Anxiety and Panic Management – Hints and Tips when working with students

There may be times at university when students become particularly stressed or anxious and therefore might experience a panic attack or high anxiety levels which could cause a period of upset and distress. This leaflet will explain how you can manage these situations to reassure the student and reduce anxiety and will also explain at what point this becomes a more serious situation or crisis.

High Anxiety and Stress
Any student can experience high anxiety and stress however it may be more common for those who already have a diagnosis of anxiety.

What are the signs?
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Voice cracking
- Crying
- Rapid breathing

How is the student feeling?
- Fear and worry
- Tired and unable to concentrate
- Faint
- Painful chest/heart racing
- Upset/Tearful
- Unsure what to do/feeling lost
- Self-doubt

Panic Attacks
This is very similar to a student who is presenting with signs of high anxiety and stress however a panic attack can be quite a sudden and intense experience.

What are the signs?
- Rapid breathing or look like they are trying to catch their breath
- Sweating
- Fidgeting
- Becoming upset
- Shaking
- Difficulty speaking
How is the student feeling?
- Like they are unable to breathe
- Tightness of the chest/chest pains
- Weakness
- Stressed and worried that there might be something wrong
- Overwhelming sense of fear or danger
- Heart racing and pounding
- Could potentially genuinely feel that they may die from the symptoms
- Hot and Cold Flushes
- Nausea/Dizziness/Confusion

How to manage anxiety and panic
- Offer the student somewhere to sit down
- Find a quiet space/room for the student
- Provide reassurance to let them know that it will pass
- Encourage slow, deep breathing
- Ask if they would like to be left alone for a moment or if they would like you to stay
- Ask if they would like to go for a walk and return when they are ready
- Ask if there is anything that they usually do to help or if there is anyone they would like to talk to
- Try not to ask too many questions but instead judge the situation and how the student may be feeling to then decide what might be appropriate.
- Use positive and encouraging language
- Use open rather than leading questions e.g. “can you describe to me how you are feeling?” Rather than “Are you feeling angry/scared etc?”
- Don’t be afraid of silence if this is what the student prefers. Your presence may be enough to help.
- Consider if the student may need a drink of water or some fresh air
- Be a good listener and always encourage the student to tell you what they want, as they are the experts in what works for them.
- Don’t feel like you have to fix the problem, your role is to gather information and taking notes can be helpful for if you need to handover the student.
- Find out if they are registered with a service such as Disability Services or Counselling so that you can encourage them to see their adviser/counsellor.

Each experience will differ per individual and some may already have techniques that help. If not then the points above may help you to help the student relax. A panic attack could last up to about 20 minutes so it is important to stay as calm as possible during this time to allow the student to recover.

It may not be helpful to talk too much, ask too many questions, move around a lot, let other people into the space, say things like ‘calm down’ or ‘just relax’, as this is what the student is trying to achieve however will be finding it quite difficult.
When the student has recovered, you could ask if they want to come back to the session or go home, or they could see a disability services adviser if they feel that this is a recurring problem that is having an impact on their university experience. If it is a one off experience or the student feels that they are managing without support then they do not have to see an adviser if they do not wish to. It may just be helpful to make them aware of the service.

Remember that although panic attacks generally are not harmful, it is still an intense experience for the student and the symptoms are very real to the individual so it is always to be taken seriously.

How do I identify if a student requires more specialist and/or urgent help?

- If there are visible signs of self-harm, it may mean that the situation is more serious. In this instance, do not appear alarmed, or ask too many questions and remember that it is the student’s choice to do this. It may be helpful to accompany the student to student services and ask to speak to a disability adviser. The focus should be on supporting and reassuring the student that they can access help. If they do not want to see anyone, you could voice your concerns to an adviser and they can contact the student to ask if they would like any support.

- If the student expresses that they may harm themselves or others, or that they are having suicidal thoughts then it is important to create a supportive and trusting environment. Rather than asking specific and probing questions, you could ask if they would like to tell you any more about this. It is of course up to the student what information they would like to disclose. You could then offer to accompany them to student services to talk to a disability adviser, or contact a disability adviser to come to your location.

Who to contact and refer to

If at any point you feel the situation with a student is beyond your professional boundaries and competence or you feel uncomfortable dealing with the situation, it is important to refer the student to someone else that could help.

- Disability Co-ordinator: You can express any concerns relating to an academic or course specific issue to the School Disability Co-ordinator. They will be able to meet with the student to discuss potential solutions and adjustments that can be made within the school.

- Disability services: A Student Adviser may be able to help if a student if the student is presenting a wider issue that cannot be managed within the school. This could be a mental health concern, a general concern about wellbeing or a crisis situation. You could accompany the student to student services reception or call them on 2277 and ask to speak to an adviser. The adviser may arrange for an immediate appointment or may meet with the student in their current location.

- Refer to the ‘Quick Guide- Students in Distress’ if you are unsure.
Remember these 6 points to consider when responding to a student in distress:

1) Reaction
2) Environment
3) Communication
4) Boundaries
5) Strategies and techniques
6) Support or signpost