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UCT opens Student Careline: 0800 24 25 26

The University of Cape Town has introduced a new UCT Student Careline to assist students and staff member who are dealing with anxiety, depression or other forms of emotional distress. Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price yesterday announced that the university has partnered with the South African Depression and Anxiety group (SADAG) to offer 24/7 telephonic counselling, advice, referral facilities and general support to individuals facing any mental health challenges, or contemplating suicide. ([Dr Price's announcement](#) is printed in full below.)

The line is also available to offer support and advice to anyone who is concerned about another person who might be in distress. SADAG will provide a dedicated help line and crisis support for UCT students and staff and will be able to advise and refer callers to both internal UCT resources and external (NGO, public and private) resources.

UCT Student Careline

- **0800 24 25 26** – free from a Telkom line
- SMS **31393** – for a call-me-back

VC Desk: Assistance is available to help prevent suicide

Released: 17h00, 23 April 2016

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Dear colleagues and students,

I am writing to discuss the issue of suicide and mental health – a matter that has been raised in public forums by students at UCT and an issue of very serious concern to the entire campus community, including the Executive and Council. We are all affected when a student or staff member commits or attempts suicide.

Suicides and attempted suicides at UCT

We recognise that anyone can be vulnerable to suicide. While suicide is a ubiquitous phenomenon, there are also unique factors that relate to local societal issues in every context. There are many complex factors involved, often related to long-term psychological, sociological and emotional struggles. There are also multiple external stresses which can precipitate thoughts of suicide. Common in our context are financial worries, poor academic performance especially in the face of high expectations from peers or family, relationship problems, trauma and assault, overwork or a sense of not coping.

UCT has more than 26,000 students and on average, we have recorded one or two deaths due to suicide each year. (The national average for the same size population would be about three to four per year.) UCT is aware of 18 attempted suicides in 2015. Statistically, these numbers may seem like a tiny percentage, however, each incident represents an individual who was struggling against odds that seemed overwhelming at a particular time. The reality for such an individual, their family members and friends is devastating, and the trauma and fear are long-lasting.

New support services

Counselling and other forms of support are available at UCT for both students and staff. These services can be accessed by contacting the Student Wellness Service or the relevant departmental Human Resources representative, respectively. We rely on experts in the field: professionals who are trained and skilled to deal with these issues. There is a general shortage of such professionals as well as limits to our resources, which frequently leads to a situation where the demand for these services exceeds our capacity and delays access. We are working to improve the situation. As an immediate new intervention, we have partnered with the South African Depression and Anxiety group (SADAG) to offer 24/7 telephonic counseling, advice, referral facilities and general support to individuals facing any mental health challenges, or contemplating suicide. The line is also available to offer support and advice to anyone who is concerned about another person who might be in distress. SADAG will provide a dedicated help line and crisis support for UCT students and staff and will be able to advise and refer callers to both

internal UCT resources and external (NGO, public and private) resources. Known as the **UCT Student Careline**, the number is **0800 24 25 26** free from a Telkom line. You can also sms **31393** for a call-me-back.

The **UCT Student Careline** supplements the mental health work of existing UCT services, especially after hours and over weekends. We are also making progress with the appointment of a more diverse profile of psychologists in Student Wellness and I am appointing a Mental Health Task Team with the specific task to address how the institution can respond more effectively, appropriately and innovatively in terms of policy and support mechanisms to support students who are mentally vulnerable or experiencing severe distress.

It is important to know – and to remind your friends and colleagues, classmates and residence mates – that assistance is available for students who are feeling vulnerable and at risk. I urge you to show your support to a struggling fellow student, or to take the initiative to seek support for yourself, should you feel distressed.

Communicating about suicides

The death of a member of our community is deeply distressing to all of us, no matter what the cause or the circumstances, and the campus has an interest and an expectation to be informed as soon as possible, and as comprehensively as possible. But the family and loved ones are clearly most affected, and communicating about the death of a student must in the first instance consider whether the next of kin have been informed, and what information they wish to place in the public domain. UCT is often asked to release information or make comments on a student death that the student's family may consider sensitive and confidential. Respecting the family's right to privacy and their wishes at such a time is our first priority. Moreover, there is always a police investigation to determine the circumstances around the incident before it is confirmed to be a suicide. It is for this reason that we often ask people to pause before they draw hasty conclusions about how or why a student has died. In many instances there are factors that the family is aware of that are not made public for various reasons.

However, at the same time, UCT wishes to be transparent about the occurrence of suicide and attempted suicide. By being open about it, we may help raise awareness of the issues in our midst and the fact that help is possible. In fact, discussion and engagement to highlight risk factors, warning signs that may have been present and possible preventive actions that could be taken are important if we are to reduce deaths that occur from suicide.

We are deeply concerned about the increase in mental health issues in society in general and amongst our students in particular. We are constantly striving to increase our support to students who struggle. Considering the multiple factors behind suicide, we are aware how critical it is that UCT deals with this situation in a responsible, multilayered way, taking note also of cultural context and other diversities.

It is important that all of us on campus – staff, wardens, students and student organisations – play our part in addressing this situation. We need to help create an environment where students feel they can ask for help. And we need to recognise and heed early warning signals, even to err on the side of caution, to encourage a student in distress to seek help. Support is available, including crisis support through the SADAG UCT Student Careline.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Max Price
Vice-Chancellor

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END

Distributed by

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