

# Looking after our students' mental health

This autumn over 400,000 young people will be leaving home for the first time to go to university, joining a total UK student population of 2.5 million. Of these, one in five will suffer a mental health problem during their studies.

Despite counselling being an accessible, valued and proven intervention for students experiencing mental distress, constraints in university funding coupled with an increased demand by students for counselling are putting these university-based counselling services under pressure, and students' mental health, academic performance and future life-chances at risk.

## Students' mental health

University students experience the psychological and developmental needs common to all young adults. However coupled with the need to adapt to a new environment without the usual social supports, alongside the demands of their courses and added financial pressures, plus peer pressure to misuse drugs and alcohol, many students will experience psychological distress sufficient enough to impact on their studies.

Worrying figures from a 2013 study undertaken by the National Union of Students showed:

- 49% of students said they had felt depressed during their studies
- 55% said they had felt anxious during the course of their studies
- 20% students considered themselves to have a mental health problem

Left untreated, psychological distress and mental health problems can lead to students dropping out of university or failing to reach their full academic or personal potential or lead to more long-term effects on self-esteem, future life-chances and on-going mental health issues through their adulthood.

## What is university counselling?

Most UK universities provide professional counselling services offering interventions to address the full-range of psychological and emotional difficulties presented by students. These counselling services are based within the university and provided by trained staff who understand the pressures of the university environment and who are able to access the systems that are in place to help students continue with and complete their studies.

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

## Effectiveness of counselling in universities

There is robust evidence that counselling decreases psychological distress in students. A study based on the experiences of 28,000 students in 18 British universities found that 75% of students had 'improved' or 'recovered' following counselling. Additionally, data from over a 1200 students indicated that counselling impacted on broader student well-being by improving self-confidence and coping strategies, and increasing hope for the future. Counselling provided by universities can also have a positive impact on academic outcomes.

Recent research based on data from over 5,500 students from 65 UK universities and further education colleges found that:

- 81% of students considered that counselling helped them stay at university
- 79% of students considered that counselling helped them do better in their academic work
- 83% considered that counselling improved their overall experience of being at university.
- 78% considered that counselling helped them develop employability skills.

## Accessibility of university counselling services

Waiting times for assessment and beginning therapy in university and college counselling services are generally better than primary care mental health services.

BACP Universities and Colleges' survey for 2012–13 showed appointments were usually within five days of first contact and the waiting time to begin counselling was normally within 10 working days. This compares to the average waiting time on the NHS of 64 days.

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 setting itself provides an easy to access, familiar and less stigmatising environment in which to receive mental health support. For these reasons, a university-based service is more likely than traditional NHS-based services to be used by and be useful to a student population.

## Increased demand for university counselling services

There is an increasing demand for counselling services at universities. A survey of 21 Heads of University Counselling Services found that there had been a 16% increase in demand from 2010–2013. This is despite an increase in student population of just 9% during the same period.

Our students are facing increased emotional and psychological pressures. Support services, such as university counselling, are required more than ever.

## University counselling services under threat?

BACP is concerned that faced by funding constraints, some universities may reduce or even withdraw counselling provision at a time when need and demand are increasing.

Without properly resourced university counselling services, students may seek support from already oversubscribed NHS IAPT services with an added financial burden on the public purse. Without easy access to services, students may leave problems untreated, increasing the number of students leaving university prematurely or leading to long-standing mental health issues requiring the need for expensive specialist or emergency mental health services.

## What we are asking you to do

Properly resourced counselling in universities can provide accessible, timely, specialist support to distressed students, helping them to continue with and successfully complete their studies as well as helping them cope with the specific pressures of university life and common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

As an MP with a university within your constituency, we would be grateful if you would consider taking the following actions:

- **Contact the Secretary of State for Education** asking her if she is aware of the increased prevalence of mental health problems amongst university students, the increased demand for counselling and asking what the Government is doing to ensure that universities provide sufficient in-house counselling provision.
- **Contact the Vice-Chancellor of your local university** asking about the level of counselling provision and seeking reassurance that the university is committed to maintaining/increasing in-house counselling provision in line with increasing demand.

## About the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP is the leading professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, with over 41,000 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.



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