

## Practice exchange

# Mind Your Mind: Involving doctoral clinical psychology students in helping undergraduate psychology students to navigate university life

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*Undergraduate student mental health and wellbeing is becoming an increasingly important topic. In particular, students from backgrounds that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education may have increased difficulties during the transition to university. Therefore, 'Mind Your Mind', a pilot, three-part programme of workshops facilitated by doctoral clinical psychology students to support first year undergraduate psychology students was developed. The workshops were formulation-based and explored 'social media', 'anxiety' and 'belonging'. Students generally found the workshops useful and easy to understand, and felt that attending the workshops increased their wellbeing. The programme also provided an opportunity for the clinical psychology students to develop their skills and give something back. Reflections on the development, facilitation and sustainability of the programme are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Wellbeing, widening participation, service learning, formulation.

**U**NIVERSITY student mental health and wellbeing is becoming an increasingly important topic of conversation. Statistics suggest that 10 per cent of students report a diagnosed mental health condition and approximately one third of students report symptoms of depression (Unite Students, 2016). Many universities have responded to this demand by providing free counselling services for those struggling with their mental health (NHS, 2016).

Whilst most students do not experience mental health difficulties, it could be argued that transitioning to university life can have a huge impact on the wellbeing of the general student population. For instance, Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa and Barkham (2010) found that psychological wellbeing generally decreases for students during university, with the most significant

decrease occurring in the first year. Many factors make students more susceptible to decreased wellbeing, including increased stress levels and moving away from their support network (Mind, 2018). However, it is likely that students face these challenges, but do not feel it warrants input from counselling. Therefore, guidance and support is needed from universities to help students navigate these difficulties, particularly in the first year.

It could be suggested that whilst a significant number of individuals do experience a decrease in psychological wellbeing during university, a large proportion of students may have protective factors and resources they can utilise at this time. For instance, universities have championed the development of sports clubs and societies whereby individuals with common interests can meet

(Jimenez-Bush, 2015), possibly alleviating loneliness, a suggested source of psychological distress for students in their first year (Sato, 2015). Additionally, as attending university is likely to be a significantly different educational environment for most individuals, it could be helpful for students to have a social network of friends and family who have shared that experience (Katrechik & Aruguete, 2017).

However, for some students these resources are not readily available. This may be particularly relevant for those individuals identified as a focus for 'Widening Participation' (WP) schemes (Devlin, 2013). WP schemes aim to engage and support individuals who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education settings; such as those from low-income or under-represented ethnic backgrounds. Devlin (2013) suggested that these students may feel a sense of displacement, discomfort or intimidation within the university context. Additionally, students may feel unwelcome or even encounter isolation or exclusion from non-WP peers due to perceived difference (Jetten et al., 2017). It could be argued that, associated with this experience, students that fall within the WP bracket are likely to have increased difficulties with their psychological wellbeing upon starting university and throughout (Brown, 2016). This is consistent with studies that have shown an increase in the reporting of student mental health difficulties since introducing WP schemes (Macaskill, 2013; Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

Therefore, additional support within universities may be extremely beneficial, not only to address the gap in services for those who experience a decrease in psychological wellbeing (but not a diagnosed mental health difficulty), but to also increase the support for those from a WP background. This takes a preventative and proactive stance around supporting these individuals before they are in need of counselling or more formal mental health support.

The University of Manchester is committed to ensuring that there are no

barriers to studying for any individuals, including those from WP backgrounds. The Annual Report for Widening Participation (University of Manchester, 2017) found that among all Russell Group universities, the University of Manchester has the highest number of students from areas with typically low engagement in higher education and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Specifically, 7.8 per cent of the 2017/2018 entrants to the University of Manchester were from low participation neighbourhoods; within psychology programmes, this figure was 7 per cent (University of Manchester, 2018).

In parallel, as part of the University's Social Responsibility agenda, there is a drive to produce socially responsible graduates who have contributed more broadly to society during their studies. The 'Mind Your Mind' programme was developed to these ends; that is, to provide further psychological resources for psychology undergraduate students, including those from WP backgrounds, and to provide an opportunity for students on the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme to engage in valuable service learning (Sigmon, 1979) alongside their studies.

Mind Your Mind was developed as a three-part series, which aimed to explore and support students with some of the issues they may face, and to provide them with tools and strategies to address these issues. It was developed as a collaborative project between the University of Manchester's Undergraduate Psychology and Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programmes. This series was piloted in February and March 2018 according to the procedure described below.

### **Procedure**

The development and facilitation of the series was completed by four Trainee Clinical Psychologists, overseen by a Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology. A Senior Lecturer on the Undergraduate Psychology programme, having established the initiative, provided additional input and coordinated its implementation. The project was also supported

by a Widening Participation Fellow, a PhD student working part-time on a number of Widening Participation activities. The trainees developed the series content and facilitated the sessions, as it was felt that the undergraduate students would find fellow students more approachable than academic staff. Sessions took place during the trainees' lunch break and a shared lunch was provided for students and facilitators. It was hoped that this would facilitate an underlying theme of self-care and belonging throughout the sessions, as well as develop relationships between students and facilitators.

The trainees developed sessions about 'Social media', 'Anxiety' and 'Belonging', based on commonly reported experiences of undergraduate difficulties. As well as being stand-alone, the sessions were linked in terms of the subject matter becoming steadily 'deeper' (i.e. potentially coming closer to core identity and more anxiety provoking) as the series progressed. Briefly, the sessional outlines are described below:

**Social media:** This session focused on how engagement in social media could make students feel. This discussion branched into the positive experiences (e.g. maintaining and making connections) and the negative experiences (e.g. social comparisons, addiction and loneliness) of social media use. A simple thoughts, feelings and behaviour formulation (Beck, 1976) was developed to support the discussion and highlight the impact of students' experiences. A discussion was also held around how to manage these feelings and how students wished to engage in social media in the future, being mindful of the experiences discussed.

**Anxiety:** During the anxiety session, the Padesky and Mooney (1990) five-factor model was used to develop a collaborative formulation about university anxieties, highlighting the link between thoughts, feelings, behaviours, physical sensations and the environment. Clarke's (1999) Interacting Cognitive Subsystems model was also utilised to understand specific maintenance cycles. Following this, the group considered ways in

which anxiety can be managed, such as using self-care strategies.

**Belonging:** In the belonging session, the group discussed the 'imposter syndrome' (Clance & Imes, 1978); that is, the feeling that everyone around you is doing well whilst you are inadequate, despite being in the same position as them. The group formulated how the imposter syndrome can affect thoughts and feelings, such as feeling that you do not belong or fears of being 'found out'. The group discussion included how to manage these thoughts and feelings (e.g. being mindful of their own strengths, as well as difficulties).

The sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes and followed the same structure each time. Facilitators introduced themselves and played a short video clip relevant to the topic whilst the whole group ate lunch. The students were then split into smaller groups to discuss particular aspects of the topic, guided by suggested questions from the facilitators. At the end of the session, the groups came back together and fed back their discussions. The sessions were designed as an interactive workshop to invite collaboration between facilitators and students; this also served to differentiate the sessions from formal lectures. Whilst prompted by facilitators, discussions were generally led by the students. In line with the subject matter and duty of care, the trainees and overseeing senior lecturer agreed a risk protocol involving signposting for, and escalation of, any arising matters of potentially clinical concern.

### **Advertisement and engagement**

Mind Your Mind was advertised via emails sent to all psychology undergraduates and posters around the University of Manchester's psychology building. Interested students were asked to email the Senior Lecturer coordinating the programme to register interest. All students were asked to complete an initial screening questionnaire to assess whether they were currently receiving treatment for a mental health condition, which

would exclude them from the programme. They were also asked why they were interested in the programme. Once accepted onto the programme, they were asked to confirm their availability and for any dietary requirements.

### **Outcomes**

Across all three Mind Your Mind sessions there was an average attendance of five students. Given the scope of this project and the ethical importance of facilitating this as an evaluation (as opposed to research; see Twycross & Shorten, 2014), no demographic data was collected. All students were asked to complete an 'Experience of Sessions' questionnaire during the final session ( $N = 5$ ). Students were asked three questions using a five point Likert scale from one (experienced low utility of the session) up to a score of five (experienced high utility of the session) (Appendix A). Results from quantitative questions are found within Table 1.

Qualitatively, students were asked to give general comments about the sessions. Students commented that the topics were relatable and had utility, for instance one student reported, *'[I] especially liked the part explaining the way to deal with anxiety'*. Students also had positive thoughts about the structure of the sessions, for example one student suggested that *'Having a small group of people to talk about clinical-psychological areas related to first year undergraduate students was really helpful'*. Additionally, students commented on how contained the sessions were, suggesting, *'I liked [the sessions] because I felt I could easily talk without being judged'*.

The only improvement suggested was from one student who reported: *'Maybe include a future session about stress. I didn't feel the social media session was massively relevant for me but still interesting'*.

### **Reflections and implications**

Several reflections were made following the end of the Mind Your Mind programme. Initially, the trainees were struck by the ease of facilitating the project. As full-time working trainees, engaging in extra-curricular activities within their lunch break initially seemed time consuming; however, the preparation for each session was made feasible by sharing the workload between the trainees and the sessions being in a workshop format, rather than a lecture. Additionally, the shared lunch and less formal style made the sessions feel more relaxed and less burdensome.

In terms of participation, the trainees reflected on the limited number of students who attended the sessions. Whilst this did have some positive consequences, such as all members of the group having the chance to speak during discussions, the trainees felt that more attendees would have increased the variety of discussion and learning. Additionally, as all four trainees attended each session, it could have felt that there was a bigger trainee presence than student, which may have impacted the dynamics within the session.

As no demographic data was collected during this project, it was unclear whether individuals who participated in sessions were from WP backgrounds. This is a limitation of the evaluation as no inferences can be made

**Table 1: A table to show the average score on items from the Experience of Sessions questionnaire**

Question	Average
Did you find the sessions useful to attend?	3.8
Did you find the topics easy to understand?	5
Did you find the sessions impacted your wellbeing?	4

regarding relevance for this population. Therefore, the Mind Your Mind programme may benefit from evaluation in the context of empirical research going forward.

The Mind Your Mind team wondered if the phrasing of the recruitment poster may have limited the number of students who felt the programme was relevant to them. The poster included the somewhat vague phrase, 'Are you feeling lost?', which was chosen with the aim of attracting students in need of the sessions, but without suggesting that it was a mental health intervention. However, the phrase could have meant a variety of things to students, so for future sessions it could be better to specifically link to the topics discussed during Mind Your Mind sessions, such as 'Do you sometimes feel that you don't "fit in" with university life?'. This could make potential participants clearer on what the sessions were about, thus identifying with the sessions more and making recruitment more likely. The timing of the recruitment could also have been brought forward, as the second half of semester one may be a particularly challenging period for students. Students may also have felt reluctant to email a member of the teaching staff to register their interest.

Due to the pilot nature of this programme, the trainees and overseeing lecturers decided the final topics for the series. Whilst the topics were generally well received, it may have been more helpful to gain ideas for topics from WP students themselves. Future facilitation of a survey or focus group prior to the sessions may provide insight from students from WP backgrounds with the difficulties that they encounter. For instance, research suggests that students from WP backgrounds may experience difficulties with low mood (Andrews & Wilding, 2004) or financial burden (Harrison & Hatt, 2012), which may be helpful topics to explore.

Many of the students wanted to know more about the route onto clinical training and the trainees wondered if this was the motivation for some students attending. Although the Mind Your Mind series was not intended to focus on career advice, it felt important for students and therefore a specific session about

this could be facilitated at the end of the next programme. The trainees also agreed that this group of students were particularly receptive to developing psychological solutions to difficulties, which was hypothesised to be because they were psychology undergraduate students. However, as no students from other disciplines were invited to attend sessions, this hypothesis remained tentative.

Steadily deepening the subject matter over three sessions was undertaken with starting anxieties in mind, but, reduced anxiety aside, an unexpected outcome was the quality of relationships developed over a short time-frame. Whilst, understandably during the first session students were somewhat reserved; by the third session, students appeared to feel more comfortable and confident in engaging in the topic and sharing their views with each other. This was evidenced within the qualitative feedback, with one student reporting, '*I liked [the sessions] as I could easily talk without being judged*'. This could have been due to the small number of students, but if more students attended, this could be replicated by discussions within smaller groups. This development of relationships and a sense of belonging may have also been nurtured by the informal delivery of the workshops, including engagement in collaborative self-care through sharing lunch.

Finally, the trainees reflected on the impact that facilitating Mind Your Mind sessions had on them as students, facilitators and trainee psychologists. In terms of the competencies needed to fulfil the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology, they felt that their skills in developing teaching sessions adapted for a specific population increased. Sessions were pitched at a level that stimulated students but did not feel overwhelming, particularly as they contained some potentially emotive content. Additionally, all four trainees reported a theme of it 'being good to give back'. Throughout the programme the trainees reflected on their own undergraduate experiences and generally felt that they would have benefitted from attending a Mind Your Mind programme themselves,

particularly as some of the trainees were from a WP background. Therefore, facilitating the programme gave the trainees the sense of fulfilment that others could benefit from the current and future programmes.

### **Sustainability**

In terms of moving on from a pilot scheme, the trainees and overseeing lecturers felt that it would be highly beneficial for the Mind Your Mind programme to continue each year. It was agreed by all parties that the positive outcomes from the programme significantly outweighed the relatively minimal preparation needed. However, given the increased demands placed on the trainees as they move through the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme, it was unfortunately deemed unfeasible for the current cohort of trainees to continue facilitating Mind Your Mind sessions year-on-year.

Therefore, a plan of sustainability was developed by the current cohort of trainees and the overseeing lecturers: it was agreed that each year, first year Doctorate in Clinical Psychology trainees would be invited to volunteer to facilitate Mind Your Mind. In the first semester, second year trainees who had facilitated previous Mind Your Mind sessions would meet with volunteered first year trainees, and the second year trainees would support the first year trainees in developing and facilitating sessions within the first semester. Following this, the first year trainees would continue facilitating Mind Your Mind independently within the second semester. This would then continue on a rolling basis each year, meaning that the sustainability of the Mind Your Mind programme would be feasible. This would also allow first year trainees the opportunity to develop their skills in sessional development and facilitation, and the second year trainees to develop their skills in peer supervision and leadership – fitting with core programme requirements of personal and professional development (Committee on Training in Clinical Psychology, 2008), as well as service learning.

### **Conclusions**

Mind Your Mind piloted a series of workshops to promote wellbeing for first year psychology students at the University of Manchester, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of students from WP backgrounds. The three workshops, which focused on social media, anxiety and belonging, were generally well received and students felt that sessions increased their emotional wellbeing. Future Mind Your Mind series were proposed given these positive outcomes and their feasibility for facilitation by Trainee Clinical Psychologists. Recommendations to improve the project would be to enhance recruitment strategies and collaboratively develop session content with students.

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