

SUCESSO ACADÉMICO NA ULISBOA

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UNIVERSIDADE  
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# GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

## *Psychological/Psychiatric Conditions*

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# Psychological/Psychiatric Conditions

## Manifestations we might observe in these students:

Students with psychological or psychiatric issues may face several challenges in the academic setting:

- Relational/interpersonal issues
- Behavioral regulation issues
- Limitations in attention capacity
- Constraints on memory, reasoning and processing speed (more pronounced in specific cases or due to certain medications)
- Challenges in maintaining a routine
- Emotional restraint and feelings of shame and insecurities

## Challenges in supporting these students

One of the main obstacles to effectively supporting these students is the prevalence of prejudice toward them.

Typically, physical limitations are more readily accepted as conditions that naturally deserve attention.

However, with psychological and psychiatric conditions, not only are their limitations not visible, but also easily misunderstood. Since many symptoms manifest themselves in one's behavior, there is risk in assuming that these can be easily changed, as if they were just a matter of "willpower".

A good starting point is assuming that the person is already doing their best with their condition limiting them. It is not a matter of willpower. Generally, these students experience considerable distress, feel some level of shame associated to their condition and would give anything not to feel as limited as they do.

The clinical issues in this area are varied, with multiple implications. However, there are situations that occur more frequently than others, or carry greater impact in the academic setting. The following are recommendations for two issues of dysregulation that can occur in the academic setting.

### What to do in situations of high anxiety or panic attacks:

- Extreme anxiety or panic attacks are the most common situations of dysregulation
- In the classroom setting, escort the student outside of the class to a calm area. If someone calming is present (e.g. a friend or partner), they should be allowed to accompany them.
- Adopt a calm and supportive posture: show patience, be empathetic and willing to help.
- Avoid telling the person to “calm down” or “just relax”. This often only increases anxiety. Things are not as simple as that. By doing so you risk adding stress on the person.
- It may be important to ask for help (emergency contacts are found at the end of this document), explaining the situation and location. Since the person should not be left alone, ask someone else to make the call if it is possible. Depending on the situation it may be necessary to contact a family member or even 112.
- Avoid surrounding the person. Multiple people surrounding them and providing input can be overwhelming. A close friend can provide comfort, others should step back.
- Rapid breathing may be a sign that the person is hyperventilating, leading to physiological overstimulation. Gently encourage to person to breathe slower or provide a paper bag to breathe into.
- Those having a panic attack are hyper focused on their sensations and scared of losing control. Shifting the conversations to a neutral topic, like their hobbies, or their favorite foods, can help them to step out of this self-monitoring mode. Every time the person focuses on their fears their anxiety will once again increase. Distractions can help manage this anxiety and may need to be repeated multiple times.
- While communicating it can be beneficial to say something like: “I’m here with you and want to help” or “I want to stay with you because I care” instead of saying things like “This will go away”, “Can’t you see that this is not important? You just need to let this go” or “I know what you are feeling, you just need to be strong”.
- Make sure that the student does not leave alone. If 112 was not called, the student should go with a friend or a family member instead of leaving by themselves.

### What to do in situations of decompensation or a psychosis crisis?

- Students with schizophrenia that request special accommodations are generally well-medicated, so decompensation events are rare.
- If something happens in the classroom, escort the student outside the class, or give permission to step out (depending on what seems appropriate within the situation). The goal is to create a clam environment for the student.
- Sometimes these situations are preceded by visible agitation. If the teacher or a third party knows the student’s condition, they can utilize a calm and gentle approach to help them.

- It may be important to ask for help (emergency contacts are found at the end of this document), explaining the situation and location. Since the person should not be left alone, ask someone else to make the call if it is possible. Depending on the situation it may be necessary to contact a family member or even 112.
- Stay with the student until specialized help arrives. Even though interacting with the person may be a challenge, remain present. If a close friend offers security they can remain, but others should distance themselves.
- While with the student, logical or rational conversation may not be effective and could increase distress, as their perspective may differ from their current reality. Instead, engage with the central topics the student brings up, allowing a respectful and empathetic interaction.

### General safety instructions

Despite the earlier recommendations, prioritize safety and follow these additional guidelines:

- Ensure personal safety. Do not take unnecessary risks.
- If the situation feels unsafe or if you lack the appropriate training, leave and call the FCUL emergency number
- Report the nature of the incident
- Provide the exact location (building, floor, room or campus reference points)
- Wait and follow the emergency teams instructions

### Additional guidance on students with special status

Each school of ULisboa has a unit or person who is in charge of the special education needs of students. Regarding the compensatory measures the student is using or could be used in the future, please contact the relevant unit or colleagues responsible for issues related with Special Educational Needs (NEE). You may also consult the [ULisboa Status for Special Educational Needs](#).

Most students with critical needs are identified and have the status of a student with NEE. However, there may be students who are not flagged. In this case, if any students display particular difficulties and have no NEE status, you may try to speak with him/her and inform about the possibility of asking for the status and gain access to compensatory measures for his/her condition. For further clarification, please contact the unit or person responsible for students with SEN at your school to determine the best approach to support the student.

In the event of witnessing a situation of loss of control or decompensation, follow the safety procedures outlined here and contact 112.

**Note:** This text was originally produced for the Teaching Resources Centre of the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Lisbon, with the author making some adaptations to be made available at the Teaching Resources Centre of ULisboa.