



Interview with Dr Jenny English

Jenny English is registered psychologist with over 25 years experience working in university counselling services – from the School of Early Childhood Studies in the late 1980's to Melbourne College of Advanced Education then Melbourne University in the 1990's, Deakin University in the 2000's and finally as Manager of Counselling at RMIT 2009 to 2015. Jenny is now semi retired with a small private practise providing supervision to professionals and managers across the health, welfare and education sectors.

What is the role of academics in supporting students' wellbeing?

I think academics have a huge role in supporting students' wellbeing, through the contact they have with the students, and being open to listening to students and knowing when it is appropriate to refer and not go beyond their role in helping. It's very appropriate to ring the counselling service and seek advice, and certainly when they are concerned, to talk to a senior staff member and then maybe ring the counselling service for extra advice on what to do.

What are some helpful ways to respond to students in distress?

Look, I think the message is that "I've heard you", "I care about you", and "I will help you" but not that "I will take responsibility for your problem and fix it". So, to be able to listen to the student and hold their story, or hear it as they tell it, and to be able to say to the student: "I can hear that you have a lot on your plate and it's affecting you, and it's affecting your study" and then to say "let's look at ways that we can help you to manage this", is a really powerful message for that student because they are being heard, they are being validated, and they are being supported. And then they are being assisted to sort of network with appropriate supports and services. And the academic is in some ways giving the problem back to the student, which is saying "you have the resources, you have the coping skills to deal with this", whereas if someone takes it on, tries to problem solve and fix it, they are not assisting the student in developing their own autonomy and coping and resilience skills.

What general advice do you have for academics when students disclose personal information?

It can be really difficult when a student, in talking to the academic, discloses personal information or tells you a story that is quite distressing or tells you about their mental health concerns. It's really important when you hear stories that concern you that you have some concerns about how to respond to, that you seek advice early on. Go to your senior staff member or supervisor and get advice from the experts, the counselling service, on how to manage these situations. Sometimes academics get worried that this is a breach of privacy or confidentiality, and don't like to do this. In the first instance if that's the case, you can talk hypothetically if you like, you don't have to use the student's name. When you talk to your senior staff member, that's not a breach of privacy either, you are seeking advice around how to manage the situation within your work context. It's important that you do this quite early on and that you make a file note of your actions and your follow-up responses. One other piece of advice I give is to do this in person, not to do it via email because sometime emails, if taken out of context, can *not say* what they are meant or the intent is a bit different. It's also riskier in terms of privacy if you've got emails with subject headers with students' names in it. So I would advice that you actually do this in person, or ring.