Oxford Student Mental Health Network

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OSMHN's Strategic Aims 2002-2003

Welcome to our third Newsletter. We hope that this is a useful way of keeping in touch with you, we would be pleased to hear back from you on any of the topics covered. We start out with the strategic aims which have been agreed for the OSMHN project. These have arisen as a result of consultations carried out through research interviews, workshops and network events. The following areas have been identified as priorities:

1. Student Involvement
2. Review of Policies and Procedures
3. Enhancing Support and Treatment
4. Influencing Staff Development
5. Promoting Mental Health
6. Changing Practice

The development of the aims reflects the move from research and evaluation to a more active phase of trying to influence policies and practices. However, research and evaluation will continue alongside these other activities.

We have set out below an explanation of each aim. If you would like a more detailed breakdown of our aims and their time-scales please contact us for a copy of our Strategic Plan (or visit our website http://www.brookes.ac.uk/osmhn).

1. Student Involvement

In all of OSMHN's activities the project will continue to seek input from students through consultation with student representatives, groups and individuals. Concern for the welfare of students is the main focus of the project's activities.

2. Review of Policies and Procedures

Project Steering Group members will initiate a review of policies and procedures in their institutions. These will be specific to each institution but influenced by legislation and national guidelines. OSMHN offers an opportunity to share good practice in the development or revision of policies and procedures which affect the mental health and well-being of students. The policies and procedures adopted will underpin the other areas of focus set out below.

Research interviews have indicated that both staff and students would welcome clear, but not overly-rigid, policies and guidelines for when students are experiencing significant emotional or mental distress. A number of respondents have indicated how certain policies and procedures are unhelpful in either responding to the needs of distressed students, or more generally in promoting well-being in the student and wider academic community.

3. Enhancing Support and Treatment

Ensuring that appropriate and timely support is available to students with mental health problems; giving students and staff information on pathways to treatment and support. This will involve collaboration across academic and health care organisations so that students get support and, where necessary treatment, at a time and in a manner that suits their needs.

Our research interviews show that, depending of the severity of mental or emotional distress experienced, the student has a number of support options which could be pursued. However, in some cases students are either not aware of the range of options open to them, or have ruled out certain options owing to uncertainty of their appropriateness or effectiveness. Whilst treatment is usually available in cases of severe mental breakdown, this is not always so in the case of less dramatic but nonetheless enduring and disabling mental health conditions. We also found concerns about students' re-entry to academic life after a period of absence caused by mental health problems.

4. Influencing Staff Development

Supporting member institutions in the implementation of staff training and development on mental health and well-being issues. This will be aimed at equipping staff to support students with mental health and emotional problems whilst maintaining appropriate boundaries. The work will involve collaboration across academic, health care and other organisations.

Research respondents consistently state that staff in universities and colleges require the knowledge and skills to deal with the wide range of mental health issues raised by students, including knowledge of how and when to refer the student on to other agencies. Staff in healthcare settings could benefit from greater knowledge of the academic environment in which their student patients will be continuing or resuming their studies.

5. Promoting Mental Health

Working in partnership with local organisations to promote awareness of mental health issues and develop the ability to maintain good mental and emotional health within the academic population. This will involve working with students and staff in order to find the most effective ways of promoting mental health and well-being.

Whilst serious mental illness is only experienced by a minority of students, a much larger number are affected by the stresses and strains of modern student life, often cut off from the support of friends and family at home. Many research respondents expressed hope that the existing positive aspects of the student experience could be built on and that students could be supported in developing their mental and emotional fitness to tackle the challenges faced.

6. Changing Practice

Identifying and seeking to change practices which are detrimental to the mental health and well-being of students. Such practices may come from the policies and procedures of institutions and from aspects of students' lifestyles.

Mental health is not just an individual phenomenon, students and staff are affected by the culture and practices of their academic and residential environment.

During the interviews many factors were raised including: rivalry, anonymity, lack of privacy, examination pressures, alcohol use and fear of showing vulnerability, which have a negative impact on students' well being.

Many issues have been raised in this first half of the project's life. It won't be possible to address them all, but in addition to the problems identified, many solutions have also been suggested. Despite the many challenges faced, the educational process is a positive experience for most. When students do run into difficulties there are support mechanisms in place. This project presents the opportunity for those providing and using that support to learn from each other and to identify how it could be further enhanced.

OSMHN's Workgroups

Supporting students with mental health difficulties

Teresa Evans (Assistant Psychologist) and Ged Lombard (Director) of the Independent Psychological Service at Swindon College, led a workgroup on *Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties.* Teresa and Ged spoke about the ways in which The Independent Psychological Service (TIPS) works to enable students at the severe end of mental illness to access Further Education.

The speakers stressed that academic ability may only be a small part of a student's success at College. TIPS therefore look at the entire learning environment; factors such as social skills may be equally important for a student's success at College.

Another key factor in preparing students with mental health difficulties for FE is confidence building. Some students may have a fear of learning as a result of negative past experiences with education, for example bullying. TIPS work with the student to remove this fear and attempt to rebuild their confidence and self-esteem.

Mutual respect and a good working relationship between client and TIPS is also crucial. Disclosure is an issue. Unless students are open about their past experiences, staff are unaware of the most appropriate support for the student.

Teresa stressed that, often, when a student faces problems in their life, the first thing that is going to be dropped is university or college, therefore it is equally important that clients inform TIPS about any changes which may have an effect on their condition, for example changes in medication or housing. This enables staff to increase support levels appropriately and avoid potential problems.

Ged highlighted that, for HE and FE staff who have responsibility for directly or indirectly supporting students with mental health difficulties, the importance of networking and sharing experiences with one another is a crucial part of the learning process.

Developing emotional literacy

Increasingly, we are beginning to think about how the development of emotional literacy can contribute to the improvement of levels of health and well-being within ourselves, our places of work, the communities in which we live and indeed within society as a whole.

Sarah Stewart Brown, Reader at the Health Services Research Unit, Oxford University, led the workgroup *Developing Emotional Literacy*. She highlighted four areas important for the development of our own emotional literacy:

1. Being aware of our emotions and ability to talk about them.
2. Focusing on the positive aspects in ourselves and others.
3. Dealing with distressing situations openly and honestly.
4. Accepting responsibility for the problems we have caused.

Awareness of our own emotions and being able to talk about them is an important starting point for the development of emotional literacy. Refusing to acknowledge or express our feelings can have a detrimental effect on our mental health and well-being. It can lead to difficulties relating to other people, effect our physical health and can prevent us from recognising a need for and being open to accessing support services when we need them, for example counselling.

During the workgroup, participants were made aware that learning to deal with the way we express our own emotions can improve relationships with our families, friends, work colleagues and the students whom we teach or support. It can consequently have a positive effect within all aspects of our lives, for example our homes, communities and within the organisations in which we work.

Emotional Literacy Resources

Publications

Goleman, Daniel (1996) *Emotional Intelligence* Bloomsbury

Goleman, Daniel (1999) *Working with Emotional Intelligence* Bloomsbury

Steiner, Claude & Perry, Paul (1999) *Achieving Emotional Literacy* Bloomsbury

Web sites

http://www.antidote.org.uk

Antidote promotes and raises understanding of emotional literacy.

http://www.nelig.com/

The National Emotional Literacy Interest Group is dedicated to the promotion of emotional literacy for everyone.

According to Antidote, practising emotional literacy means we are more able to:

- ❖ Develop self awareness
- ❖ Understand and appreciate others
- ❖ Build strong relationships
- ❖ Connect to a wider community
- ❖ Contribute to society

Self-help books for positive mental health

Most bookshops now carry a bewildering array of "self-improvement" books offering to help you overcome depression, beat anxiety, control stress, be more confident, manage your time, enjoy your life more etc. I suspect that if someone is at a particularly low ebb with their mental health, such books with their exhortation that "you can change" may not be what they need. However, there are many students (and staff for that matter) who have levels of anxiety and depression which, whilst they might not be serious enough to take the person to a doctor or counsellor, are having a significant negative effect on their lives.

Although it may be "good to talk" about one's problems, talking does not suit everyone. Some may have tried it to no avail, and others may feel that they are stretching the patience of friends, colleagues and family. Students and academics generally are good at using books for information, so this may feel a comfortable way to address some experiences of mild to moderate distress. However, it is definitely helpful to get an external perspective on one's situation and we should be careful that referring someone to a self-help book should not be interpreted as "don't bring your problems to me or anyone else!"

Following are a few books I am familiar with, I can't guarantee that they are the best available, but they represent some different approaches to self help. We would be glad to hear from you with your own recommendations for self-help books.

Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide

Gillian Butler and Tony Hope (1995) Oxford University Press ISBN 0192623834 £9.99

At over 400 pages this book is extremely good value for money, however its length might put some people off. In fact it is very readable and the authors guide you as to which chapters you need for particular issues. The approaches suggested, based on research findings and clinical experience, bring together insights from psychotherapy and management training. The book focuses on developing the mental skills you need in order to function well including: managing time, managing yourself, problem-solving, relaxation, self confidence and self esteem. Issues addressed include: anxiety and depression, relationships, habits, smoking, eating, alcohol, sleep, coming off tranquillisers, as well as study skills and improving your memory.

Managing Yourself

Mike Pedler and Tom Boydell (1999) Lemos & Crane ISBN 1898001553 £12.99

This is a shorter book at 222 pages, and whilst aimed at managers, has lessons for anyone who feels that they are losing control of their work or study activities. This book does not focus on specific conditions like anxiety and depression but emphasises the importance of knowing, valuing and being yourself. The book contains various questionnaires which the reader can use to assess where they are at and what they might wish to change. Like the book by Butler and Hope the emphasis is on developing personal skills. But this book is also concerned with helping you to manage the organisation within which you are operating.

How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything: Yes Anything!

Albert Ellis (1998) Lyle Stuart ISBN 0818404566 £14.95

I recently heard Albert Ellis, now in his mid 80's, interviewed on Radio 4 and it was an impressive performance! Equally striking is the number of books this man has produced. This book inevitably has a very North American feel about it, and is written as if Ellis himself is in the room talking to you. His main theme is that we make ourselves unhappy, anxious and depressed by turning preference's into "musts". We tell ourselves that we can only feel happy and stable if other people or events work out just as we want them. Ellis says that by thinking in this way we make ourselves feel bad, but that we can learn to think differently which in turn will help us to feel better. In an academic or working environment it is all too easy to judge ourselves by exam results, performance indicators and other outcome measures. Whilst there is nothing wrong in trying to do better, this book show us how to avoid feeling devastated when we don't reach the high standards set by ourselves or those around us.

Mental health on the web

How to cope with the stress of student life

Mind has produced a booklet aimed at students about the stresses of life in Higher Education. A printed version of the booklet is available for a small charge from Mind. Alternatively, a non-printable version can be viewed free of charge on their website.

http://www.mind.org.uk/information/howto/student_life/how_to_cope_with_the_stress_of_student_life.asp

Self help leaflets for students

The University Student Counselling website provides details of and links to self-help materials for students available on various UK university counselling service web pages.

http://www.ad.rhul.ac.uk/counselling/hucs.html#services

SUKHealth

SUKHealth is a site specifically for students. It contains guidance information surrounding some of the common problems faced, for example stress, homesickness, depression, ME, eating disorders and self harm.

http://www.studentuk.com/health/general/stress.html

Resources for staff

Students with mental health difficulties: your questions answered

Skill: The National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, has produced a booklet for professionals to raise their awareness of particular issues relating to students with mental health difficulties e.g. terminology, access to records, using counselling services, 'emergency' situations etc. Further information is available from Skill, Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1 3JW or on their website at http://www.skill.org.uk.

The impact of debt on student well-being

"Student debt is having a negative effect on the well-being of students". This is the overriding theme which has been brought out in a recent publication by Scott, Lewis & Lea (eds) *Student Debt: The causes and consequences of undergraduate borrowing in the UK* (The Policy Press 2001).

The researchers believe that the replacement of maintenance grants with the student loan is breeding a debt culture which is having a 'serious impact on student well-being'. Using qualitative and quantitative research, including focus groups, face-to-face interviews and questionnaire surveys, the authors were able to examine how changes in the financing of higher education are impacting on the mental well-being of students within UK HE institutions today.

Student Debt is of interest to anyone concerned about the impact of debt on student well-being. The publication looks at the causes and consequences of student debt, investigates how changes in policy have impacted on undergraduate borrowing, and compares issues surrounding student debt in the UK, Italy and France.

Topics of investigation within the publication include student money management styles, student attitudes towards credit and debt, the psychological effects of student debt and the nature of the relationship between the student and the bank.

Findings

The National Union of Students estimates that, on average, students graduate owing nearly £12,000[1]. The publication highlights that increasingly, students are being forced to accept debt as an integral part of university life and indeed, the student survey found that 81% of the prospective students had concerns about the financing of their university education.

The researchers found that debt did negatively impact on student well-being, with depression occurring in nearly one third of graduates who anticipated owing substantial amounts of money. This compared to 8% of other students who didn't foresee such debts. Similarly, 74% of those students who did worry about getting into debt were found to suffer from anxiety compared to 45% of those students who were not concerned about potential financial difficulties.

Money troubles were found to arise from a few sources, namely poor money management skills such as careless budgeting and lack of self discipline; and unforeseen circumstances beyond the students' apparent control e.g. the high cost of living or illness. However, in spite of this, few students attempted to limit expenditure during such periods of financial hardship, especially when it came to socialising and alcohol consumption.

The effect on studies was made apparent with half of the students questioned believing that their financial problems damaged their academic results.

The researchers are suggesting an overhaul of the student funding system and recommend that money management lessons be introduced in schools with the aim of better preparing students for handling their finances at university.

References

1. *Students 'clinically depressed' by worries over debt* The Independent 24 September 2001

OSMHN's web site is changing!

We hope that the site will become a resource both for students with mental health difficulties and for the HE and FE staff within Oxfordshire who support them.

In order to achieve this and ensure that our website is of maximum benefit to you, we need to hear your views and suggestions as to the kind of information which you would like to see included on the site. Some examples may be:

- Details of where you can refer students with mental health difficulties within your institutions
- Information about mental health policies and procedures within your institutions e.g. confidentiality
- Guidelines on dealing with a crisis e.g. a suicidal student or self harm
- Guidelines on supporting students with mental health difficulties for specific staff groups e.g. personal tutors

These are just a few examples. If you agree with any of these or have any other suggestions or ideas please contact us. Any feedback or ideas, however brief, would be greatly appreciated.

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:

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

OSMHN is running two further workgroups this term for HE and FE staff in Oxford:

Supporting students with serious mental health problems

Making teaching and learning strategies more effective by taking account of emotional and psychological well-being

For further information please contact us as above or see our website at http://www.brookes.ac.uk/osmhn