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Guide for teaching staff

supporting students with mental health issues

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This guide was created by a working group on the topic of “student mental health”. Employees from the following units at HHU were involved: Counselling Centre of the Commissioner for Students with Disabilities or Chronic Illnesses (BBST), Heine-Center for Sustainable Development (HCSD, Health Section), philGRAD Graduate Academy, Service-Center for Good Teaching and Learning (SeLL), the student advisory services.

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As at: 03/2026

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1. Objectives and limits of the guide

Photo: HHU / Ivo Mayr

Teaching staff often encounter students whose behaviour raises questions or is a cause for concern: withdrawal, frequent absence, emotional outbursts or unusual communication. In such situations, many teaching staff ask themselves similar questions such as:

- Should I say something?
- How should I address the topic?
- What if I am unable to cope?

Mental health issues and conditions are not a rarity among students – and many teaching staff are unsure about how to deal with them. This flyer aims to help you assess such situations better, consider initial steps and make sure you know appropriate contacts.

This guide is not in any way intended as a substitute for the expertise of qualified mental health professionals. Rather, it aims to provide teaching staff with pragmatic options to help them respond appropriately and supportively in emergency situations.

2. Case studies: sample teaching situations involving students with potential mental health issues

The following case studies illustrate typical day-to-day teaching situations involving students who may have mental health issues. These scenarios are aimed at raising awareness of potential signs of mental health issues and encouraging a considered response by suggesting appropriate courses of action.

Case study 1

Student Noa is participating in the fifth session of the seminar given by lecturer Sam. Following discussion of the text, which the course participants should have read beforehand, Noa is supposed to give a 20-minute presentation on their own in front of the 37 people present.
Noa does not like speaking in front of lots of people and is anxious about the upcoming situation. Noa becomes increasingly nervous during the full-class discussion of the text.
When Sam asks Noa to go to the front and start their presentation, Noa feels their heartbeat getting quicker and a tight feeling in their chest. Shortly after getting up, Noa starts to feel dizzy and begins to shake. Sam notices that Noa does not feel well.

Case study 2

Lecturer Robin undertakes a five-day field trip to Athens with nine students. Robin notices that, by contrast with the other course participants, student Sasha is wearing a long-sleeved top even though it is 34°C. However, they think nothing of it initially.
During a presentation given by Sasha in front of the Acropolis on the third day, the left sleeve of their top slips down a little and Robin notices cuts at different stages of healing on Sasha's skin.

Case study 3

Student Kim is waiting outside the office of lecturer Lois to take the last oral exam of their degree. Kim is well prepared and can hardly wait to finish the exam. Lois asks Kim into their office and the exam starts well for Kim. After 12 minutes, Lois asks Kim a question, after which Kim unexpectedly appears distracted. Lois and lecturer Nika, who is the record-taker for the exam, notice that Kim has beads of sweat trickling down their forehead and is having difficulty breathing. The two lecturers do not know that the question reminded Kim of a traumatic experience or that Kim suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

3. Potential courses of action

Photo: HHU / Ivo Mayr

To say something or not to say something?

Do you get the impression that a student is experiencing a personal crisis or exceptional situation, but are uncertain whether you should address the matter? Assessing such situations from the outside is not easy. Is someone really behaving in an unusual way and giving cause for concern? Or is the person just having a bad day or are they just stressed during the exam phase, which is only temporary? Out of uncertainty or fear of doing something wrong, we may then tend not to address such situations openly.

As people are different and therefore also respond differently to stress, there is no “one size fits all” approach to offering support. If you notice aspects of behaviour and communication in someone like those mentioned in the case studies above, which you find disturbing or worrying, trust your instincts and experience, and speak to the person. It is better to ask too often than not ask in an emergency.

How do I address something like that?

The following tips can help you find a good way to address the subject.

- Establish an appropriate framework and a calm atmosphere, e.g. after a class
- Ensure you have enough time and are in the right frame of mind to have such a conversation when you address the subject
- Address what you have noticed directly and mention examples to explain your impressions; describe observed behaviour without speculating, e.g.:

“I would like to talk about something I have noticed...”

“You seem dejected to me and I have noticed that you are contributing less...”

“I have noticed that you have not met deadlines recently...”

“Over the last few days/weeks, I have noticed that you have been absent...”

“I am concerned because you often arrive late...”

“Unlike in the past, you have been very reserved during the seminars recently...”

- Communicate that you are concerned and would like to offer support, e.g.:

"I am asking because I am concerned and your well-being is important to me."

"I get the impression that you are perhaps struggling a bit at the moment – and I want you to know that you are not alone."

"It is important to me that you know I'm here for you and that you are welcome to talk to me about what is currently bothering you."

- Make it clear that you will not pass on what is said to other teaching staff or students
- Listen and ask questions – in the first instance, just listen to and accept what they say without denying their feelings, etc.

"Would you like to talk to me about how you feel right now?"

"I would be happy to listen, if you would like to talk."

"Is there something you are particularly struggling with at the moment?"

"I would like to try and understand how you feel in this situation."

"I understand that this is a very difficult time for you now – thank you for sharing that with me."

- Do not jump to conclusions with well-meant suggestions and do not try to provide a diagnosis
- Do not downplay the situation in order to make the person feel better
- Give the student time and space, particularly if they do not want to talk immediately and perhaps feel overwhelmed by the situation. Offer the opportunity to talk again at another time without putting them under pressure. Signalise your willingness to talk, e.g.:

"If you like, we can agree another time to talk that is better for you."

"You do not need to say anything now if you don't want to – we can talk another time if you like."

"If you would like to talk about this at another time, my door is open."

- Draw attention to the support services offered by the University. It can often already be a relief for some to realise that they do not have to face certain challenges alone. The psychological counselling service for example is an important initial point of contact and enables people to address problems with professional support. The service can also provide contacts to appropriate institutions where necessary.

"Many students experience extremely challenging phases during their studies. You are not alone with these feelings and it is important to seek help."

"If you would like support, I would be happy to help you find suitable offers."

"It can help to talk to a professional about what is bothering you. The psychological counselling service is a helpful and confidential point of contact."

"There are various services here at our University, which can help in such situations, for example..."

How do I deal with emergency situations?

Even if a person is extremely upset, it does not always mean that the situation is an emergency. As a first step, it can be helpful to give the person time and space to collect themselves and calm acute emotions. In cases where there is no immediate danger, it is a good idea to point the person to the psychological counselling service at Student Services.

A situation in which a person is under extreme stress can however also escalate into an acute mental health emergency. If you get the impression that the person is not capable of dealing with the situation on their own, it is recommended that you point them in the direction of suitable emergency contacts.

- **Crisis helpline**: call 0800 111 0 111 or 0800 111 0 222 anonymously and free of charge at any time
- **Clinic run by the Landschaftsverband Rheinland (LVR) Düsseldorf** – central A&E department: Bergische Landstrasse 2, 40629 Düsseldorf | tel.: +49 211 822-2801

If a person's remarks or actions make you think that they could be a danger to themselves or others, it is important to talk to the person about this. Ask them directly about any suicidal intent and how concrete these thoughts are, e.g.

"It worries me when you say something like that. Are you thinking about harming yourself?"

"Do you have concrete plans about how you would take your own life?"

"How often have you had suicidal thoughts recently?" (Scale: 1 – 10 | 1 = no thoughts, 10 = very frequently)

"How worried are you that you might really harm yourself?" (Scale: 1 – 10 | 1 = not worried, 10 = very worried)

It is usually the case that the more concrete the thoughts and planning, the greater the danger of implementation. If you cannot get through to the person or if they are unwilling to accept help and are an immediate danger to themselves or others, please do not hesitate to call the emergency services on 112 or the police on 110.

Helpful points of contact you can pass on

Psychological counselling service at HHU

The psychological counselling service supports students experiencing personal and mental health challenges during their studies. These may include concerns such as exam nerves, concentration problems and procrastination, mental overload and dejection or personal problems.
In addition to the open consultation sessions, personal appointments can be agreed by sending an e-mail to psychologischeberatung@hhu.de.
The consultation sessions are open-ended and of course confidential. They can take place in person at the SSC, online or via telephone. Consultation sessions are also possible in English.
You can find all the services offered and up-to-date information at https://www.hhu.de/en/studies/study-counselling/students.

Study consultation & coaching service at HHU

In some cases, students may have fewer inhibitions about speaking to the study consultation & coaching service, making it an initial, easy-access point of contact. It offers professional coaching on how to deal with study-related challenges such as the organisation of studies, doubts about studies and orientation during/after studies. Here again, there are open consultation sessions and personal appointments, which can be agreed by sending an e-mail to studienberatung@hhu.de.

Emergency contacts for students

There are a variety of services, which students can contact at short notice in the event of emergency situations, e.g. the crisis helpline, the clinic run by the Landschaftsverband Rheinland (LVR) or the general psychiatric outpatient clinic (TAZ).

You can find an overview of helpful emergency contacts at: Contact points for psychological stress situations.

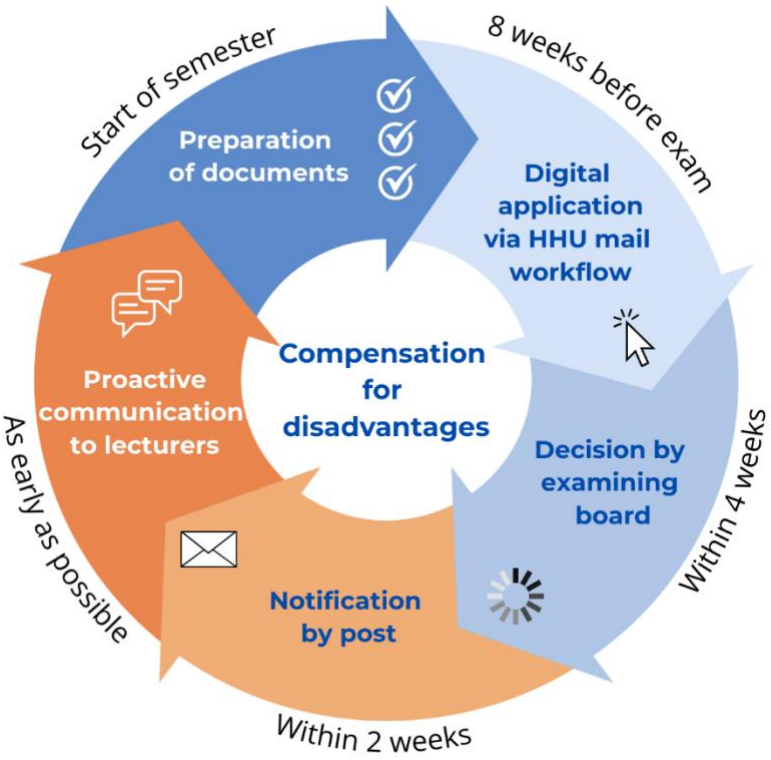
Information on compensation for disadvantages

As a student, if you are not able to complete study or exam components in whole or in part in the prescribed format and/or duration (pursuant to the exam regulations) due to a disability or chronic illness, you can apply for so-called compensation for disadvantages.

The Counselling Centre of the Commissioner for Students with Disabilities or Chronic Illnesses at HHU (BBST) provides advice on the topic of compensation for disadvantages: Studying with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

Compensation for disadvantages ...

… is personal and tailored to the specific impairment.
… should compensate for disadvantages resulting from disabilities and
… not result in any advantages.
… may be granted on a one-time basis or for the entire study programme.
… does not have to be used in every exam – students can decide for themselves whether and in which exams they want to use any compensation for disadvantages.
… is not noted on the Transcript of Records.
… can optionally be applied for in collaboration with the BBST – advice and support can be provided during the application process.
… can be requested by completing an application (German only) and submitting it together with a medical certificate (mandatory) to the responsible examining board chair.



Digital application process for compensation for disadvantages. Process diagram: BBST

Your boundaries as a member of the teaching staff

Involvement in emergency situations affecting others can also become a burden for us. There are no "quick fixes" for mental health issues in particular, which usually involve a longer process.

Please remember the following self-care tips:

- Helping someone does not mean assuming responsibility for solving the problem
- Ensure that no-one oversteps your own boundaries and only support others within the framework of your capabilities and opportunities
- Refer individuals to experts and specialist points of contact on campus where necessary
- Talk to colleagues and appropriate experts where necessary to ease the burden on yourself

4. Support offers for teaching staff

Psychological counselling service & study consultation and coaching service at HHU

As a member of the teaching staff, you can refer students to the psychological counselling service as well as the study consultation and coaching service, or contact the colleagues yourself if you need to talk to someone or obtain support in a specific situation or instance. In such cases, please send an e-mail to psychologischeberatung@hhu.de or studienberatung@hhu.de.

Emergency contacts for students

There are a variety of services, which students can contact at short notice in the event of emergency situations, e.g. the crisis helpline, the clinic run by the Landschaftsverband Rheinland (LVR) or the general psychiatric outpatient clinic (TAZ).
You can find an overview of helpful contacts for mental health issues at: Contact points for psychological stress situations

Psychological counselling service for employees

Certain situations in dealings with students who have mental health issues can also be challenging for you. In order to deal with these situations, it can be helpful to talk to someone and obtain support. As an HHU employee, you can agree a consultation session with the psychological counselling service for employees and talk to them about personal challenges in a confidential environment.

Contact:
M.Sc.-Psych. Nisrine Aydin
Building: 23.03 | Floor/room: U1.46
Tel.: +49 211 81-10550 | e-mail: psychologischemitarbeiterberatung@hhu.de

Workshops offered by SeLL

In the workshops offered by SeLL, you can improve your advisory skills for helping students and gain concrete ideas for developing classes, which are diversity-sensitive and promote learning (you can also find some tips on this here: Teaching strategies and prevention).
You can find all workshops for teaching staff at HHU here: www.sell.hhu.de/workshops (German only).

5. Teaching strategies and prevention

Photo: HHU / Ivo Mayr

As a member of the teaching staff, various options are available to you when it comes to organising your classes in a way that makes it easier for students experiencing mental health issues and/or other challenges to participate successfully. These include principles of student-centred teaching, which benefit all students in your class.

Didactic planning

Well thought out didactic planning ensures that students have a clear understanding of (realistic) targets and know what steps are required to achieve them. At the same time, it enables classes to be designed in a such a way that students can organise their involvement and study more flexibly, which in turn enables better accommodation of different needs. The following approaches, among others, may be helpful here:

- Reduce course content: concentrate on the key points to make content more accessible
- Orient your planning to the learning objectives and communicate the learning objectives clearly
- Use different methods and social forms when planning classes (e.g. input, group work, full-class discussion, online learning unit, etc.) to offer different access options
- Where possible: provide multiple options for completing course credit/exam components
- General: facilitate self-determination by offering options
- Formulate clear evaluation criteria for exams and communicate them to students
- Offer sample tasks and mock exams

Communication

Open and transparent communication establishes orientation for students and gives them the confidence to talk to teaching staff in an atmosphere of trust in the event of difficulties. In concrete terms, this means e.g.:

- Emphasise at the start of the class that students can talk to you if they have any special needs

- Draw attention to the option of compensation for disadvantages (see Information on compensation for disadvantages)
- Make it easy for students to contact you and clearly state communication channels and times (when can I be contacted via which channel?)
- Communicate objectives/expectations transparently
- Encourage a cooperative learning atmosphere and collaboration
- Regularly encourage students to ask questions
- Talk to individuals about absences where necessary

Support for the learning process

Teaching staff can support the learning process of individuals in a variety of ways and thus support those students in particular who face special challenges with regard to organising and structuring their studies. The following can be helpful:

- A learning culture that forgives errors
- Structuring the learning material
- A realistic pace
- Realistic tasks, potentially on a scale from easy to complex (participation by students depending on energy and stress levels)
- Offering flexible ways to acquire the study programme content (possibly also: flexibility with regard to in-person participation)
- Assistance with study organisation/learning strategies
- Formation of study groups, with peer feedback where appropriate
- Provision of encouraging, constructive feedback on tasks/exercises
- Scheduling of breaks, possibly with exercise/relaxation techniques

Media and materials

Appropriate teaching materials can help students with mental health issues organise their learning process in a way that suits them. Helpful measures:

- Offer materials for preparation/follow-up (e.g. slides, script, lecture recording)
- Always provide teaching materials in good time
- Ensure materials are accessible as far as possible (e.g. use format templates to provide a clear structure, add subtitles to videos)
- Where possible: enable hybrid participation

6. Further information

Bibliography (please note that these publications are in German)

Hofmann, Y. E. (publ.) (2024): *Die psycho-soziale Situation von Studierenden in der (post-) pandemischen Zeit. Stand der Forschung und Impulse aus der Praxis*. Bielefeld: UVW UniversitätsVerlagWebler. (*Hochschulwesen: Wissenschaft und Praxis*; N. F. 48). Available at: https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2024/32089/pdf/Hofmann_2024_Die_psycho-soziale_Situation.pdf (accessed on: 30 October 2025)

Mühlfelder, M. (2014): *Studieren macht krank oder Freude. Anforderungen, Belastungen und Gesundheitsressourcen für Studierende und Dozierende in einer sich verändernden Hochschullandschaft*. Konzepte, Methoden, Praxisbeispiele. Lengerich: Pabst Science Publ.

Links/materials

Hamburg Open Online University: *"Studieren mit psychischer Erkrankung und Neurodivergenz: (wie) geht das?"*. Website (in German) providing extensive information and materials for both students and in particular teaching staff.

Graz University of Technology: *University all inclusive – Respectful interactions with students and employees with disabilities*. Online course on iMoox, strongly oriented to an Austrian context.

Gemma Armstrong et al. (2021): *Capacity to Connect: Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellness. Facilitator's Guide for Use with Faculty and Staff*. Open Educational Resources for multipliers seeking to raise awareness among faculty/staff on the topic of student mental health.

Serious game

Cologne University of Applied Sciences: *Beyond the Chalkboard*. Browser-based serious game, which makes aspects of living with a mental health condition as a student tangible.

Podcasts

ENABLING Cities: *Podcast Folge 7 – Psychische Erkrankungen* (German only). Podcast in which a psychologist reports on her experiences of advising students.

Zwischentöne (Inklusive Geschichten): *Kein Tabu: Über psychische Erkrankungen im Studium* (German only). Podcast episode in which students with a mental health condition report on their experiences during their studies.