Supporting students affected by mental health issues

Dr Jonathan Leach,
The Open University
Mental Health Problems in the General Population
(Figures for a population of 1000 based on Goldberg & Huxley 1993)

- Psychological distress
- Attend primary care
- Recognised by GP
- Attends MH services
- In-patient care
‘People’s moods can change a lot, e.g. students can feel great when they are complimented by a tutor but criticism has the opposite effect on their moods.’

(Student in Leach 2004)
‘Much emotional distress arises from the fact that the emotional environment is not conductive to mental well-being and there is not enough information or chances to think things through and this needs looking at.’

(University Counsellor in Leach 2004)
Mental health and isolation

Even when a person has a ‘social network’ of people they know, they can feel lonely if those relationships are unsupportive or, worse still, actually detrimental to their wellbeing

(Se grin and Passalacqua, 2010).
SOCIAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

- Tutors
- Other staff
- Friends
- Other students
- Family

PSYCHOLOGICAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT
- Counsellors
- Psychotherapists
- Psychologists

MEDICAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT
- GPs
- Psychiatrists
- Nurses

Nurses
Universities UK Good Practice Guide

Consideration should be given to making training on mental health awareness and the protocols for reporting concerns available to all relevant staff. This includes academic and related departments, service and support areas, frontline and auxiliary staff, personal tutors, house/hall tutors and departmental disability officers. Such training could be cascaded to staff who have a front line role including cleaners, canteen and library staff, whether they are permanent, contract or agency staff.
Five elements of social support

• engaging in friendship,
• providing emotional support,
• constructing meaning,
• offering practical advice
• giving material assistance.

(Leach 2015)
Graham Allan (2010) points to the key role of friendship in affirming a person’s identity;

- Friendships are often chosen and nurtured because they help each party to maintain a similar world view and to reinforce their self-images.
- Friendships also seem to develop between people with a similar economic and social status and for hierarchies to be avoided in these relationships.
- Reciprocity is important in sustaining friendships as it helps maintain equality in the relationship.
Emotional support

Key components:
• listening,
• showing empathy and concern
• acceptance
• perhaps trying to lift the person’s mood

‘Quite often talking is the best form of therapy and having someone who knows you, who you can confide in and can talk back to you on a personal level based on the fact they know you, can sometimes be very comforting.’

(Respondent to Open University survey, 2011)
Constructing meaning

‘… sharing experiences to help me understand what I was going through, and how to make sense of it.’

(Respondent to Open University survey, 2011)

‘I am one of life's chatterers and students come to me and it becomes apparent that it is more than trivial chat. They are trying to raise something much closer to them, which they may not be able to identify. I never give advice. Through talking they may find their own way, if not I will offer some possible answers.’

(College Staff Member in Leach 2004)
Practical advice

• ‘Other people who have not experienced the full extent of a mental health problem can think that it is just like when they are feeling down, so they may not offer appropriate support or advice.’
  (Student in Leach, 2015)

• ‘People have talked to me. I can’t be sure they listened. Lots of advice.’
  (Respondent to Open University survey, 2011)
Material assistance

• Examples: help with finances, transport, fixing things, learning new skills
• Can be empowering - enabling a ‘normal life’
• How it is given is important – sense of empathy
• Can make some people feel uncomfortable through lack of reciprocity
Social support in education

- **Friendship** – enabling social relationships with fellow students and accessibility to staff
- **Emotional support** – listening to concerns, providing reassurance
- **Constructing meaning** – support in becoming a student and maintaining a sense of optimism and self-efficacy
- **Offering practical advice** – managing learning and assessment processes, developing academic skills, signposting to support services
- **Giving material assistance** – ensuring financial, residential, transport and other basic needs are met
Range of social support

- **Formal**
  - e.g. Support worker
- **Semi-formal**
  - e.g. colleague
- **Informal**
  - e.g. friend
- **Close**
  - e.g. partner or relative
‘What this student wanted was to be listened to by someone who really cared about her, not the kind of relationship you get in a counselling situation.’

(Student respondent in Leach 2015)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Talking Therapy</th>
<th>Social Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time-limited sessions</td>
<td>More open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes place in clinical settings</td>
<td>Occurs in natural situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed by theory and accredited training</td>
<td>Based on informal skills and life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear boundaries</td>
<td>Boundaries less defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds therapeutic alliance</td>
<td>Builds friendly relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May try to give meaning to experiences</td>
<td>May try to give meaning to experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is likely to be focused on bringing about change</td>
<td>May focus on supporting change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is likely to avoid giving direct advice</td>
<td>May involve giving advice and guidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Improving Mental Health THROUGH Social Support

Building Positive AND Empowering Relationships
References


• Leach, J. (2004) *Organisational Responses to Students’ Mental Health Needs: Social, Psychological and Medical Perspectives*, PhD Thesis, Oxford Brookes University. [http://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/e5eca0f1-9e7c-d32d-a439-94d33c8459de/1/?hb=true&nav.tabSection=summary&nav.tabData=summary](http://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/e5eca0f1-9e7c-d32d-a439-94d33c8459de/1/?hb=true&nav.tabSection=summary&nav.tabData=summary)


