

Oxford Student Mental Health Network

Welcome!



Welcome to OSMHN's first Newsletter. We hope that you find this a useful way of staying in touch with the work of the Network. Communication across the boundaries of professional interests is one of the main objectives of our project, and this is being mailed to people in the academic, healthcare and voluntary sectors. We intend to produce a publication for each of the academic terms and would welcome your contributions.

OSMHN's staff took up post in mid-Summer 2000. Jonathan Leach is the full-time Project Manager/Researcher responsible for the day to day running of the project. Previously Jonathan was Deputy Course Director for City University's MSc course in Disability Management in Work and Rehabilitation. Prior to that he worked for RESTORE, a voluntary sector mental health project in Oxford. Madeleine Collin is the project's part-time Director, a role that she combines with that of Disabled Students' Adviser at Oxford Brookes University. Deborah Williamson is the Administrator, working three days a week for the project. Deborah previously worked for CanDo a national service providing employment information for disabled graduates based at Lancaster University.

The first phase of the project has been concerned with building up a general picture of the issues affecting the mental health of students in Oxford. This has been achieved by gathering research reports, interviewing a selection of those involved in supporting students either in an academic setting or in healthcare services, and holding our launch event. What has emerged is a widespread concern for the well-being of students in Oxford and

agreement that there is much to be gained through developing a collaborative approach between academic, medical, psychological and psychiatric support services.

Whilst there have been a number of reports on student mental health in higher education, very little has been written about the further education sector. During this project we hope to explore the similarities and differences between these two sectors.

The next phase of the project focuses on a more detailed picture of what support is available, how it is used and what issues arise for both students and staff. We have sent out a questionnaire to those who support students with mental or emotional problems. The results will help us to quantify the numbers of students using different services and to identify the referral routes followed. Interviews are being arranged with practitioners to explore the issues that arise in their work with students. Most importantly, students themselves will be consulted on their experiences of using support services. Where possible OSMHN will collaborate with individual academic institutions to conduct surveys of the student population identifying their needs for support at different levels of provision.

In addition to the research aspect of our work, we want to bring people together to share experiences, learn something new and develop useful contacts. Following our launch event we distributed forms to all our contacts. These asked you to let us know how you would like to be involved. If you have not returned these yet we would still like to receive them. The information contained will be extremely valuable when it comes to putting on future events. Please let us know if there are any particular areas that you would like included.

Launch of the Network

Friday 3 November 2000 saw the official launch of OSMHN! The aim of this one-day event was to mark the first stage in the establishment of a new network on student mental health in Oxford.

Over 60 individuals attended on the day, representing over 30 different organisations and institutions in the region. Delegates came from a wide range of employment backgrounds but all shared a common professional interest in some aspect of the mental health of Oxfordshire's students.

The delegate list itself included representatives from higher and further education institutions in Oxford (counselling service, senior academic and pastoral staff); the health service (GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses); the voluntary sector (local disability and mental health organisations) and user groups.

Through discussion and group workshops, the day provided a much-needed opportunity for delegates to network with one another and share thoughts and experiences with other colleagues involved in different or similar aspects of work. Speakers from Lancaster and Leicester Universities gave delegates the opportunity to hear about the work of two earlier successful and similar HEFCE projects in other parts of the UK.

The group workshops and detailed evaluation forms completed by participants were crucial in enabling OSMHN to identify some of the key issues of concern to local institutions, services and organisations involved with student mental health. As a result of the day, OSMHN has now begun to set the agenda that will be addressed by the Network.

Some of the main issues raised by delegates at the launch event are as follows:

- The importance of regular networking with colleagues both within the institution/organisation and with external agencies to enable the sharing of information, knowledge and concerns.
- The need for mental health promotion across Oxfordshire to raise awareness of some of the relevant issues and consequently reduce the stigma attached to mental health.
- The need for mental health training for all those involved in supporting students with mental health difficulties within academic institutions (in particular those staff who provide indirect support e.g. tutors, wardens and academic staff).
- The importance of student participation in all stages of the Project.

Detailed feedback from the launch event is available on request by e-mailing osmhn@brookes.ac.uk.

Why worry about student mental health?

On the face of it students have got a wonderful opportunity. They are young, fit, free from the responsibilities of families and mortgages, learning new things every day, qualifying for well-paid jobs, meeting other people and being provided with all sorts of social, sporting and cultural activities for their free time. So what have they got to worry about?

Well first of all there are many students who don't match the above stereotype. Whilst the majority may come straight from school to Further or Higher Education there are many who have children, partners, or elderly relatives to provide for. They may have given up paid work to study or have chosen to become a student following redundancy. Many students are working part-time in order to reduce their level of debt. Roberts (1999) found that of a sample of 360 students, 47% were in debt. Being in debt was significantly associated with knowing people who were involved in crime, prostitution and drug dealing in order to support themselves. The mental health of the sample was significantly poorer than that of the equivalent general population and was linked to working long hours outside of their university and experiencing difficulties in paying bills. A recent MORI survey of 1,100 students across the UK found that most students anticipated owing at least £7,000 by the end of their studies (Times Higher Education Supplement 19.01.01).

Stewart-Brown et al (2000) in a study of 1208 students in higher education (including 200 students from Oxford Brookes University) found that 33% had long standing health difficulties especially asthma and musculo-skeletal problems. The mental health of students was found to be significantly worse than in the general population, with 38% having to cut back on the amount of study, work and other activities owing to emotional problems (compared with 13% in the general population of the same age range) Ashton et al (1996) found 50% of university students showing signs of clinical anxiety and more than one in ten suffering from clinical depression. It has been difficult to find any comparable figures for students in Further Education.

Whilst debt is one stressful factor, my research so far indicates that there are many other aspects of the student's life that could contribute to their poorer mental and emotional health. The time and effort put into obtaining high grades at A-Level may lead to restricted personal and social development during late adolescence. With parents often having to contribute to the students' financial upkeep, their offspring are under additional pressure to succeed. On top of this, those students who have moved away from their home town experience the loss of former supportive relationships. These students have to build up new friendships, whilst coming to terms with managing many other aspects of their own life for the first time. On the academic front they are expected to work at a much more independent level and have the constant pressure of exams and other forms of assessments looming ahead of them.

Despite these problems the recent MORI survey found that 95% of their sample thought that going to university was a worthwhile experience and that 74% felt more confident as a result of their life at university. This suggests that many students find ways of dealing with the stresses of academic life. However, we should not lose sight of the large minority who need additional support in order to make it to the end of their course without suffering undue mental distress.

Jonathan Leach

References

- Ashton et al (1996) *Alcohol and drug use in UK university students* The Lancet 348, 9032 05/10/96
- Garner M (2001) *Money worries top list of student concerns* Times Higher Education Supplement 19/1/01
- Roberts R et al. (1999) *The effects of economic circumstances on British students' mental and physical health* Journal of American College Health 48,3
- Stewart-Brown S et al. (2000) *The health of students in institutes of higher education: an important and neglected public health problem?* Journal of Public Health Medicine 22,4

Student mental health at Cambridge

A new report recently published by the University of Cambridge provides us with a valuable insight into the extent of mental health difficulties amongst students within one UK higher education institution. The study, carried out by questionnaire with 1200 students between 1995 and 1997, had three main aims:

- To investigate the prevalence and severity of psychological problems amongst students at the University throughout their course of study.
- To assess students' use of the university counselling service and other support agencies.
- To investigate links between student mental health and academic attainment

Consistent with previous research, psychological distress amongst Cambridge students was apparent, with one fifth of the students reporting at least one problem which caused them substantial worry. Academic problems caused students greatest concern, closely followed by financial concerns and social/personal relationship problems. Interestingly, women seemed more distressed than men with females reporting one and a half times as many problems as males.

At Cambridge, as with a number of UK institutions, addictive habits were rife. One in ten students reported drug use on a weekly basis and a similar number used alcohol to a level which suggested alcohol-related problems.

Additionally, eating disorders, which are of growing concern nationally, affected only the female students with 6% of women reporting problems in this area.

A study into suicide at Cambridge University published last year found that suicide rates at the university had declined and were lower than the national average (Collins I P; Paykel E S 2000). Findings from the present study show that 6% of the students surveyed had considered suicide and just under 1% had made an attempt.

Of some concern was the finding that use of support agencies at the university was not very high with 35% of students who reported one or more defined problems not seeking help. In fact, only 10% reported seeking help from support agencies with as little as 8% approaching the university's own counselling service. Furthermore, those students who did consult the service were shown to have greater levels of distress than those who did not seek support. On the positive side, counselling was shown to be beneficial with 75% reporting that the help and advice given by the service had helped to resolve their presenting problems.

Social and psychological factors were found to have a negative effect on academic outcome. Students who reported problems in 1996 and 1997 were two and five times less likely, respectively, to achieve a first class mark. Those students who reported problems in their final

year of study were ten times less likely to be awarded a first class mark.

This information has been summarised from Surtees P et al *Student Mental Health, Use of Services and Academic Attainment: A Report to the Review Committee of the University of Cambridge Counselling Service* March 2000

OSMHN has collected over 350 different resources relating to student mental health both locally in Oxfordshire and nationally. These include research articles, publications, newspaper articles and reports.

You are welcome to come into our office to use these resources for your own research purposes. If you would like us to e-mail you a detailed list of the resources which OSMHN holds, please e-mail us at osmhn@brookes.ac.uk

Book Review

Rana R (2000) *Counselling Students: a psychodynamic perspective* Macmillan Press Ltd

There is no doubt that for many students, university life can be a very stressful and traumatic experience. Using case studies as examples, Ravi Rana's publication utilises a psychodynamic model of student counselling to provide an insight into students' experiences at university and how psychological and developmental factors impact on this.

In the first half of the book, Rana explores in depth the effect of our past experiences on psychological development and how relationships within the family can shape our identities and personalities. Separation is investigated, specifically the emotional trauma associated with separation and early loss in childhood and the subsequent effects these can have on the transition to university.

Following this, the link between mental health and learning/study difficulties is explored. Rana looks at the common difficulties experienced by students with academic work, some of the processes involved with learning and additionally the link between intellect and the ability to handle emotions.

Serious breakdown, self-harm and suicide both within and outside of the university setting is studied in detail and some of the precursors to these are examined.

The book concludes by looking at the university context, its parameters and their potential effects on a student's mental health. The role of counselling in dealing with students' problems is also addressed, looking at the assessment process and its importance in determining appropriate levels of treatment and support.

This publication is of relevance to counsellors, students and anybody with a personal or professional interest in student well-being.

OSMHN online!

Check out OSMHN's web page now online at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/osmhn>.

Amongst other things, the site includes:

- OSMHN's aims and objectives
- Details of our latest activities and events
- Contact details for national and local organisations providing support or information to students with mental health difficulties
- Details of research papers and publications relating to student mental health

The site is intended to keep you up to date with latest happenings within the Project so make sure you log in regularly to check for updates.

Mental health on the web

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has produced a series of leaflets on common mental health issues, including bulimia and anorexia, bereavement, depression, sleeping well, memory disorders, anxiety and phobias, schizophrenia, social phobias and manic depression. These are available in full on their web site at <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/help/index.htm>

Website-based @ease <http://www.at-ease.nsf.org.uk/> is a new mental health resource for young people under stress or worried about their thoughts and feelings. The site contains a comprehensive list of mental health related information and resources of interest to students and those supporting them.

For details of these and other useful web sites go to OSMHN's web page at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/osmhn>.

Please help us to help you!

If you provide a service to students with mental health difficulties locally and would like to have your details included on our web site please contact Deborah Williamson at osmhn@brookes.ac.uk.

Additionally, any comments or suggestions you may have relating to the content of the site would be gratefully received.

OSMHN Steering Committee members

OSMHN is supported and advised by a Steering Group consisting of representatives from its partner institutions. The present members are as follows:

Oxford University

Elsa Bell, Head of Counselling
Dame Fiona Caldicott, Chairman
Committee on Student Health and Welfare

Oxford Brookes University

Keith Cooper, Head of Student Services (Chair)
Marion Casey, Senior Counsellor

Oxford College of Further Education

Pam Woolley, Manager of Student Support

Oxford City Primary Care Group

Jan Cottle, Health Development Manager

Oxfordshire Mental Healthcare NHS Trust

June Dent, Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Mike Hobbs, Consultant Psychotherapist; Clinical Director

Reminder!

OSMHN has recently mailed two forms to individuals in Oxfordshire (one for those providing services to students with mental health problems and one for those interested in becoming involved in the Network).

If you have received either of these forms and have not returned them please could you do so as soon as possible. Your assistance is crucial in enabling us to progress with the next phase of the research and the building of the wider network on student mental health.

If you have misplaced your form and would like another copy please contact OSMHN as below.

Contact details

OSMHN is unable to offer direct support or advice to students, but aims to collaborate with those organisations and services that are involved in supporting students with mental health problems. OSMHN can be contacted at:

Oxford Student Mental Health Network
Ground Floor
Sandringham House
Heritage Gate
Sandy Lane West
Littlemore
Oxford, OX4 5LB

Telephone/Fax: 01865 488128

E-mail: osmhn@brookes.ac.uk

Web site: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/osmhn>

For additional copies of this newsletter or a copy of our leaflet providing further information about the Project, please contact us as above. Help us to spread the word by requesting multiple copies to distribute to colleagues.