**
- **Giving in to inappropriate requests.**
- **Adjusting your schedule or policies to accommodate the student.**
- **Ignoring inappropriate behavior that has an impact on you or other students.**
- **Feeling obligated to take care of the student or feeling guilty for not doing more.**
- **Allowing the student to intimidate you.**

## The depressed student

Depression is a common mental health problem that varies in severity and duration.

In its less serious form, depression is a temporary reaction to loss, stress, or life challenges. It can be alleviated through the passage of time and/or the natural healing effects of social support, daily routines, and simple coping strategies like distraction and exercise. Severe or chronic depression usually requires professional help.

### Symptoms of depression include:

- ▶ Feelings of emptiness, hopelessness
- ▶ A deep sense of sadness
- ▶ Irregular eating and sleeping
- ▶ Fatigue and social withdrawal
- ▶ Helplessness, and worthlessness
- ▶ An inability to experience pleasure
- ▶ Difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision - making

Sometimes depression includes irritation, anxiety and anger.

In its most serious form, depression can be accompanied by self-destructive thoughts and intentions as a way to escape from the emotional pain.

Research shows that depression is highly responsive to both psychotherapy and medication.

### WHAT TO DO

- Talk to the student in private.
- Listen carefully and validate the student's feelings and experiences.
- Be supportive and express your concern about the situation.
- Ask the student if he/she has thoughts of suicide.
- Discuss clearly and concisely an action plan, such as having the student immediately calls for a counseling appointment.
- Be willing to consider or offer accommodations (e.g., extension on a paper or exam), if appropriate, as a way to alleviate stress and instill hope.

### AVOID

- Ignoring the student.
- Downplaying the situation.
- Arguing with the student or disputing that the student is feeling depressed.
- Providing too much information for the student to process.
- Expecting the student to stop feeling depressed without intervention.
- Assuming the family knows about the student's depression.



## The suicidal student

- Suicidal states are often associated with major depression, a combination of acute anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder.
- Suicidal people often tell people about their thoughts or give clues to others about their feelings.

### Some factors associated with suicide risk are:

- Suicidal thoughts
- Pessimistic view of the future
- Feelings of alienation and isolation
- Intense feelings of hopelessness, especially when combined with anxiety
- Viewing death as a means of escape from distress
- substance abuse
- Personal or family history of depression or psychosis
- Substance abuse
- Personal or family history of suicide attempts

A suicidal student who confides in someone is often ambivalent about suicide and open to discussion.

Students who are at high risk usually have a specific plan, have a means that is lethal (e.g., medication, knife), and tend to be or feel isolated.

### WHAT TO DO

- **Talk to the student in private.**
- **Remain calm and stay in control.**
- **Take the student's disclosure as a serious plea for help.**
- **Ask the student directly about feelings and plans.**
- **Express care and concern, and assure the student that you will help her/him reach a professional. Escort the student to the Mental Health Service**  
**Inform the family members**

### AVOID

- **Minimizing the situation. All threats need to be considered potentially lethal.**
- **Arguing with the student about the merits of living.**
- **Allowing friends to assume responsibility for the student without getting input from a professional.**
- **Assuming the family knows that the student has suicidal thoughts.**

## The aggressive or potentially violent students

### Facts about aggression:

- Aggression varies from threats to verbal abuse to physical abuse and violence.
- It is very difficult to predict aggression and violence.

### Some indicators of potential violence include:

- ▶ Paranoia/mistrust
- ▶ An unstable school history
- ▶ Fascination with weapons
- ▶ Impulse control problems
- ▶ A history of juvenile violence or substance abuse
- ▶ Prior history of violence or abuse
- ▶ History of cruelty to animals as a child or adolescent

### WHAT TO DO

- **Assess your level of safety.**
- **Remain in an open area with a visible means of escape.**
- **Explain to the student the behaviors that are unacceptable.**
- **Stay calm and gain control of the situation by setting limits.**
- **Use a time-out strategy (that is, ask the student to reschedule a meeting with you once she/he has calmed down) if the student refuses to cooperate and remains aggressive and/or agitated.**
- **Call security personal**

### AVOID

- **Staying in a situation in which you feel unsafe.**
- **Meeting alone with the student.**
- **Engaging in a screaming match or behaving in other ways that escalate anxiety and aggression.**
- **Ignoring signs that the student's anger is escalating.**
- **Touching the student or crowding his/her sense of personal space.**
- **Ignoring a gut reaction that you are in danger.**

## Responding to substance abuse students

### Facts about substance abuse:

- ▶ Alcohol and drug abuse among university students interferes with academic performance, puts them at risk for serious accidents and even death, and can lead to addiction problems for a subset of individuals.
- ▶ Substance use and abuse among university students is often a misguided way to cope with anxiety, depression, and the stressors of university life.

Research shows that the most abused substance is alcohol and that a large number of university students engage in binge drinking.

**Signs that a student may have a substance problem include:**

- Repeated failure to handle academics, work or personal responsibilities.
- A pattern of unexplained underachievement.
- Substance-related disciplinary or legal problems such as assault, driving under the influence, and date rape.
- Denial of the negative and harmful consequences of substance use, even in the face of serious problems.

**WHAT TO DO**

- **Treat the situation as serious.**
- **Share your concern and encourage the student to seek help.**
- **Recognize that denial is a powerful aspect of substance problems and that it can involve conscious or unconscious lying and distorting of the truth.**

**AVOID**

- **Ignoring or making light of the problem.**
- **Chastising or condoning the behavior.**
- **Assuming that experimenting with drugs or alcohol is harmless.**

**Responding to students with disabilities**

**Facts about Disability:**

- Students with **medical disorders** may experience difficulties participating in their academic programs due to the condition itself or the ongoing treatment protocol.
- Students with **learning disabilities** have neurological impairments that interfere with and slow down information processing, memory and retrieval, and output. These disabilities can have a detrimental impact on reading, writing, math, attention, concentration, and/or overall organization.
- Students with **psychiatric disabilities** have a chronic and debilitating psychological condition that interferes with their ability to participate in the routine educational program. Examples of conditions that fall under this classification include Bipolar Disorder, Major Depression, Anxiety, Disorders, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

- Students with **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)** may experience inattentive, hyperactive, and/or impulsive behaviors due to a dysfunction of the central nervous system. These behaviors may compromise an individual's social, vocational and academic performance.
- Students with disabilities may not realize that they have a particular problem and that treatment/accommodations are available.

### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Speak to the student in private about your concerns.**
- **Treat each student with sensitivity and respect.**
- **Acknowledge the difficulties that the student is having.**

### **AVOID**

- **Using patronizing language with the student**
- **Underestimating or questioning the stated disability.**
- **Assuming the student understands the academic limitations imposed by the disability.**

## **The failing student**

### ***Facts about failing Student***

- The student may come to class late or often may be absent.
- The student usually does not understand the course content.
- The student may be unaware of campus resources to combat the problem.
- Negative thinking and behavior may be evident early in the course.
- The student might lack preparation or interest in the course.
- The student may not be able to balance work, social activities and academic study hours.

### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Encourage the student to make a private appointment.**
- **Review the student's performance in the course.**
- **Make suggestions for improvement.**

### **AVOID**

- **Concluding that the student is just lazy.**
- **Waiting to connect with the student.**
- **Presuming the student lacks the ability to be successful.**
- **Discouraging the student who really does have the time to improve.**

## **The academically dismissed student**

Problems leading to academic dismissal often include wrong selection of courses; financial difficulties; too many outside work hours; an accident; illness of student or family members; the need for improved study skills, especially time management; and a failure to use campus resources.

### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Talk with the student in private.**
- **Listen to the student's concerns.**
- **Remind the student that current academic requirements and policies**
- **Have the student explain the main reasons for the dismissal.**
- **Ask the student if he/she has seen an academic advisor.**
- **Refer the student to an academic advisor to develop a two-semester corrective plan.**

### **AVOID**

- **Overwhelming the student with too much information.**
- **Assuming the student can work through the problems without developing a network of support on campus.**
- **Discouraging the student from applying for reinstatement.**
- **Reaching the conclusion that the student will not be reinstated.**

## The student with writing anxiety

### Facts about writing anxiety:

- Anxiety may result in assignments being late or not turned in at all.
- A history of incompletes may be a sign of writing anxiety.
- Often the student is emotional when discussing his/her writing.

### Writing anxiety can be related to:

- ▶ A failure to understand the assignment
- ▶ Lack of general time management skills
- ▶ Poor organization skills
- ▶ Poor grades on writing assignments in the past
- ▶ The lack of pre-writing techniques for starting the assignment
- ▶ Procrastination
- ▶ Problems with grammar
- ▶ A learning disability

#### WHAT TO DO

- Have a private appointment with the student.
- Listen carefully to the student's explanation of the problem.
- Look for patterns and repetition of the problem behavior.

#### AVOID

- Concluding that the student is only trying to obtain extra time for the assignment.
- Assuming the student can simply control the behavior by him/herself.

## The student who needs learning skills

### Facts about learning skills:

- A student may not have been taught specific learning skills prior to coming to university.
- Good time management can promote academic success.
- Paper and pencil techniques (e.g., "to do" lists, schedules, and calendars) can help students analyze and organize their time.
- Notes and text material can promote learning (e.g., making marginal notes, giving visual emphasis to material, scheduling frequent reviews, etc.).

- A student can plan effective study strategies, based on his/her learning style.
- Sometimes a student's learning style does not match the teaching style of the instructor.
- Learning skills and strategies vary, according to the specific nature and content of the course.

### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Ask the student about his/her personal study time and study strategies.**
- **Determine if the student understands the course content.**
- **Provide clarification of course content, if needed.**
- **Build into your class a session on how to study for the course at the beginning of the semester.**
- **Take time to review past exams to analyze the student's strengths and weaknesses.**
- **Make suggestions and encourage the student to adjust learning strategies before the next test.**
- **Ask if the student is utilizing any other campus resources.**
- **Stress the value of group study.**

### **AVOID**

- **Assuming the student does not understand the course material.**
- **Believing the student should know how to learn course content.**
- **Thinking the student knows about available campus resources.**

## **The student with exam anxiety**

### **Facts about exam anxiety:**

- Some anxiety often helps a student perform better under pressure. However, if students experience too much anxiety, it can affect both academic and psychological wellbeing.
- Exam anxiety can be caused by many factors, such as the pressure to succeed, past experiences, and/or fear of failure.

### **Symptoms of exam anxiety can include:**

- ▶ Rapid heartbeat ▶ Sweaty palms ▶ Negative self-talk ▶ Feelings of inadequacy
- ▶ Tears ▶ Inability to retain test information

The student with exam anxiety may not perform well on tests, although grades on other course requirements are good.

A student can have anxiety related to certain types of exams. For example, there may be a great discrepancy between a student's grades in multiple-choice and essay exams in the same course.

#### **WHAT TO DO**

- See the student privately.
- Ask about the student's exam preparation and time management skills. Suggest useful study strategies and exam preparation techniques.
- Go over the exam with the student so that the student understands his/her performance and what caused the errors.
- Encourage the student to form a study group for the course to provide academic and psychological support

#### **AVOID**

- Minimizing the situation.
- Assuming the student is simply trying to ask for special attention.
- Thinking the student should be able to handle the problem without support.
- Concluding that the student must have a learning disability.
- Believing that if the student really understands the material, the student should be able to perform better on exams.

## **The student who procrastinates**

### **Facts about procrastination:**

- Procrastination is putting off something that is in the student's best interests to do, or doing less important things first.
- Avoidance of important work can lead to stress, depression, shame, and guilt which, in turn, can cause the student to avoid the same tasks in the future.
- While some students procrastinate because a given task is aversive, there is usually an emotional cause at the root of serious procrastination.



**Emotional causes underlying procrastination may be classified into four categories:**

- ▶ Perfectionism      ▶ Fear of success      ▶ Fear of failure      ▶ Rebellion

### **WHAT TO DO**

- See the student privately.
- Help the student assess time management skills and refer the student to the Learning Assistance
- Help the student set specific and realistic goals. Procrastinators often cannot see the trees for the forest!
- Be clear with deadlines, limits, and consequences.
- Identify how procrastination hurts the student and use his/her suffering as a motivator for change. Procrastinators will not seek help unless they are suffering from the procrastination.
- Recognize that there are often strong emotions underlying procrastination, such as guilt, fear, anger, depression, panic, and shame. Chronic procrastinators may have low self-esteem and suffer extreme guilt.
- Refer the student for individual or group

### **AVOID**

- Assuming that the student is lazy or stupid.
- Communicating in ways that increase shame and, thereby, decrease motivation to change.
- Being pushy because the student could respond with resentment or rebellion.
- Conveying disappointment or irritation if the student does not make quick progress. Such messages may lead to a stand off, which is a relationship pattern that procrastinators often have with others.

## **Responding to students with career concerns**

### **The undecided student**

#### **Facts about being undecided**

- Being undecided about a course or career is a normal developmental process.
- Many students change their course one or two times before settling on a career path.
- Self-exploration and gathering information about course and careers are important steps in making a career decision.
- Difficulties and delays in making a career decision can lead to stress and poor academic performance.

### **The indecisive student**

#### **Facts about career indecision**

- Indecision refers to chronic difficulties in making decisions about a course or career, and often in other areas of life.
- Indecision is a significant impairment in decision-making and is not a normal developmental stage.
- Indecision can be related to any number of internal and external barriers or conflicts.
- Career anxiety is one specific problem that can block decision-making and contribute to indecision.
- Indecision can impede a student's progress through the university.

#### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Encourage exploration through course selection, work, volunteering, extracurricular activities, and counseling.**
- **Normalize the developmental process for the student.**

#### **WHAT TO DO**

- **Be supportive and understanding.**
- **Point out the self-defeating patterns or symptoms.**

## ***Responding to student emergencies***

Immediate and decisive intervention is needed when student behavior poses a threat to self or others, including:

- Suicidal gestures, intentions, or attempts
- Other behavior posing a threat to the student (e.g., hallucinations, drug abuse)
- Threats or aggression directed toward others
- Demonstrated inability to care for one-self

### **WHAT TO DO**

- ❖ **Move the student to a quiet and secure place.**
- ❖ **Listen attentively, and respond in a straightforward and considerate way.**
- ❖ **Enlist the help of a co-worker so that the student isn't left alone and you aren't left alone with the student.**
- ❖ **Make arrangements for appropriate university intervention.**

## ***Referring a student for professional help***

### **When to refer?**

In many cases of student distress, faculty and staff provide adequate help through empathic listening, facilitating open discussion of problems, instilling hope, conveying acceptance, and offering basic advice.

In some cases, however, students need professional help to overcome problems and to resume effective coping. The following signs indicate that a student may need counseling:

- The student remains distressed following repeated attempts by you and others to be helpful.
- The student becomes increasingly isolated, unkempt, irritable, or disconnected.
- The student's academic or social performance deteriorates.
- The student's behavior reflects increased hopelessness or helplessness.

- You find yourself doing on- going counseling rather than consultation or advising.

### **How to refer?**

- Speak to the student in a direct, concerned, straight forward manner.
- Because many students initially resist the idea of counseling, be caring but firm in your judgment that counseling would be helpful. Also be clear about the reasons that you are concerned.
- Be knowledgeable in advance about the services and procedures of the Professional Counselors
- Remind the student that services are free and confidential.
- Sometimes it is useful to more actively assist students in scheduling an initial counseling appointment.
- In some situations, you may find it wise to walk the student over to the professional counselor.

### ***Awareness of cultural differences***

You must keep a note on the race, ethnicity, cultural background and other dimensions of difference as you help a distressed student.

### ***Dealing with financially distressed student***

If there are students who are distressed with serious financial difficulties, you may discuss with the Deputy Vice Chancellor for possible helping options. Also, you may try to find a donor to assist the student and keep informed the Deputy Vice Chancellor. Any such transaction should be done via a bank account and you may not offer money personally.

### **Repeatedly harassed students (Stalking)**

#### **Facts about Stalking**

- Repeated harassment of an individual that is designed to instill a sense of fear or danger.
- Stalkers often have an irrational obsession with the victim and try to gain power and omnipotence through control and intimidation.

Stalking behavior includes tailing the victim as well as harassment via phone, email and letters; unwanted gifts; and unwanted attentiveness.

#### **WHAT TO DO**

- Encourage the victimized student to trust his/her instincts.
- Advise the student to document unwanted contacts and maintain evidence of harassment.
- Advise the student to take precautions to ensure safety, including a change in routine travel routes and schedule.
- Refer the student to the Counseling

#### **AVOID**

- Ignoring or minimizing the situation.
- Suggesting that the victim is responsible for the unwanted attention.
- Taking responsibility for protecting the student.
- Failing to alert the proper authorities

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