

Looking after our students' mental health

Each autumn over 530,000 young people leave home for the first time to go to university, joining a total UK student population of 2.3 million. Additionally over 350,000 students start at college.

Over the past 10 years there has been a fivefold increase in the number of students who disclose a mental health condition to their institution.

For individuals, it can affect their ability to learn, earn, form strong and meaningful relationships, and live long and healthy lives.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) believes that counselling services play an important role, as part of an integrated support network for students, in addressing these issues.

Left untreated, psychological distress and mental health problems can lead to students dropping out and failing to reach their full academic or personal potential. They can suffer on-going mental health issues and low-esteem through their adulthood and not develop employability skills. For some, it leads to self-harming or, tragically, death by suicide.

We fully support the Government announcement of the Mental Health Charter, which has directly challenged Vice-Chancellors to prioritise the issue of student mental health. Whilst we also

support the broad approach of *Minding Our Future* (Universities UK) and welcome the expansion of wellbeing services, these services are not the same as counselling, and cannot be a substitute for support from trained mental health practitioners.

We are concerned that remodelling services to embrace a wider wellbeing approach will be at the expense of professional, embedded counselling services and that current services could be downgraded or outsourced.

Helping students with mental health issues requires the right support, provided at the right time.

A growing challenge

Students experience the psychological and developmental needs common to all young adults. However, students have additional worries: adapting to a new environment without the usual social supports, course demands, financial pressures, plus peer pressure to misuse drugs and alcohol. As a result, many students will experience psychological distress sufficient enough to impact on their studies.

Worrying figures from a 2015 study undertaken by the National Union of Students showed:

- 77% of students said they had felt anxious during their studies
- 69% said they had felt depressed during their studies
- 36% had considered self-harming

Why support embedded counselling?

It is a specialist service

Mental health needs amongst students are often complex, and access to trained and accredited counsellors with specialist knowledge and skills to work with the student or staff client groups, within the university or college setting, is essential.

Embedded counselling services at the place of learning are staffed by trained practitioners who understand the pressures of the learning environment and who can access internal systems in place to help students continue with and complete their studies.

University or college based counsellors are also trained to support the increasing number of mature students and their specific needs, as well as staff.

It is accessible

Waiting times for assessment and beginning counselling inhouse are generally better than primary care mental health services. The average waiting time between referral and first counselling session in HE was six days compared with 18 days in primary care counselling.

In a context where students need to attend class, meet assignment and exam deadlines and for many, hold down part-time employment, it is important that counselling is provided promptly to address problems before they impact on functioning.

In addition, a service provided within the university or college setting itself provides an easy to access, familiar, and less stigmatising environment in which to receive mental health support.

Without easy access to services, students may leave problems untreated, increasing the number of students leaving their studies prematurely or leading to long-standing mental health issues requiring the need for expensive specialist or emergency mental health services.

It is effective

There is robust evidence that counselling decreases psychological distress in students - data shows that 75% of students had 'improved' or 'recovered' following counselling.

Research based on data from over 5,500 students from 65 UK universities and FE colleges found that counselling helped:

- 81% of students stay at university or college
- 79% do better in their academic work
- 83% improve their overall experience of being at university or college
- 78% of students develop employability skills.

About the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP has over 46,000 members working to the highest professional standards in a range of settings. BACP is recognised by legislators, national and international organisations and the public as the leading professional body and the voice of counselling and psychotherapy in the UK.

BACP has a dedicated division for University and College Counselling with over 600 members.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

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