

Feature

Supporting mental health in higher education

Names of all students have been changed for confidentiality

I have volunteered for Patapia Tzotzoli since 2013; my role has been as an editor for both system content and publications associated with her research

"As a final year undergraduate I began suffering from depression and anxiety symptoms. Having no history of either, it was quite different to the very happy, straightforward person I had been through school and the early stages of university."

Clara, postgraduate student at the University of Cambridge

University offers opportunities to develop and learn, both personally and academically. It is often a time of increased independence during which individuals construct their adult identity. However, with these opportunities comes greater responsibility than before and the pressure to succeed. During this transitional phase of life, in which the onus is on personal growth as well as meeting new academic challenges, unsurprisingly some students will struggle.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England monitors the number of students reporting difficulties at university and have suggested that an increase has occurred in recent years. For some, the experience of mental health problems will begin during their studies. However, attendance at university is an experience available to many more students than previously. As such, more students with mental health problems apply for and gain places at university. Doing my own small survey of student experiences via social media, I found that students' experience of support when facing psychological difficulties in higher education varies. Everyone that I spoke to who sought help eventually received it, even if they had a long wait—6 months in one case.

In general, students found counsellors to be approachable, helpful, and a useful listening ear. Nonetheless, a good experience appears to depend, to some degree, on whether individual staff members are informed, sympathetic, and willing listeners. This dependence on individual staff members might be particularly true of postgraduate academic environments. Several research students suggested that some supervisors or lecturers appeared more concerned about funding and exam results than about the student's welfare. As one postgraduate told me: "I did get a slight impression that encountering difficulties was an inconvenience to the faculty". One hopes that in many cases, this response is not due to an absence of human feeling, but of knowledge about how to approach and deal with mental health problems. Greater understanding and openness in higher education institutions than at present and recognition that training needs exist for some staff members would benefit all, including staff who might themselves experience psychological difficulties.

Those working in student counselling services have witnessed these trends in the mental wellbeing of higher education students. I spoke with Alan Percy, Head of Counselling Services at Oxford University, who has worked in the field for almost 30 years. He suggested that part of the problem is that students might be less well equipped than in previous years to face the challenges of higher education. "Students are finding it much harder in the transition from secondary education and family life. They get far more structure in secondary education and it's far more targeted to passing exams and less about independent learning." This mentality makes it difficult in an environment where you cannot always be right and leaves students feeling as if they are failing. He suggests that they might also lack emotional resilience: "It's about people learning to manage the challenges of developing internal skills to be adaptable, overcome failure, and delay gratification. Young people aren't developing that in the same way."

Percy also stresses that the challenges faced by young people need not always be couched in terms of clinical psychiatric diagnoses, which can lead people to adopt a "passive sick role". So although some students might have very serious problems, he says that "Over all the students we see, they're not all severely mentally ill". So, although the media paints pictures of ever-increasing numbers of students with mental illnesses seeking help from universities that are having to tighten their belts in a difficult financial environment, the situation is more complex and nuanced than the media suggest.



Sigrid Gumbert/Science Photo Library

The lives of young adults in modern, high-income societies could simply be more unstable than they were around 50 years ago. Students aged between 18 years and 29 years might continue to explore their identity, feeling as though they have not yet left adolescence behind to achieve full adulthood. A potential consequence of increased instability in the lives of young adults is that many students arrive at higher education institutions already anxious. Ruth Caleb, Chair of the Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education working group, which formed in 2003 as a result of increasing concerns about student mental health and wellbeing, told me: "We are getting more students coming in, already extremely anxious about the sort of degree they might get. Students in previous years and decades wouldn't have arrived already anxious about [this]. They would have thought of their first year as a time to get to know other students, start relationships, and move on from school life."

Of course, various complex social factors could be influencing the changes seen by counselling services in the students they support. For example, greater recognition of mental health and wellbeing in society could contribute to increased uptake of counselling services, actually reflecting a positive change in stigmatising attitudes to psychological problems. Considered within the context of financial instability and budget cuts in higher education, these issues raise questions of how higher education institutions can best meet the needs of struggling students. Traditional face-to-face counselling might be only part of the answer. Different institutions are considering what they can use as alternative approaches to traditional one-to-one sessions with a counsellor. These approaches might include peer support, dyslexia services, study support, and use of technology to meet a larger cohort of low-risk students with milder difficulties than at present.

Indeed, online self-help could possibly be offered to all students to support development of self-agency before they reach crisis point. Good practice guidance is beginning to recognise use of technology to improve support for students, particularly for those with mild difficulties, allowing those with greater need to access more intensive support from student services than others. Online psychological support systems do exist. Many of these systems are designed for the general population, although some targeting student populations are being developed. These systems range from offering simple psychoeducational resources (eg, Students Against Depression) to evidence-based targeted therapeutic interventions.

I have been working with Patapia Tzotzoli, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and founder of iConcipro, who is developing and testing an online support system designed specifically for higher education students called MePlusMe. Rather than simply offering further information about

mental health and wellbeing, the system offers guided self-help, assessing psychological needs and providing techniques to address difficulties identified. The techniques are rooted in psychological theory and research, drawing on therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness, and acceptance and commitment therapy. Furthermore, it aims to support those with mild difficulties. As such, students identified as more severely ill than others are signposted to their support services or family doctor.

As a student, Tzotzoli noticed that the student experience depended on so much more than academic ability. Support of the development of other skills, including self-efficacy, would therefore be important in tackling mental health difficulties. These observations drove her to develop a 24/7 support system for students that could complement other available support services. "We want to walk side by side with students as challenges arise, and turn these into opportunities for learning and growth. MePlusMe can reach out to the majority of students, acting as a complementary source of support. Students with mild to moderate difficulties on the waiting list for support services can be offered MePlusMe allowing counsellors to concentrate on those with more significant difficulties and so manage the demand for budget-constrained services."

Despite the support that web-based cognitive behavioural therapy is gaining for use in the general population, giving hope that such systems could be useful in higher education contexts, the students I spoke to were ambivalent about use of e-health alternatives. Although many agreed that they would be useful in principle, some felt that the importance of face-to-face contact cannot be underestimated.

Caleb agrees that online support could be useful, but is not a panacea. For Caleb, face-to-face counselling offers something unique that is not provided by online systems. "[Students are] making a relationship with that person to a greater or lesser degree—they make you feel that somebody knows you and understands you, because it can be very lonely at university." Online resources might complement and support other available support, but they are unlikely to entirely replace them. Such alternatives should not simply replace more traditional forms of support as a cost-cutting exercise. Backed by evidence for their efficacy, they could, however, provide a complementary alternative.

Understanding of the many and varied influences on student wellbeing is in itself a challenge so, whatever the solution, it is unlikely to be simple. Counselling services are working hard to support students seeking help, and in most cases, are doing a very good job. However, careful consideration of complementary methods of support could be key to reach more students than at present and ease the strain on overstretched services.

Rhianna Goozee

For **Students Against Depression** see <http://studentsagainstdespression.org>

For **iConcipro** see <http://www.iconcipro.com>

For **MePlusMe** see <http://www.meplusme.com>