

Talking about Mental Health: Scenarios and Responses

The following 11 scenarios offer suggestions on how to respond to students who are overwhelmed and feeling distressed. Use these scenarios as starting points for discussions and continued thought about how we can respond with empathy to students while recognizing and honouring their strengths and capacity to achieve balance.

SCENARIO 1

Student who's struggling to balance studies with caring for their child

Alex is a single parent who is going to school full-time and is unable to find reliable daycare. The daycare on campus is full and Alex is on a waitlist; all the other community daycares are also full. Alex's daughter, Gemma, is a toddler, and Alex is wary of leaving her with a stranger. Alex has no family in the area, and friends are unable to help as they either work or go to school themselves. With final exams coming up, Alex is having trouble finding time to study and feels options are extremely limited or non-existent. Alex tells you they have been trying to study while Gemma sleeps but cannot keep it up for much longer because they are feeling so sleep deprived. Alex looks unkempt and has dark circles under their eyes; they look like they are about to cry and seem very stressed.

Key points

- Empathize and acknowledge their need to ensure the safety and well-being of their child.
- Provide possible resources the student has not thought of, both within and outside of the school setting.
- Suggest they talk to their instructors to let them know about their situation and possibly request extensions on assignments, if needed.
- If your friendship is close and you have time in your schedule, you can offer short-term babysitting.

Possible response

I can see you really care about your daughter and how important it is to ensure she is safe and well-cared for. I also see how hard you are working to do well by studying while she is sleeping. I admire

(Continued)

SCENARIO 1: CONTINUED

Student who's struggling to balance studies with caring for their child

and respect you for putting yourself through school while raising a child. Is there anything I can do for you right now that would ease your stress? (You could suggest a beverage or food or a walk or even a shower if they seem a little lost or unsure. Sometimes parents are so focused on their children, they forget their own basic needs, and taking care of some of them can help them focus and feel more grounded.)

I know it may feel like you are out of options, but perhaps we can figure this out together.

We can contact student services on campus. They may have a list of caregivers for this specific reason or resources/referrals for parents. We can also try Facebook and ask the community if they know of any reputable caregivers that have space for your daughter.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to speak to your instructors so they're aware of everything that you're juggling. They may be able to give you more time for assignments or may have resources or ideas you haven't thought of yet.

Responses to avoid

- Don't worry, I'm sure you'll think of something. (Chances are, they have thought of everything they possibly could think of. They would not be talking with you if they had any possible solutions in mind.)
- Can't you just put her in front of the TV while you study? (Most parents do not use TV with toddlers as a long-term solution to a chronic problem.)
- Thank goodness I don't have kids; school is hard enough without them. I don't know how you do it. (Although this may feel like you are complimenting their strengths as a parent and a person, it's unhelpful and the focus is no longer on their situation and has shifted to how much easier it would be without children.)

© Dagmar Devine ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

SCENARIO 2

Student who's genderqueer and just gone through a bad breakup

You have been paired up with Leslie on a semester-long project in one of your classes. Leslie is upfront about being genderqueer and asks you to use the pronouns they/them. Leslie is enthusiastic, shows up to all the meetings, and completes their portion of the work on time. However, as the semester progresses, Leslie begins missing meetings, is harder to get hold of, and is either late with their contributions or the work is subpar compared with their earlier submissions. When you ask if everything is okay, Leslie admits they are going through a bad breakup and is having a hard time handling it. They are having difficulty concentrating on their work, they aren't sleeping well, and they are drinking a little more than usual. Leslie tells you they are thinking about dropping out and don't know what to do. *(Continued)*

SCENARIO 2: CONTINUED

Student who's genderqueer and just gone through a bad breakup

Key points

- Be empathetic and supportive while taking a strengths-based approach, highlighting their capabilities as a student and their resilience in the face of stress and hardship.
- Be mindful when referring to them or their partner with the proper pronouns and stay conscious of it.
- Connect the student with LGBTQ2S+-friendly resources, such as counselling services, at the school or in the community.
- Provide support by discussing how your joint project's deadlines, delivery, and work can be altered to allow for flexibility without loss of quality or imbalance in the division of work.

Possible response

I'm sorry to hear about your breakup with your partner. In my time working with you on this project, you have been diligent, hardworking, and enthusiastic. I can see your situation is causing you a lot of stress and sadness and distracting you from your studies. Have you spoken to anyone about this? Do you have support at home or with friends or family? The school has some excellent LGBTQ+-friendly counselling services you can access as well. Maybe it would help to talk to someone about what you are going through? I know you're having a really hard time and I commend you on continuing to show up and trying the best you can; it's a testament to your resilience. Although we do need to complete our project, I'm flexible in how we continue with it. Is there anything we can change to ease some of your stress, such as working on it together instead of separating the work and then meeting?

Responses to avoid

- Cheer up, there are plenty of fish in the sea! I'm sure you'll have no problem meeting someone new. (Although this may be true, it minimizes the pain and grief the person is going through. They need time to process their experience before they can move on.)
- Did you break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend? (At no point is it necessary to know the sex/gender of their partner. If they do not disclose this information, it is because they have chosen not to and the physical sex or gender identification of their partner will not impact the way in which you support your peer. Using gender-neutral terms like *partner* or *significant other* is more appropriate and respectful, and mirroring the language they use to describe their significant other is the best option.)
- Can't you just get over it and move on? We have deadlines, and I don't want to get a bad grade. (Although the concern for a bad mark is real, adding stress and pressure to a situation does not help or support the student in crisis; it only adds to their stress.)
- I know exactly what you are going through. When I went through that, I [insert personal story]. (This may seem helpful, but it takes away from their experience, and when we offer personal anecdotes, we stop listening to their story and concerns. Maintaining the focus on their situation allows them to talk through their experience with someone and sometimes that is all they need to move forward or find clarity in a situation and seek the help they need.)

© Dagmar Devine ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

Indigenous student triggered by lesson content

You are in class when the instructor begins talking about Canada's residential school system and the abuse and forced assimilation of Indigenous children. As the lesson closes and students begin to pack up, you notice that a usually gregarious Indigenous student is sitting quietly and appears to be wiping tears from their eyes. When you approach the student, they tell you that their grandmother was in a residential school and they found the lesson very triggering.

Key points

- Recognize and validate the student's distress without appropriating it.
- Actively and non-judgmentally listen to the student's story, if they wish to share it with you.
- Connect the student with Indigenous services (such as an Elder in Residence or an Indigenous or liaison counsellor).
- Offer support in contacting the instructor about trigger warnings in future.

Possible response

Thank you for sharing that with me. I noticed you were tearful, and I'm very sorry that you're upset. I won't pretend to know exactly how you're feeling, but I understand there is intergenerational trauma related to the residential school system. If you feel comfortable, please tell me more about how you're feeling and how you've been affected. Can I assist you in accessing Indigenous services? There are staff on campus who can connect you with Indigenous Elders and counsellors. If you'd like, I can also talk to the instructor about providing trigger warnings on content like this in the future, or I can support you in contacting the instructor.

Unhelpful responses

- Well, that was a long time ago, and it didn't happen to you.
- You need to develop a thicker skin; don't be so sensitive!
- A lot of groups have been oppressed.
- Oh my gosh, that instructor is totally racist! Don't worry, I'm going to take up your cause and make sure everybody knows how totally unacceptable this is! (This response disrespects the Indigenous student's voice and agency. It appropriates their trauma and misunderstands the situation.)

© Jenny Guild ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

SCENARIO 4

Homeless student misses study group

You are part of a study group that has been meeting regularly through the semester. Recently, one member's attendance has become sporadic. When they do show up, their appearance is dishevelled, and they seem to have a hard time concentrating. When you ask them about this, they confide that they have been evicted from their apartment and must live in their car for a few weeks until they can afford a deposit on a new place. They explain that it's hard to find a quiet and comfortable place to study or sleep, and their coursework has suffered as a result. They also tell you that they feel a lot of stress and shame about the situation.

Key points

- Validate in an empathetic and non-judgmental way.
- Respect privacy.
- Offer to connect the student with relevant resources, such as shelters, counselling, financial aid, bank programs, and library study spaces.
- Set personal boundaries.

Possible response

You have nothing to be ashamed of; many of us have gone through financial hardships through no fault of our own. I understand it must be a stressful situation, and I will respect your privacy. Can I connect you with some services that might help you at this time? Financial aid has scholarships, bursaries, and assistance programs that could help you financially. There are food bank programs and shelters in the community. A counsellor could help you deal with the stress. And if you need a quiet place to study, there is always the library and campus study spaces. I can show you these spaces and support you in accessing these resources.

Unhelpful responses

- Oh my gosh, I can't believe you're homeless!
- You really need to learn to manage your money better.
- Don't worry, you can move in with me today and stay as long as you need to! (This response is not conducive to maintaining healthy personal boundaries.)

© Jenny Guild ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

SCENARIO 5

Transgender student who needs support with a culturally unsafe instructor

Alexa, a transgender student, approaches you after a LGBTQ2S+ meetup on campus. She tells you that one of her instructors refuses to call her by her name, stating that “preferred names” are optional as per school policy. Occasionally, the instructor will use Alexa’s name, but will self-edit it; for example, calling her “Alex” instead of “Alexa.” The student feels disrespected and humiliated by her instructor during class, so if she does attend class she sits in the back and doesn’t participate very much. She explains to you that she needs to do well in the course so she can get into the program she wants. She expresses feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and frustration during this interaction.

Key points

- Listen empathetically and support the student while recognizing her capacity.
- Validate her experience and recognize that you do not personally know this experience (if appropriate).
- Acknowledge the student’s strength and resilience and remind her that she is valued.
- Offer to help connect her with campus and community resources, such as counselling services and advocacy groups that can support her (e.g., the student union or other advocacy services on campus or in the community).

Possible response

Thank you for sharing your story with me. I’m sorry this happened to you. It must be so frustrating for your instructor to not understand trans reality. I can appreciate how your instructor’s behaviour is impacting your well-being. You are valued, and there are many people and services that can support you through this. How can I help? I hear that you’re feeling sad and hopeless, and I’m concerned. Would you like to talk to a counsellor on campus? Counselling is confidential and free for students. I can walk with you to counselling services if you like, or I can give you their location and contact information.

Another option is I could help you connect with the pride centre. They have free short-term counselling as well as sliding-scale or low-cost long-term counselling services. I can also give you the online crisis resources so you can access them if and when you’re ready. Is that okay with you? If you like, we can also speak to the student union on campus to discuss mediation if you want to talk to the instructor or the director of the department about this. I can walk with you to the student union, or I can give you their location and contact information. I can also be present to support you throughout this process as well.

Unhelpful responses

- I understand what you are going through. You can wear dresses if you want.
- I’m sure the instructor was not intentionally trying to misgender you. Maybe they didn’t know. Did you tell your instructor you are transgender?
- Have you considered looking more feminine? Perhaps wear makeup, long hair, or dresses so you look less ambiguous.
- Are you sure you are transgender? Maybe you are gay instead.

© Arica Hsu ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

(Continued)

Resources for Supporting LGBTQ2S+ Students

When speaking to a transgender student, use the name of the student:

- Say “What is your name?”
- Do not say “What is your preferred name?”
- If it is necessary to determine the student’s name in the registry, say “What is your legal name?”

Use a transgender or non-binary student’s appropriate pronoun:

- Say “What are your pronouns?”
- Do not say “What are your preferred pronouns?”

Online Resources

Here are some helpful online LGBTQ2S+ resources on language:

- *The Genderbread Person*. “[Genderbread Person v4.0.](#)”
- University of California, San Francisco. LGBT Resource Centre. “[General Definitions.](#)”
- University of California, Davis. “[LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary.](#)”
- Alberta Health Services. “[Terms to Avoid.](#)”
- Trans Care B.C. “[Two-Spirit.](#)”
- Re:searching for LGBTQ2S+ Health. “Two-Spirit Community.”
- 2 Crees in a Pod. “[Embracing My Two-Spirit Journey with Prestin Thotin-Awasis.](#)”

Engineering student who appears anxious and rushes out of class

Your classmate usually sits at the very back of your engineering class and keeps to themselves. Today they arrive late, and you notice them taking one of the remaining seats at the busy centre of the lecture hall. Other classmates are engaged in loud conversations with one another. Your classmate appears to become anxious. You notice them frantically shuffling their body. As additional classmates fill up the remaining seats, your classmate hastily grabs their belongings and runs out of the class, sweating profusely. You decide to follow them out of class to see how they're doing. When you talk to them, they tell you that they were just anxious and needed to get out of the room to relax.

Key points

- Express support and empathy and let them know you support them.
- Technical fields like engineering may appear to be emotionless environments to many students, but all students need support sometimes. Bring attention to mental health care by reaching out and sharing available resources.

Possible response

I noticed that you had an uncomfortable reaction in class and left class earlier. Are you doing okay? I just wanted to check because I know I sometimes feel overwhelmed during class. I know there can be all sorts of pressure, and I'm here if you want to talk about anything. How about we try and sit together next class? I can save you a seat.

Note: *If the student says they're fine and they don't share anything else with you, that's okay. They now know that someone else cares about their well-being and you're available if they want to talk. If the student indicates that they're feeling like they can't cope with all the pressure or says anything that concerns you, you could suggest they connect with student services to find out about the resources that are available on campus to support students and help them learn coping strategies for dealing with*

all the stresses of being a student. You could also offer to walk over to student services with them, but you should take your cue from them.

Unhelpful responses

- Hi there. I noticed that you ran out of class. I feel like that was weird. Next time, you should stay at the back of the class. If the seats are full, just find a spot on the floor up there or stand.
- Hey, it looks like you need to see a counsellor. I know a person who suffered from social anxiety, and they eventually decided to drop out of school. This is a huge problem, and you need to get it fixed right away. I don't want to see you suffer the same fate.

© Hamza Islam ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

International student who is not able to pay fees

An international student you know from classes is not able to pay all their fees for the semester. The student tells you that they didn't get any kind of financial aid. They discussed their situation with their parents, but they are not able to send money because their business was shut down during the pandemic. The student is really upset and appears to be on the verge of tears when they talk to you. They are worried they'll have to drop out and say they feel helpless and very stressed.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy.
- Tell them about resources on campus, such as financial aid, international student services, and health and wellness services.
- Offer to help them connect with a local food bank.

Possible response

I'm sorry to hear that you are having such a difficult time. I can understand that this is very stressful and heartbreaking for you. Did you know there are a lot of really helpful services right here on campus? You could also talk to someone in international student services to see if they have any suggestions. And there's also the financial aid office on campus, and they may be able to suggest bursaries or loans. The health and wellness centre has staff and counsellors who can help you if you are feeling stressed and low. There's also the food bank on campus, which provides free food to students in need. I can help you connect with all of these services if you'd like.

Unhelpful responses

- Why don't you just get a job? That's what most students do when they're short of cash.
- So how much money does your family make and how much are they sending you?

© Mehakpreet Kaur ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

SCENARIO 8

International student feeling overwhelmed by academic and work commitments

Salem arrived in Canada three months ago and is struggling with absorbing school material in English. Salem has to work after classes to support their family, so there is no time for extra tutoring or study club. Because of late-night shifts, they are having trouble keeping a consistent sleep schedule and preparing meals for the week. Salem explains to you that they have a midterm exam coming up. Salem discloses to you that in their culture, grades play a large role in defining one's self-worth and social status—and this exam is no exception. They are visibly distressed, their eyes swollen with dark circles underneath, and they mention their lack of appetite and lack of communication with their loved ones.

Key points

- Acknowledge and validate student's feelings and concerns.
- Ask if they need advice or a compassionate listener; if the latter, listen attentively.
- If the student needs advice and support, offer to connect them with relevant services, such as financial aid, international student services, mental health resources, or academic advising for additional support.
- Offer to support the student in their advocacy with instructors about their school-life balance.
- Offer to help research food banks, bursaries, and student loan resources.

Possible response

I'm so sorry to hear about what you are going through. Your feelings and concerns are valid and deserve to be heard. I can't imagine how challenging it must be to navigate school, work, and personal life in a foreign environment, far from home and family. I admire your resilience and perseverance in this difficult situation and appreciate you opening up to me about your experiences. You are not alone, and we are here to support you.

How can I help? Do you need a listening ear or support with brainstorming options? I'd be happy to help you navigate the many student services on campus. Have you spoken to anyone at international student services or financial aid? They may be able to help. Have you contacted your instructor? There are ways to make a request for an extension on assignments. Would you like assistance with that or help with putting together a study plan? We can also look into local food banks and bursaries together, to free up your time to allow for more rest and studying.

When was the last time you connected with family and friends? They care about you and your health; we can call them together if that would help. Your academic performance does not define your worth; there is so much more to you as an individual.

(Continued)

SCENARIO 8: CONTINUED

International student feeling overwhelmed by academic and work commitments

Unhelpful responses

- This is just an exam, you'll be fine. This is just what student life is like.
- Don't blow this issue up. I had exams too and was just fine.
- I don't see other international students complaining. You should be grateful you even get to be here.
- Actually, I had the same problem when... [continue talking about yourself].
- It's because your English isn't that great. Things will get a lot easier when your English improves.
- Just talk to your instructor, it's not that big of a deal.
- Wow, the way your culture is this focused on grades is so regressive.
- This is school, what did you expect?

© Malena Mokhovikova (CC BY 4.0 license)

SCENARIO 9

Student worried about failing a course and disappointing their family

Cobie is the first member of their family to attend a post-secondary program, and their parents and grandparents have invested most of their money in their education. Cobie has come up to you, as a teacher's assistant, in a panicked way after class. They explain that they just got their mark back for an assignment, and they failed it and are unable to improve their mark. They will likely fail the class because of how much the paper was worth. The student is clearly panicking, and is displaying frantic behaviours like pacing, speaking rapidly, and fidgeting with their hands, and is on the verge of crying. They say that they feel guilty for wasting their parents' and grandparents' money and are embarrassed to tell them that they failed on the paper. They say they feel helpless and stuck, with no way out of the situation.

Key points

- Validate the student's feelings and emotions, and show your understanding of their situation.
- Provide options for the student, such as discussing a rewrite with the instructor.
- Encourage the student to visit counselling services.

Possible response

This sounds really challenging, and I'm so sorry that you're going through this tough time right now. It must be really hard and upsetting to have worked so hard on a project and not got the mark you wanted. Your parents and grandparents care about you; that's why they have helped you with school. You are a hardworking student and this one grade does not define you.

I suggest you first talk to your instructor and see if they're open to you rewriting your assignment. If that's an option, you could get extra support from the learning centre. If redoing your assignment isn't possible, there is the option of taking the class again or taking a different class that you

might be more interested in. I'm here for you, and you can come to me to talk. If you're feeling really overwhelmed by this, there are also counselling services on campus, and I can recommend a counsellor who can help you through this tough time. Would you like me to help you connect with counselling services?

Unhelpful responses

- Don't worry about it. This assignment probably doesn't matter as much as you think it does.
- Your parents and grandparents won't be mad at you for failing one assignment.
- You probably should have worked a bit harder and then this wouldn't have happened.

© Jackson Mackenzie Nicholls ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

Student triggered by an instructor's comments about weight and body image

Your friend Blue, who is recovering from an eating disorder, just ran out of class because of triggering course content. Blue is non-binary, queer, bi-racial, and neurodivergent. In class, the instructor was discussing nutrition, body image, and healthy eating when they made an implicitly offensive comment about weight and body mass index. This triggered Blue, causing them to run out of the classroom. You also leave class to check on them, and you find them pacing up and down the hallway, scratching their arms, and tugging at their shirt to pull it away from their body.

Key points

- Listen and respond in an empathetic way.
- Ask them if they have anyone to talk to.
- Offer to go with them to a quiet place on campus, such as a student hub, so they can ground themselves.
- Ask if they'd like to talk to a counsellor and offer to help connect them with counselling services.

Possible response

I noticed that you ran out of the class after the instructor made that insensitive comment. Do you want to talk about how you're feeling, or do you need time for yourself? I know you're recovering from an eating disorder and hearing your instructor make a comment like that must be extremely upsetting. I can see that you're distressed by the way you're scratching yourself. I know the student hub has a quiet space that we can go to if you think that would help; I can walk you there now. After you feel more grounded, do you want to talk to someone? There's counselling at the school and peer support, but if you don't feel comfortable discussing the matter here, there's Here2Help.ca, which is an online chat or text resource.

Unhelpful responses

- I thought you recovered from your eating disorder. Why does this bother you?
- I'm sure the instructor had good intentions; you're just taking it the wrong way.
- I know you were triggered by that comment, but I'm sure the whole class was too.
- Come on back to class, you don't want to miss everything and fall behind.

© Calla Smith ([CC BY 4.0 license](#))

Student struggling to balance academic pressures with their social life

A student shows up to class after not coming for a couple of weeks. As everyone is packing up their bags at the end of class, you approach the student, who looks tired, is not wearing appropriate clothing for the cold weather outside, and looks like they may not have showered in a while. After talking privately with you in the empty classroom for a few minutes, the student discloses that they are hungover from a weekend of drinking. The student is clammy, sweaty, and breathing quickly. The student continues to tell you that they don't want to be in school, but they're under a lot of pressure from their family to be there. The student tells you that the only part of school they enjoy is the social aspect.

Key points

- Listen and respond in an empathetic way.
- Suggest they talk to someone counselling services about the pressures they're feeling and get some advice on how to balance their academic and social life.
- Suggest they talk to someone at the learning centre about how to manage their courses.

Possible response

Hey, I haven't seen you in a while and I just want to check in on you. Is everything going okay? I see you don't have a jacket, and it's pretty cold outside. Do you want to see if the lost and found has anything that hasn't been claimed in a while? I understand not wanting to come to class; it is a lot of pressure. The social life is exciting and new, and it's a chance to feel free and be your own person. Do you have any ways to balance the social and work aspect of school? Do you have anyone to talk to about school and life? It could be really helpful to talk to someone, and here are some good resources here on campus. There are counsellors who are there if you need to talk about the pressure you're feeling from your family; they can also give you some advice on balancing the work and social aspects of school.

Would you like me to help you connect with them? I understand that you're hungover now, but you could go whenever you're ready. Is it okay if I reach out if I don't see you in class next week?

Unhelpful responses

- Don't worry so much; you'll grow out of this phase of your life.
- Why are you even in class if you don't want to be here?
- It sounds like you drink a lot. Are you an alcoholic?
- It might help to keep things in perspective. I have to work two jobs every summer to put myself through school, but your parents are paying your way—and you don't even appreciate it.

© Calla Smith ([CC BY 4.0 license](#)).