

Managing distressed students

AUA conference 2019 @plinthouse #AUA2019

Julie Rea & Levi Pay

www.plinthouse.com



julie@plinthouse.com

[linkedin.com/in/jrea](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jrea)

 [@j_rea1](https://twitter.com/j_rea1)

levi@plinthouse.com

[linkedin.com/in/levipay](https://www.linkedin.com/in/levipay)

 [@levipay](https://twitter.com/levipay)

Today's session

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What is distress? A case study

2

The importance of maintaining boundaries

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Building a collaborative relationship with a distressed student

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A useful model to hold in mind

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An effective approach to training

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Questions

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What is distress?

“Extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain.”

Oxford English Dictionary



Case study: Abi



Abi comes in to your room, upset and agitated. She has just walked out of an exam...



Audio clip available at www.plinthhouse.com/audio

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**What is your role when you're with
a distressed student?**

Your role

- To offer appropriate, accessible and effective support, in a boundaried role-appropriate way
- To direct the student to other support services, as appropriate, and enable students to take responsibility





**One foot in the river and
one foot on the riverbank**



The importance of maintaining boundaries

Setting appropriate boundaries

Do:

- Make clear how much time you have. If the student appears agitated, perhaps a brief discussion can be offered immediately with a planned follow-up meeting.
- Make clear your role – e.g. *“My role is primarily to support your academic progress, and, if you’re struggling with any personal issues or if you’d benefit from our specialist support services, to help guide you towards these sources of support”*.
- Reiterate your policy on whether you have an open-door policy or need the student to make appointments.
- Follow up with the student appropriately and confirm the discussion and action points by email.

Setting appropriate boundaries

Don't:

- Give mobile phone numbers
- Answer student emails out-of-hours
- Get drawn into sharing your own personal information
- Promise unlimited confidentiality
- Be tempted to offer reassurance through physical contact, such as a hug

Why boundaries are important when managing a distressed student

- **For the student:** Key to fostering **responsibility and independence**, and **avoiding over-dependency**. You being boundaried in your role makes it more likely the student will engage with appropriate specialist mental health support.
- **For you:** Boundaries are helpful in terms of **looking after yourself** and being able to compartmentalise the personal and professional – crucial when faced with students with varied, complex and challenging issues. They enable you to leave work at work.

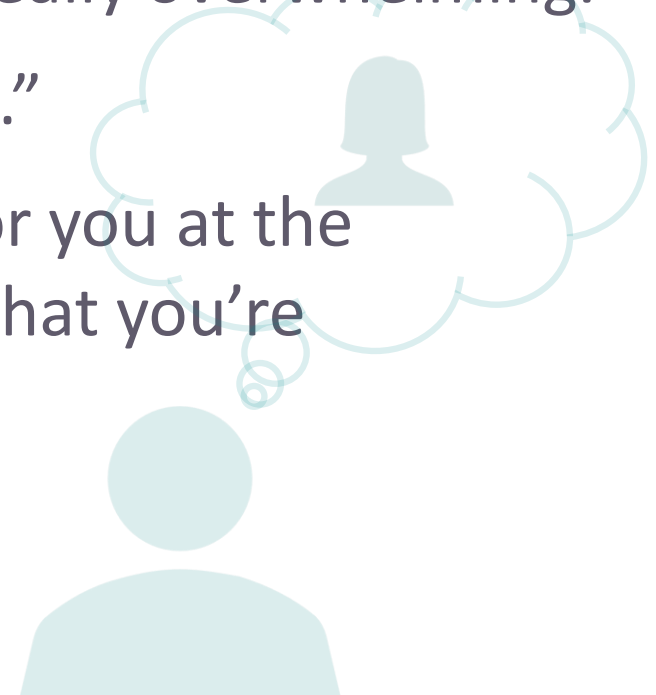


Building a collaborative relationship

The importance of empathy

Empathy is the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference.

- “I can imagine that could feel really overwhelming.”
- “I can see how upsetting this is.”
- “Things sound really difficult for you at the moment. It’s understandable that you’re upset.”



Modelling calmness



Distress is contagious, but, thankfully, so is calmness.

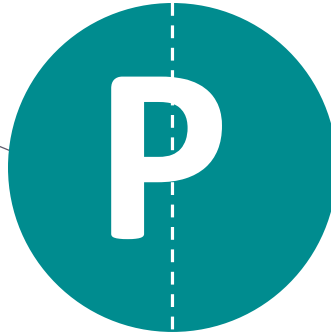
Model calmness through your body language, breathing and voice (the amount you say, volume and tone).

Neuroscientific research into 'mirror neurons'

Building a collaborative relationship

Critical Parent

Monitors adherence to rules (including expectations of self and others). Shoulds, musts, fault-finding, dismissive.



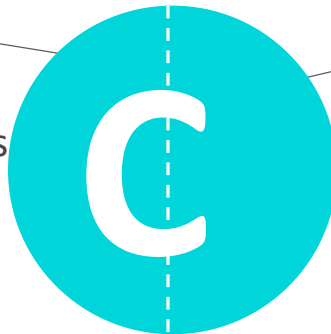
Nurturing Parent

Voice of unconditional acceptance, hope, and optimism. Source of self-soothing and self-recognition.



Adaptive Child

Makes emotional decisions about self and the world based on past and present drivers, injunctions biology, and environment. Fearful, compliant, cooperative. Can replay inappropriate childhood behaviour.

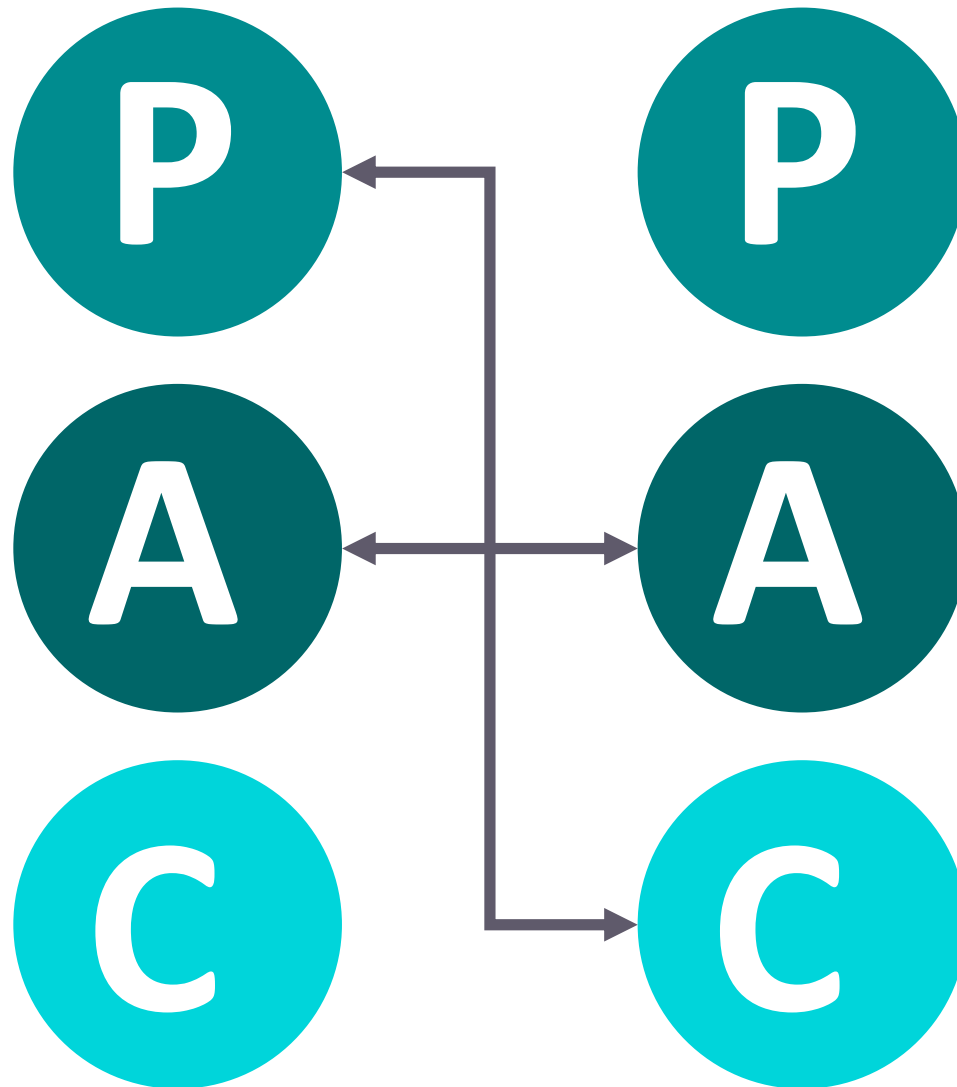


Free Child

The spontaneous, emotive, creative, and in-the-moment part of self. Creative, playful, wild.

Based on Berne, Eric (1964), *Games People Play*

Reciprocal interactions



Based on Berne, Eric (1964), *Games People Play*

Remember your active listening skills

Reflective feelings

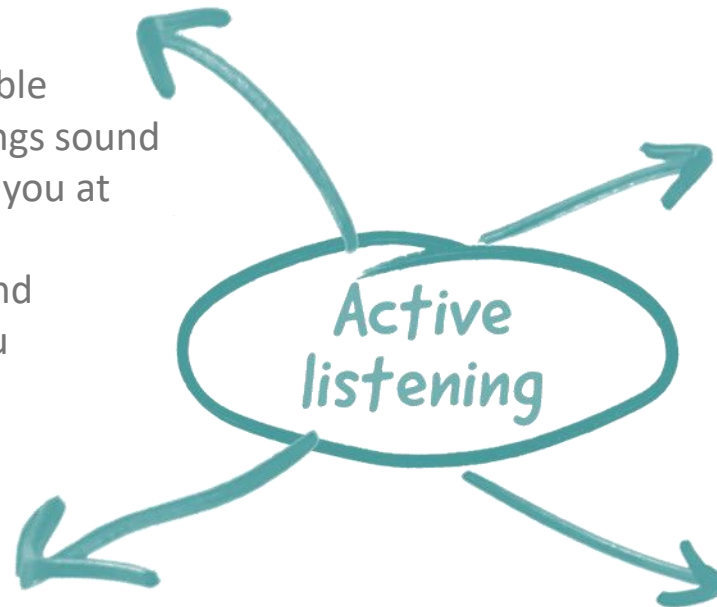
Examples:

- “It’s understandable you’re upset. Things sound really difficult for you at the moment.”
- “I notice you sound anxious when you mention...”

Paying full attention

Examples:

- Engaged eye contact
- Looking interested
- Nodding
- Open body language



Summarising

Examples:

- “So, to pull this all together...”
- “Just to sum up what we’ve agreed...”

Paraphrasing

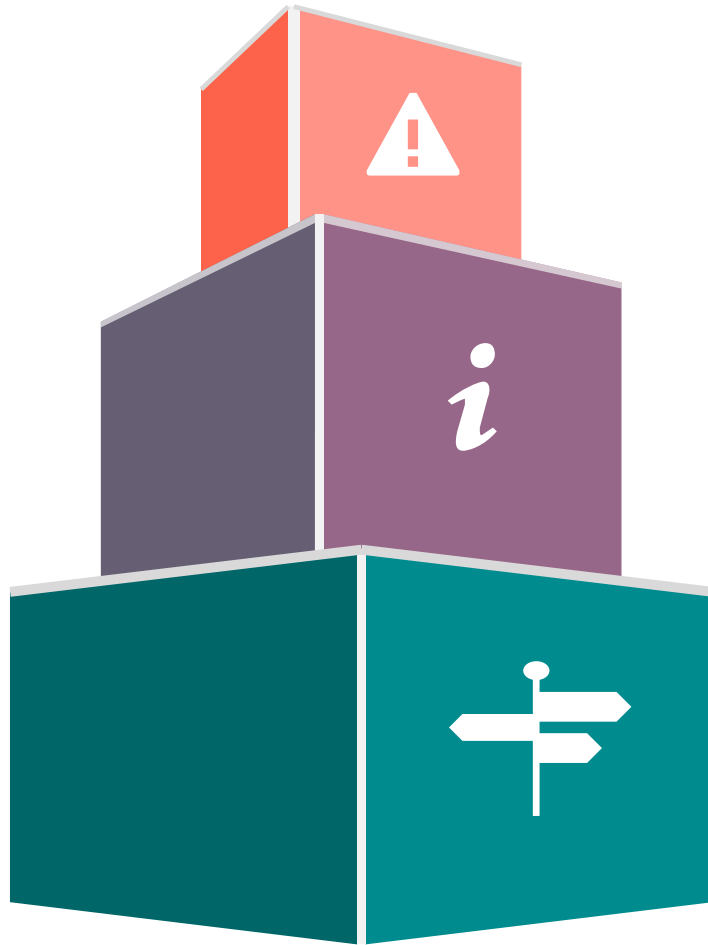
Examples:

- “So, you’re saying that...”
- “If I’m hearing you right, the two main things making you feel stressed right now are...”



'3 Levels of response' protocol

'Levels of Response' protocol: A key model to bear in mind when working with students



LEVEL 3: Imminent harm/
emergency

LEVEL 2: Seek advice

LEVEL 1: Supported
signposting

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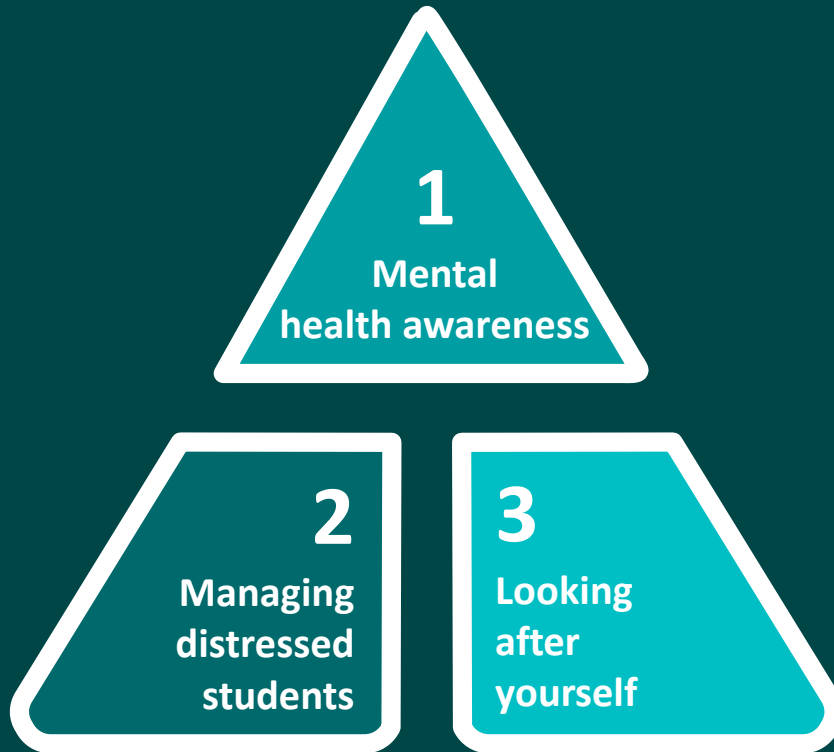
Abi revisited

8-minute role play for you to listen to after the workshop: www.plinthhouse.com/audio



An effective approach to training

An effective training strategy



Module 1: Context

Module 2: Confidence

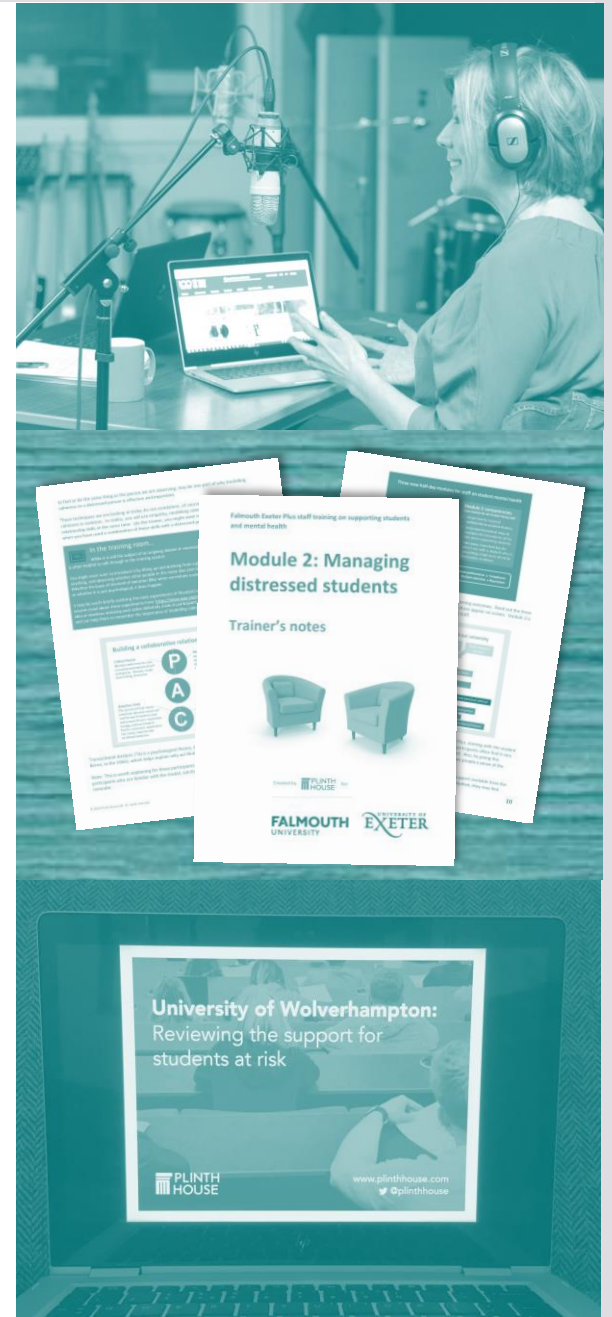
Module 3: Care for self

Supporting the student & staff experience • Enhancing compliance
Responding to increased demand & levels of risk • Underpinning student retention

Things to bear in mind

- Ensure all trainers have the right clinical training, accreditation and experience.
- Make sure the training is specific to higher education and includes institution-specific referral protocols.
- Get the balance right between promoting an awareness of mental health conditions and equipping people with practical skills to use in their work (we recommend a 20%/80% split).
- Be careful about badging colleagues as mental health 'contacts' or 'first aiders'. Focus on skills relevant to all.
- Focus the training on boundaries!

- Face-to-face training
- Podcasts and webinars
- ‘Away day’ activities
- Producing bespoke training materials for you to deliver in your institution
- ‘Train the trainer’ sessions
- Reflective ‘peer supervision’ sessions for key welfare roles
- Focus group sessions to review incident management protocols





Questions



Your feedback



info@plinthhouse.com

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