

What to do as a lecturer when a student panics

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Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (University of Antwerp)

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Nathalie has already told several teachers about her difficult home situation. She's the eldest of three girls and lives with her mother and stepfather in a flat far from the city centre. She has a good relationship with her mother, but she's worried about her mother's alcohol use/abuse. She regularly argues with her stepfather. He has a short temper, slamming doors and sometimes even hurling plates or cups against the wall. Last week, he also slapped Nathalie's youngest sister, claiming she provoked him. One day, after the last lecture, Nathalie is still sitting in the lecture theatre. You've gathered your things and you're ready to lock up. When you tell Nathalie it's time to go, she whispers: 'I can't.' She doesn't get up and doesn't react to your questions.

Every lecturer or student counsellor will one day come across a student who doesn't seem to be doing very well. In some cases, the student is truly in crisis, causing you to be concerned for their safety or the safety of others. It's not always easy to decide on the best course of action. In this ECHO Teaching Tip, we provide some tools for recognising and dealing with crisis situations. Above all, remember that there's an appropriate response to virtually any situation. You risk doing the most harm by doing nothing.

Is a crisis imminent?

Sometimes the writing's on the wall, but you can also be caught completely off guard. So always try to be mindful of three types of **signals**: academic signals, behavioural/emotional signals, and physical signals.

- Academic signals


When there's a change in the academic performance of an otherwise motivated and constructive student, something may be wrong. Red flags include absenteeism, missed deadlines or appointments, lower quality of assignments, and/or frequently asking for exceptions or extensions. Students may also communicate more or less explicitly about serious problems, for example by writing an essay about suicide, or by mentioning feelings of loneliness or unhappiness during an exam.

- Behavioural/emotional signals

It's difficult to say what exactly 'normal' student behaviour is. Nevertheless, 'abnormal' behaviour can sometimes be noticeable. A student who suddenly reacts in a very anxious, aggressive or irritable manner, or who suddenly appears very gloomy, may be having difficulties. Not responding to questions or emails from a lecturer, or no longer participating in group work or interactive assignments, can also point to a crisis.

- Physical signals

Physical signals are difficult to pick up, especially if there's little face-to-face contact. However, you might notice that a student is exhausted and possibly heading for a burnout. Signs such as slurred speech or a blank stare are good reasons to check whether something might be wrong with the student. If you notice that a student has lost a lot of weight or has visible cuts, burns or bruises, you should definitely take action.



What to do you believe a student is having difficulties

- Conversation with a student in crisis

First, think about **the best way** to have this conversation. Live interaction (on-campus, video call, phone call, instant messaging) is preferable to email, because you can respond to each other much more quickly. If the student is okay with it, you should have a face-to-face conversation or a video call.

Start off by indicating that you're **concerned**. Avoid bombarding the student with personal questions; it's not an interrogation. Above all, try to listen carefully and refrain from giving unsolicited advice. Stay calm and acknowledge the feelings and concerns expressed by the student. Discuss the channels available for professional help (general practitioner, psychologist, student counsellor, etc.).

Also be mindful of **yourself** throughout the whole process: how are *you*, can you handle this, what are your own limits? If you have any questions or concerns of your own, it's a good idea to talk about them with others. Ask the student if it would be okay for you to discuss your concerns (anonymously or otherwise) with others. If there's a safety risk (e.g. risk of suicide), you can consult others without the student's consent, but try to agree on actions whenever possible, and be transparent about what you're going to do.

- Crisis situations

Crisis situations are very rare and it's difficult to provide blanket guidelines on how to act. After all, by their very nature, crises are unpredictable. The important thing is that you do something. In any crisis situation, it's crucial to ensure your own **safety** and that of others.

Note that only healthcare professionals (doctors, psychologists, etc.) are bound to professional secrecy. And even then, professional secrecy can be broken when someone puts themselves or others in mortal danger. So **don't promise confidentiality** if a student confides in you. Always take great care not to break the trust the student places in you, by discussing together what steps need to be taken and who you're going to involve.

The following **suggestions** may help you if you encounter a situation where someone is about to harm themselves or others:

Try to stay calm and adopt a non-threatening posture. Don't approach the student from behind or stare at them, as this may feel threatening. Give them room to breathe; don't touch them unless you're sure they're not afraid of you.

If you only have online contact with the student, stay in touch and ask which family members or friends they can turn to at that moment.

Be honest and open: say that you're concerned, and that you're going to make sure they get help. Try to appear confident. People in distress are often very afraid of what they might do, so they actually find it helpful if someone takes charge of the situation.

If the student calms down enough to start thinking about what might help, you can suggest consulting a student counsellor, psychologist, general practitioner or emergency service. The next step is helping the student get in touch with these services.

If the student continues to behave in a way that endangers their own safety or that of others, you must inform emergency services (ambulance or police). Also, always inform the head of your department/faculty or the Health & Safety Department about what's happening.

After the crisis is over, it may help to talk to your colleagues, a confidential advisor or someone from the Health & Safety Department about what happened. Crisis situations can be shocking and overwhelming, so it's important that you seek out support whenever necessary.



Referral

- When?

Proper help requires proper **boundaries**: don't hesitate to refer the student to a specialist if you don't have the right skills or knowledge. As a lecturer or study programme counsellor, it's not your job to provide psychological guidance to students. It's in everyone's best interest that the student gets appropriate help as soon as possible.

- Where?

In the event of a referral, it's important to discuss the options for further help together, and to help the student to decide on the alternatives that are available. For help with mental difficulties during office hours, you can refer the student to the student counsellors in your educational institution. Outside office hours, there are other external services that offer acute care (see below for contact details).

- How?

Be **confident** and resolute about the need for a referral. If you appear ambivalent or uncertain, the person being referred will pick up on that. Be open and transparent in your communication. A referral may provoke feelings of rejection, so it's important not only to be honest about the reason or need for the referral, but also to explain that a referral is not a bad thing, and perfectly **normal**. Leave some room for the student to express feelings or doubts about the referral.

- Together

Don't take over **responsibility** from the student: try to encourage them to make their own appointments with the service or person you're referring them to. Of course you can point them in the right direction by providing contact details. Once the student knows who to contact, you should check whether they actually reached out to that person or service. Ask the student to keep you informed about this.

- Follow-up

If you told the student that you'd **contact** them after they consulted the person or service you referred them to, it's important that you do that. If you don't, they'll start to wonder why you haven't reached out to them: *I'm not important enough, it's too big a problem, it's too trivial, they didn't really care, they just forgot about me...* and so on. Once you've referred the student elsewhere, you'll have to adjust your relationship with them accordingly. If you'll be seeing them again, it should be clear that you won't be going into the details of the counselling sessions.



Decision tree

The flow chart below can help you decide how to act if you believe a student is in crisis.

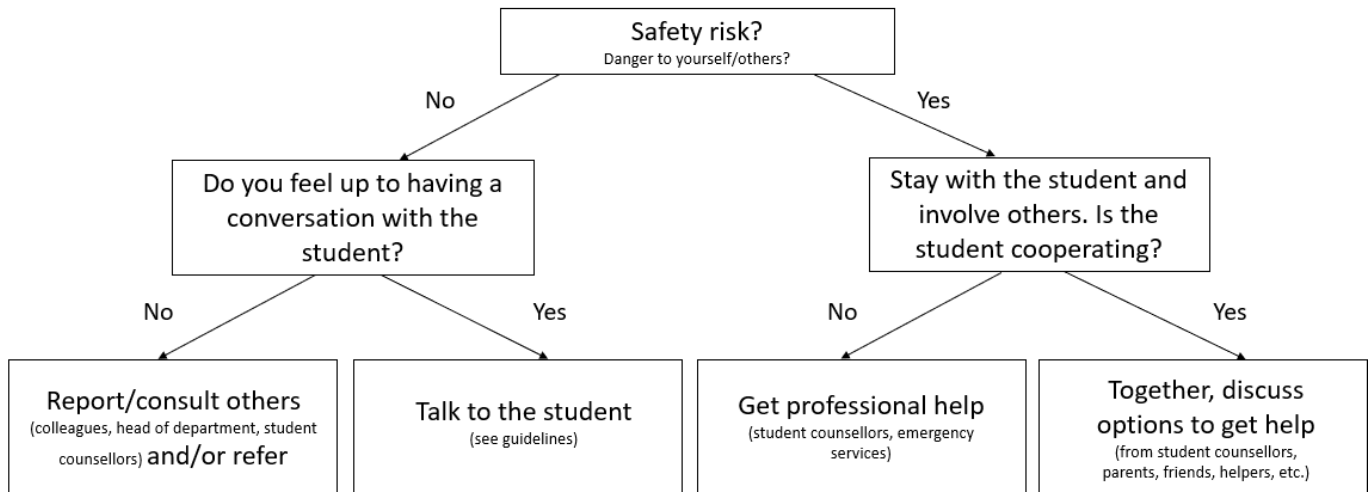


Figure 1. Decision tree (Study Advice and Student Counselling Service, UAntwerp)



Want to know more?

Federale dienst noodplanning gouverneur Oost-Vlaanderen (2018). [Canvas intern noodplan voor scholen en internaten](#).

Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA) (2012). [Balancing Safety and Support on Campus: A Guide for Campus Teams](#).

KSLeuven (2014). [Algemeen draaiboek voor schokkende gebeurtenissen op school](#).

Online ECHO session with UAntwerp's Study Advice and Student Counselling Service

Een student in paniek - Wat te doen als docent? [ECHO-sessie 8 december 2020](#)

What to do if there is a risk of suicide

113 Zelfmoordpreventie. ['Als ik kan zeggen wat ik denk.' Handreiking zelfmoordpreventie voor scholen en universiteiten](#).

Dumon & Portzky (2014). [Zelfmoordpreventie, interventie en postventie op school: TOOLKIT](#).

Suïcidepreventiewerking DAGG. [Een suïcidepreventiedraaiboek op school](#).

Suïcidepreventiewerking van de CGG West-Vlaanderen (2010). [Leidraad draaiboek suïcidepreventie in secundaire scholen](#).

The Campus Suicide Prevention Center of Virginia (2012). [Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress: A Faculty Handbook](#).

VLESP (2017). [Detectie en behandeling van suïcidaal gedrag: Multidisciplinaire richtlijn voor hulpverleners in de gezondheidszorg](#).

Other contacts for referral and consultation

- [Zelfmoordlijn](#) or call 1813
- [Tele-onthaal](#) or call 106
- [Acute hulp](#)

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