



EUI Counselling Service

How to spot if a research student has personal difficulties

Postgraduate researchers may experience difficulties of different sorts while producing their thesis, a long and often hard, lonely and demanding process. Supervisors are in a good position to know when a researcher is running into personal problems. At one time or another, everyone feels upset, depressed, and/or unhappy. Causes for concern should arise when the symptoms of distress occur for extended periods of time or begin to interfere with a researcher's academic responsibilities or social/personal relationships. Some common questions or observations may help you spot if a student has personal difficulties.

Academic signs

- Is the researcher's behaviour cause for concern?
- Is he or she not regularly attending seminars?
- Is he or she failing to respect assignments or meet deadlines?
- Is there a significant decline in the quality of work?
- Is he or she feeling overwhelmed, helpless and/or sad over a prolonged period of time?

Psychological or physical signs

- The researcher's physical appearance and hygiene.
- Exaggerated behaviour or personality traits (e.g., agitation, withdrawal, blunted affect, aggressive behaviour).
- Constant irritability, anxiety or tearful behaviour.

- Overt suicidal thoughts or behaviour, such as referring to suicide as an option or manner of coping
- Unwarranted anger, hostility, or outbursts
- Significant changes in concentration or motivation
- Evidence of alcohol or other drug dependence or abuse
- Visible increases or decreases in weight
- Extreme fatigue.
- Evidence of self mutilation
- Is he or she trying to talk to you about his or her problem
- Have other staff noticed problems
- Is he or she experiencing panic or excessive worry

Additional factors to consider

- Candid statements indicating family problems, personal losses such as the death of a family member or the break up of a significant relationship.
- Expression or concern about a student by peers or colleagues
- Your sense that something is seriously amiss (no matter how vague this might be)

What you can do

Should a researcher get in touch with you, open up and talk to you about a problem, it would be best if you could take the time to listen without judging.

- let the student know about the boundaries and limitations of your role.
- encourage the student to make an appointment with the counsellors at the Counselling Service.
- after referral, ask the student directly what support he/she requires from you.

Should you wish to talk to a researcher you are concerned about, it would be advisable to do this in a clear, direct and respectful manner.