



THE UNIVERSITY  
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AUSTRALIA

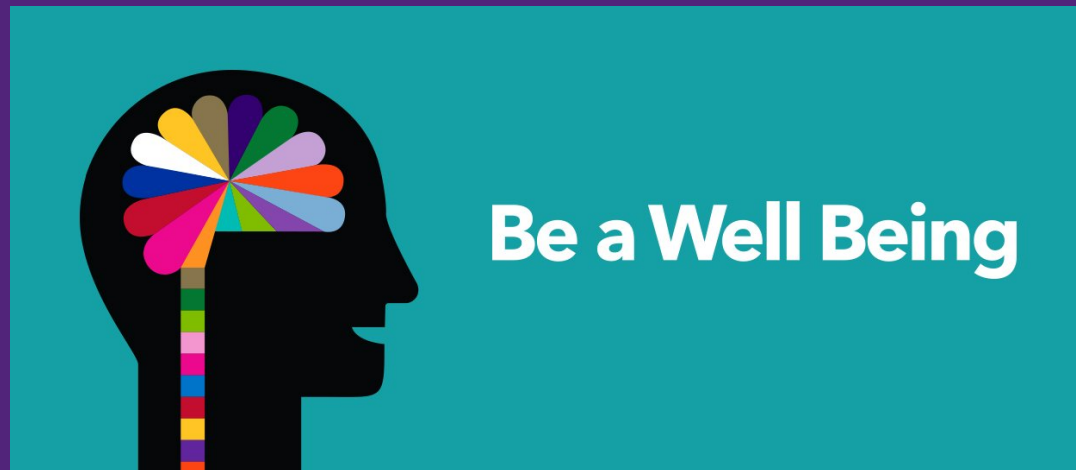
CREATE CHANGE

# Talking the Talk: How to have Conversations about Well-Being.

Presented to the UQ Medical Students for Research Week

By Dr Bronwyn Robson – Student Services Counsellor

[b.robson@uq.edu.au](mailto:b.robson@uq.edu.au)



# Introducing your presenter

- Dr Bronwyn Robson
  - Scientist
  - Teacher
  - Counsellor
  - Mental Health First Aid Instructor
- Background in microbiology, biochemistry and population genetics.
- PhD in evolutionary genetics – chromosomal speciation in native *Rattus* species. (hence the cartoon)
- Counselling approach based on a framework of neuroscience, biology and evolution.
- Current research areas – Animal-Assisted Interventions for counselling in tertiary contexts.



Courtesy of Richard Butterworth's website  
<http://www.richardbutterworth.co.uk/blog/13-i-did-a-phd>

# Agenda

- Wellness issues faced by HDRs
- Change, Stress and Anxiety
  - Covid 19
  - Meeting Basic Needs
- Stress
  - Predicting and Identifying Distress
- Beyond stress
  - Mental health crises
  - Supporting someone with mental illness or mental health crisis
- Available supports for you and others



# Ever felt like this?

- You can't work hard enough
- Overwhelmed by the workload
- You are not working to your true ability
- Inability to focus
- Nothing you do has any impact, and that you have no control
- Even easy things have become difficult
- Constant fear of failure
- You don't belong in a Medical program, and that you will be "found out"
- Physical or mental exhaustion

Common and "normal" experiences.

"Normal" does not mean "healthy"

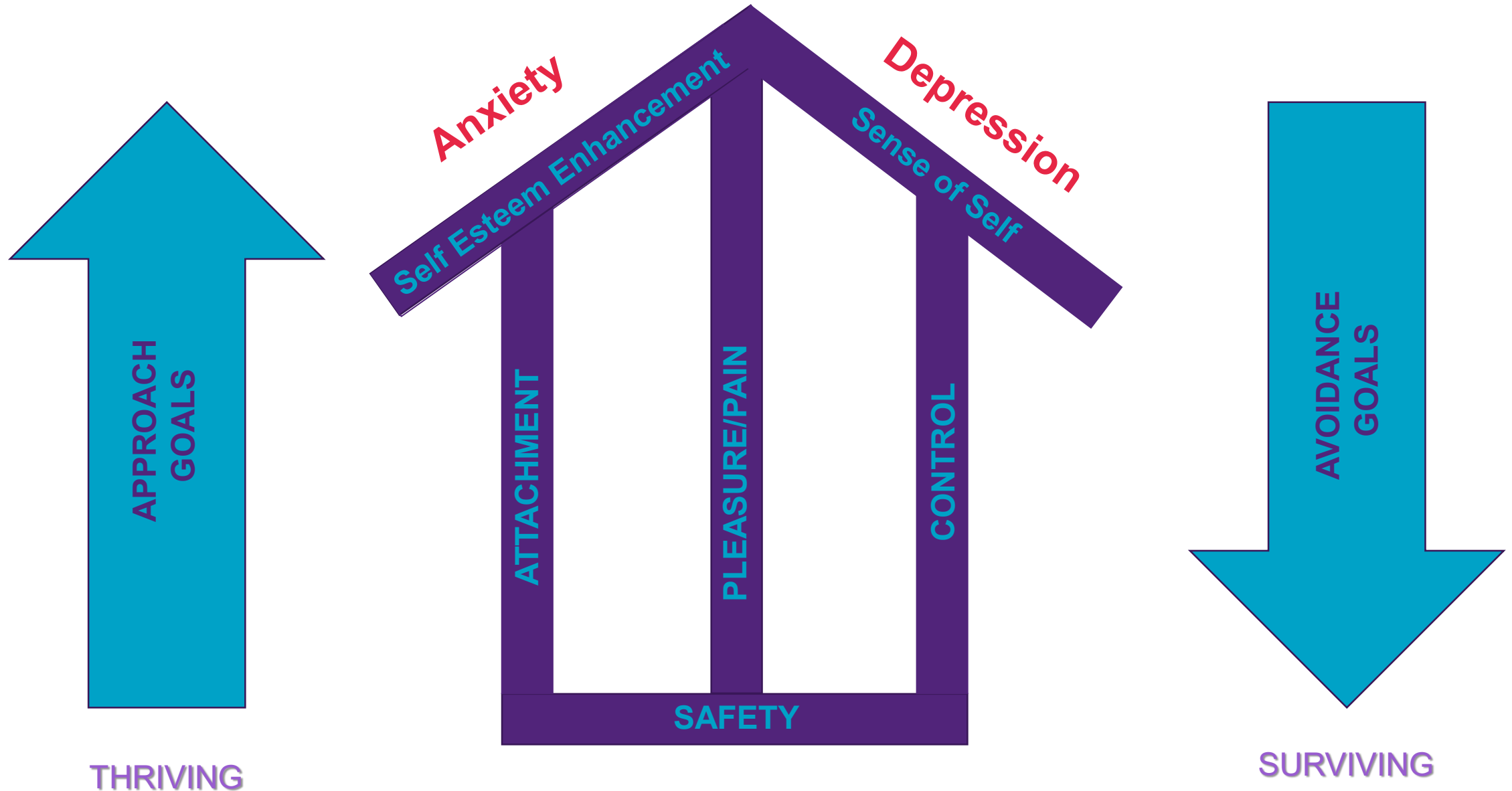
Don't be afraid to ask for healthy ways to manage stress.

Why???

# Wellness Issues Faced by Tertiary Students



- Anxiety
- Depression
- Strain on personal relationships
- Sense of isolation
- Imposter syndrome
- Perfectionism
- Uncertainty about the future
- Lack of balance
- Stress!



# Change, Stress and Anxiety

- Normal part of life but can be uncomfortable if not down right scary! This causes stress. Even positive, desired changes can be stressful. Emotional discomfort is often called distress.
- When we encounter change, we assess if we have the resources to manage the situation – if not, then we experience a stress reaction that can cause psychological reactions eg anxiety, anger.
- Stress also causes physiological changes, eg adrenalin and cortisol release, elevated heart rate and respiration, increased blood flow, suppressed digestive and immune systems – preparation for “fight or flight” from an immediate physical threat. This is a GOOD thing – survival strategy.
- Body cannot differentiate between immediate physical “life threat” and stress due to change. As stress is usually longer lasting, stress caused long-term “fight or flight” responses, which are NOT adaptive/helpful and can lead to health problems.
- The reason why stressors are a problem for people is that it causes them to feel out of control.
- Different people react differently to stress and as a result, to change. However, you do have the capacity to decide how to **choose to respond** to change and stress – you have **control** over how you behave.

# The Big Change in Our Time - Anxiety in the Time of Covid-19

You may be feeling...

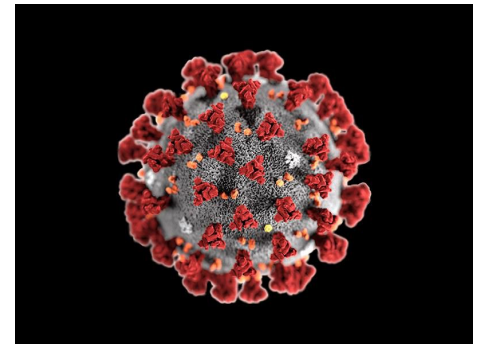
- Stressed or overwhelmed
- Worry, or fearful
- Racing thoughts
- Sadness
- Loss of interest in usual enjoyable activities
- Physical symptoms
- Frustration, irritability, or anger
- Restlessness or agitation, trouble relaxing
- Helpless
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Disconnected from others
- Apprehensive about going to public spaces

To “FACE COVID”

- F – focus on what’s in your control
- A – acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
- C – come back into your body (be present)
- E – engage in what you’re doing

Dropping  
anchor

- C – committed action
- O – opening up
- V - values
- I – identify resources
- D – distance and disinfect





# Managing Stress and Anxiety by Meeting Basic Needs

## Attachment

- Reach out and seek support and stay connected.
- Arrange virtual coffees or lunches with colleagues
- Have a check-in buddy
- Communicate with other HDR students

## Pleasure

- Set boundaries on work, stay active and have fun.
- Have a separate work space with a good chair.
  - Take 10 to Zen
- Pleasure as a reward = positive reinforcement
- Self-Care (more later!)

## Safety

- Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
- Identify your resources
- Be explicit regarding your values
- Create an explicit plan for maintaining your health – physical, mental and spiritual.

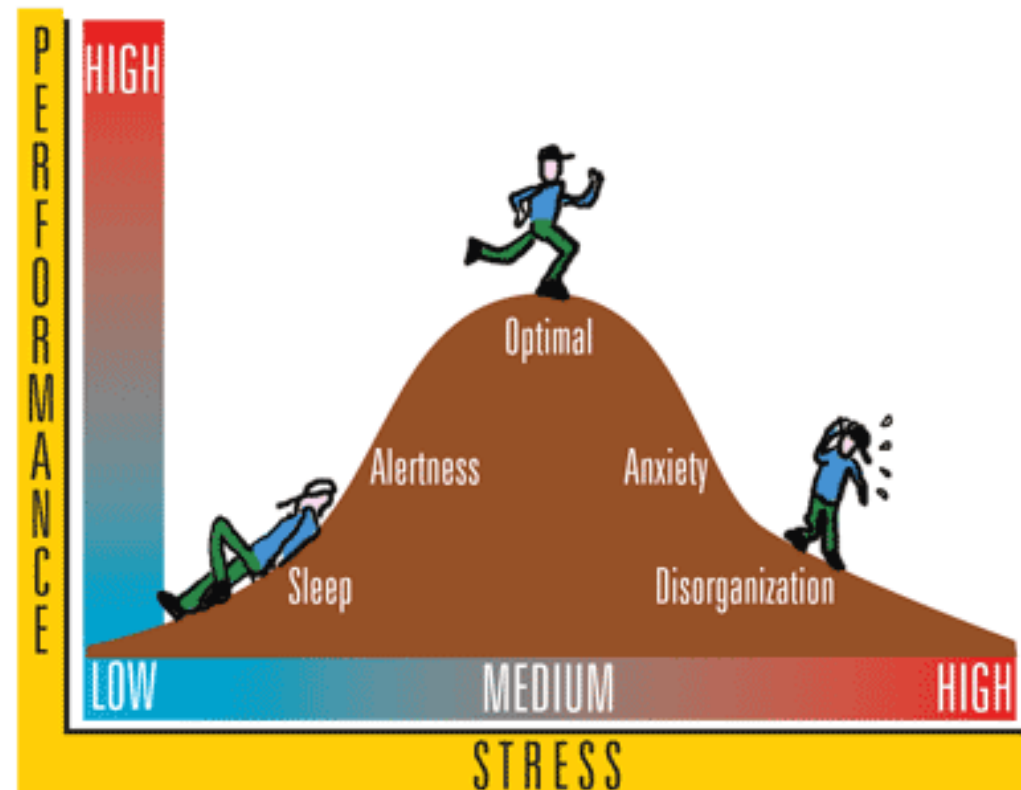
## Control

- Focus your attention on what you can control.
- Be conscious of your choices.
- Set limits with unhelpful, opinion based/biased media – seek accurate information.
- Have a routine/plan, but be flexible. Redundancy is key.

# Stress

- Stress is the body's response to something that demands adaptation.
- Are students more stressed than the general population?
  - Yes (Helen Stallman 2010) – 29% gen pop to 84% of students (UQ and QUT)
- A degree of stress is necessary for growth; however too much stress, ie distress, can be detrimental.

Stress Performance Connection



# Predictors of Student Distress (Stallman & Hurst, 2009)

Low coping, self-efficacy

High perfectionism

Poor time management

Self-defeating beliefs

Distorted thinking

Low university connectedness

Lack of social/family support




# Wellness Warning Signs - Distress in Others

- Appearing vague, confused or agitated
- Perspiring excessively, breathing difficulties or restlessness
- Fatigue, complaints of sleep problems, or falling asleep while on campus/site
- Anger or emotional outbursts
- Avoidance of tasks or deterioration in quality & quantity of work
- Withdrawing socially or verbally, reluctance to participate
- Non-attendance or need for extensions with skimpy details e.g. 'personal reasons'
- Overly dependent on academic or administrative staff




# Wellness Warning Signs - Distress in You



I can't  
work hard  
enough!



It's all  
so  
hard!



I can't  
focus!



I don't  
belong!




I'm not  
working to  
my true  
ability!



I'm  
exhausted!



I have no  
control!



I'm going  
to fail!

- Frequently feeling frazzled and overwhelmed in daily life
- Affecting your mood to a point where you no longer feel in control
- Hard to make decisions, always worrying
- Relationships feel rocky
- Feeling alone and isolated, withdrawing
- Procrastinating and neglecting responsibilities
- Not feeling confident about having options in life

# What Happens to You When You're Distressed?



What we experience	What's going on and why
Pounding heart	Pump blood to relevant muscles
Fast breathing	Fill blood with extra oxygen to help provide energy
Raised blood pressure	Move blood more effectively
Butterflies/nausea	Blood moving away from irrelevant digestive processes
Muscle tension/headaches	Relevant muscles ready for use
White skin	Blood moved away from skin to reduce potential blood loss
Inc need to urinate/defecate	To lose unnecessary weight
Sweaty palms	Inc perspiration to cool the body
Loss of language	Diversion of energy away from higher brain functions
Charged emotion	Diversion of energy to more primitive brain structures
Increased senses	To aid combat, chase or escape
Insomnia	Survival = sleep not an option
Exhaustion	The stress response ultimately depletes the body of resources.



# So...how do you approach someone who is distressed?

Small group discussion

# How do you approach someone who is distressed?

Ask “Are you ok?”

Listen to the person in a respectful, understanding and non-threatening way:

- body posture
- tone of voice

Avoid confrontation – just listen, don’t agree or disagree

Be a empathetic listener but do not try and be a counsellor

Be aware of cultural norms/stigmas



# Mental Health Continuum



# Beyond stress – mental illness

What is mental illness?

- Causes major changes to thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- Impairs functioning across areas of life
- Persists over time.

Common mental illnesses affect, 20% of the Australian adult population (16-85 years) in any given year.

Only 35% of people with a common mental illness received professional help.

In Australia, mental illness is the cause of the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest disease burden.

Risk factors for developing a mental illness include:

- Biological factors
- Psychological factors
- Social factors

Early intervention is important to prevent problems becoming more serious, the reduce secondary effects and to speed recovery.



# Mental Health Crises

- Suicidal thoughts/behaviours
- Non-suicidal self injury
- Panic attacks
- Trauma
- Severe psychotic state
- Severe intoxication/drug-affected state, alcohol poisoning or overdose, substance withdrawal
- Aggressive behaviour
- Medical emergency eg eating disorder



## Activity – Exploring Mental Illness

- Break into groups of 3-5
- Be allocated one of the following topics to discuss:
  - Risk factors – what increases someone's risk of developing mental illness?
  - What sort of professionals can help with mental health concerns, and what do they do?
  - What sort of non professional supports are there, and can they be helpful?
  - What contributes to the stigma of mental illness, and what are potential barriers to getting help?
  - What can you do if the person does not want help?
- Share when you know about MI with the rest of the group

# How to Help

## Notice – Support – Refer

### 1. Notice

- Look and listen for signs of distress

### 2. Support

- Be open to listening
- Show concern and a willingness to help (*within limits of role*)
- Remember: You do not need to solve their problems for them.

### 3. Refer

- Help link to appropriate services
- Knowing where and how to refer

# Support

*How are things going for you?*

***Have a direct conversation with the student to gather more information.***

***Actively listen – be engaged***

***Point out specific changes you have observed about the student***

***Ask open questions – be curious and judgment-free***

***Express your care and concern***

*I noticed you have been late a few times this week, and seemed upset this morning*

*I am concerned about you.*

*Would you like me to call someone for you?"*

***Acknowledge and show you have listened and heard them***

***Show a willingness to help – within the limits of your role***

***Ask who they normally go to for support***

*Can you tell me more about.. ?*

*So, it sounds like...*

# How to Suggest Support to Others

Acknowledge your concerns and suggest connecting with support

*“I can see things are difficult for you at the moment and I’m concerned about you. I think that you could use some help in sorting out these issues. I would like you to consider talking to one of the advisors at Student Services. Their services are voluntary, free and confidential.”*

Recognize the limits of your responsibility

## Refer:

- Suggest making an appointment with Student Services and provide contact details
- Ask them if you can call Student Services for them (3365-1704), and then allow them to talk to our staff. OR Call on person's behalf while they are present (with agreement).
- If possible, walk them to Student Services.
- Follow up with them about whether they received the help they needed or whether other support options needed
- If the person resists referral and you remain uncomfortable with the situation, contact Student Services to discuss your concerns as soon as you are able or lodge a Welfare Check through Student Hub.

## Recognise Your Limits!




# Crisis Scenarios

- #1 - Keep yourself and others safe.
- If you are concerned about yours/others' safety:
  - Contact Security *if on campus* (3365 3333)
  - Follow site-specific procedures
  - Call 000
- Consider time, place, comfort, confidentiality and privacy.
- Check on suicidal thoughts/intentions/plans – don't be afraid to ask! Use direct questions.
- Support by listening empathically and provide hope for change.
- Try not to leave the person alone during a crisis situation
- Student Services and UQ Health Care can provide crisis support



For more skills in this area, consider Mental health First Aid training

# Resources at UQ

- Health Supports
    - UQ Health Care
    - Student Run Clinics eg UQ Psychology Clinic
  - SAS through UQ Union
    - Education and Equity, including grievances and discrimination issues
    - Employment
    - Legal
    - Migration
    - Welfare
    - Gender and sexuality
  - UQ Ally
  - ATSIS unit
  - DHCOs – discrimination and harassment contact officers
- 
- Graduate School
    - Admissions and management of candidature
    - Research Training and mentoring
    - Career development framework
    - Online and workshops
  - Student Services
    - Range of types of advisors and programs including Multifaith Chaplaincy Centre
    - Individual appointments, online support groups and workshops
    - **UQ Crisis Line** (24/7) call on 1300 851 998

# Supports Available at Student Services

## Face-to-Face, Telephone & Skype appointments

- Counselling: Free and confidential counselling, 10 sessions per year, includes SMSU\*
- Diversity, disability and inclusion (Physical/Mental Health, permanent and/or temporary),
- Learning Support
- Student Advisors (International and Welfare)
- Accommodation Advisors
- Student Employability Centre (Careers)
- Workshops and groups eg Art Therapy, Canine Co Counselling, Freedom From Your Cage
- 24/7 UQ Crisis Line 1300 851 998

\*SMSU – Sexual Misconduct Support Services

## Bookings

- Student Hub <https://studenthub.uq.edu.au/> (for DIY online bookings)

## How to find/contact us at St Lucia:

Building 21D

Tel: 3365-1704

Email: [student.services@uq.edu.au](mailto:student.services@uq.edu.au)

<http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services>

We are also at Herston and Gatton campuses

UQ **STUDENT SERVICES**

ACCOMMODATION • DISABILITY • LEARNING • COUNSELLING  
MULTI-FAITH CHAPLAINCY • INTERNATIONAL ADVISORS



[uq.edu.au/student-services](http://uq.edu.au/student-services)

# External help/support – for you or others:

- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
- [Diverse Voices](#) on 1800 184 527 from 3PM to midnight
- [1800 RESPECT](#) (1800 737 732)
- [ReachOut](#) at [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)
- [Care Leavers Australasia Network \(CLAN\)](#) on 1800 008 774
- [Queensland Human Rights Commission](#) – report racism 1300 130 670 or <https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/complaints/report-racism>



# Thank you

Dr Bronwyn Robson  
UQ Student Services  
Building 21D  
[b.robson@uq.edu.au](mailto:b.robson@uq.edu.au)

