Online safety incidents
student support

Toolkit for Universities
Creating safer online environments
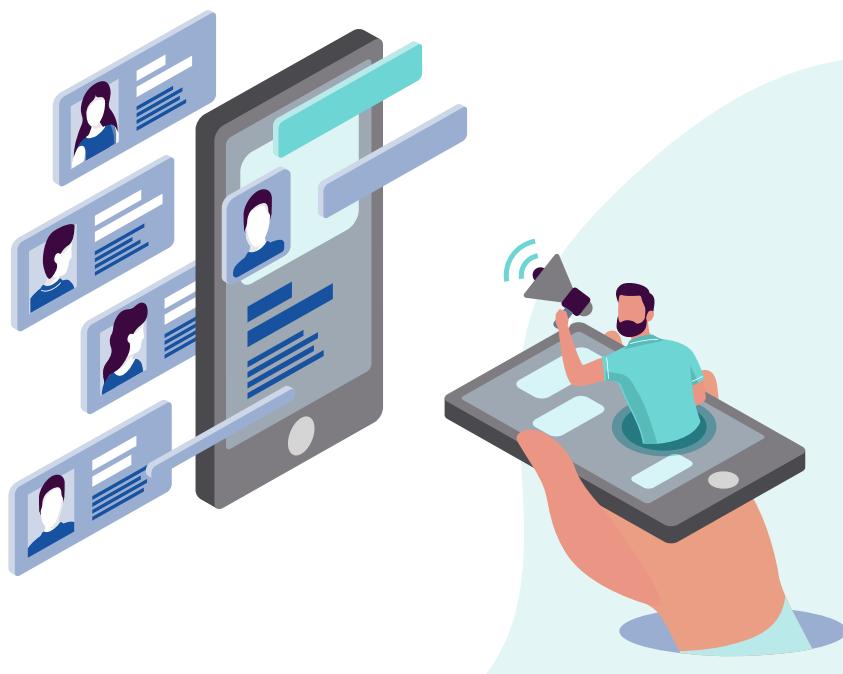
This resource provides advice to teaching staff on how to support their students if they suspect, or become aware of, students experiencing cyber abuse. It includes information on what to look out for and actions that can be taken.

Australian Government | eSafety Commissioner

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

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As a university academic, you may find some of your students stressed as they try to balance the demands of study with issues impacting other aspects of their lives including relationships, family, work, health, social or money matters.

When learning online, students also face stresses, including the risk of cyber abuse which can have a significant impact on students personally and/or in their academic capacity. Online abuse, threats and cyberstalking are all traumatic, extremely stressful experiences, though students' reactions can vary.

Signs of cyber abuse

In response to cyber abuse, it is normal for people to feel:

- confused, anxious and powerless
- angry, depressed and distrustful
- isolated from family and friends
- embarrassed, ashamed or guilty
- like they are 'watching their back' all the time and are unable to have any peace.

Students experiencing cyber abuse may find it harder to:

- remember things
- get organised
- manage their academic responsibilities
- switch off.

The most important thing to remember when responding to a cyber abuse incident is that the abuse is not the fault of the person being targeted. Students experiencing online abuse need support and encouragement.

How to support students

For detailed information about how to respond to cyber abuse including advice on how to support students (and staff) facing this experience, please read the eSafety guides on responding to cyber abuse against staff and students which are part of the toolkit. In addition, you can:

- Listen and be receptive to the student's issue and concerns.
- Advise the student not to respond or retaliate. Instead, suggest that they save evidence which documents the incident. eSafety has advice on collecting evidence which you can share with students.
- Refer the student to eSafety's responding to cyber abuse guide which provides advice on how to respond to how to respond to students/staff experiencing cyber abuse.

- Advise the student that they can report abusive content to the service or platform on which it has been posted. The eSafety Guide provides information on how to report content to various services and platforms.
- Refer the student to eSafety or the police for advice if appropriate. If you are uncertain about how to respond, you could also contact your university's counselling or welfare services for advice.
- Consider what support/assistance you can offer. This may include:
  - extensions for assignments
  - alternative assessment arrangements
  - facilitating a conversation with the cyber abuse instigator to address the issue (if they are another student in your class) or escalating the issue to professional services staff if you have the student's permission
  - referring the student to student counselling or welfare services.
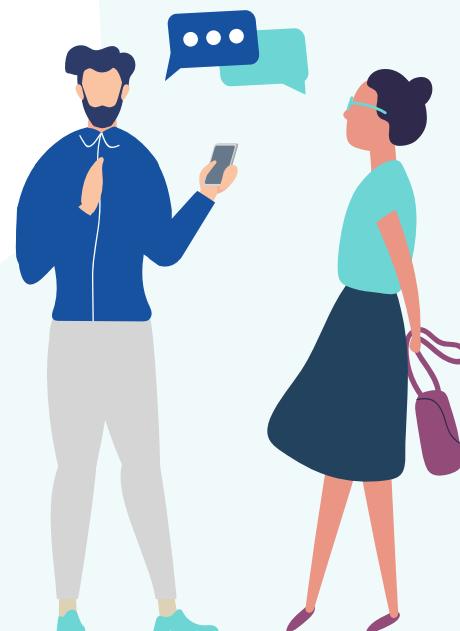
Be mindful

Remember:

- It's important to follow up on incidents with your students. Check-in to see how they are doing and review whether the issue is being resolved.

- Consider the severity of the issue — including whether it involves other students/staff. You may need to inform the Head of School, Course Coordinator or other academic staff to support the student and resolve the issue. Make sure you have the student's permission before speaking to others.

- Keep a record of your interaction with the student, including the concerns raised and how you responded. This will help maintain an accurate account of the issue and your interaction.

- Make sure you have a list of your institution's safety and wellbeing contacts at hand to address immediate safety concerns regarding a student's mental health, such as self-harm or suicide. Call Triple Zero (000) if there is an immediate risk of harm.

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