

Supporting the mental health of university students: The views and experiences of an academic

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IN 2015–2016, the total number of students at UK universities was around 2.3 million; the demand for higher education remains high and will undoubtedly continue to grow (Universities UK, 2017). Given these numbers, many young people will be transitioning to student life and this difficult move needs to be supported by the educators to prioritise student mental health and wellbeing.

Whilst independent study can be satisfying and thrilling it can also be terrifying and some students may not be equipped to handle what lays in front of them. University can be a testing time. It is a fact that 75 per cent of adult mental health problems begin before the age of 18 (Davies, 2013) therefore, some students will enter University with a mental health diagnosis. On the other hand, commonplace stressors like independent living, finances, work-life balance, social relationships can trigger distress and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression manifest. Students may not be robust and/or resilient enough to cope with the expectations of university life may they be academic or socially related and may become stressed trying to cope with any negativity. In this way their confidence and/or self-esteem may become ‘knocked’ and mental health problems are triggered.

Given all this, UK universities have a key role to play in providing support for students with mental health difficulties. The student demographic is evolving, and staff need be mindful of risk factors that affect student mental health and overall wellbeing. As educators it is our job not only to instruct these young people but to protect

and support them when the time is needed. Although busy, we are well-placed to recognise biopsychosocial signs to ensure that we can intervene appropriately if, and when required.

Whilst necessary to establish boundaries with students, an open-door policy, when not misused, can be effective for communication with students about issues non-academic related. Students are now paired with personal tutors therefore the opportunity for academics to spot any issues and to address them in small steps is available. By having open, honest and non-judgemental conversations with students in time we may be able to earn their trust so that they may disclose any problems and/or diagnoses. The Institute for Public Policy Research (2017) found that nearly five times as many students as 10 years ago disclosed a mental health condition to their university. Don’t be afraid of student tears. Having the courage to disclose problems can ease the burden and any ‘shame’ that may ensue from keeping mental health issues to themselves. Time to Change’s 2014 ‘State of Stigma’ survey showed that 65 per cent of people with mental health problems experienced stigma in their friendships therefore they not spoken to their peers about what that they are experiencing so feel isolated. Having a confidant may be a step in the right direction.

A survey by YouGov (2016) showed that more than a quarter of students (27 per cent) report having a mental health problem of one type or another. This means that the demand for university mental health services such as counselling and drop-in sessions is growing, and UK institutions need to retain

appropriate staff and facilities for the longer term. There will be long waiting times so drop-in sessions locally and self-help Apps recommended by student wellbeing services within each university can facilitate the demand.

In all this, it is important to understand our role, thus, universities offer Mental Health First Aid training for their staff to equip them with the skills to deal with such problems/issues. Staff who are trained include teams working in student accommodation who are coached to recognise warning signs and to support/help students when needed. At the core of this training is how to communicate with students in need, how to reassure them and not to judge, how and when to offer support (not a solution), how and what support/help to access and to learn that confidentiality never applies when someone is a risk to themselves.

Going forward universities need to continue to work as a community to support this vulnerable group of young people.

Student Wellbeing at Kingston University offers Mental Health First Aid training to their staff

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