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College Counselling - More to it than meets the eye?

A general assumption is that a college counselling service mainly deals with exam pressures or study-related issues. For some, this is true, however, for the majority of students other issues take precedence. In the past year our clients have brought a diverse range of issues, for example: sexual assault, isolation, suicidal thoughts, abuse, relationships, drug use, eating disorders, self harm, cultural issues, family difficulties, sexuality, the effects of crime, anxiety, depression and trauma. Adding this to the general stresses of growing up, working out who they are, the transition from school and demands of college life we start to develop a picture of just how complex life can be for these young people.

A confidential service

A confidential service for these students is invaluable. Without it, they may never have an opportunity to talk about such issues, which are having significant effects in their lives. Counselling may be the first place they discuss a problem and we can ensure they get the correct support for their individual needs. The safety of the familiar college environment can help reduce stigma about counselling and therefore make it easier to just drop in, which for young people in particular is one less barrier to getting help.

Greenhead College in Huddersfield has had a counselling service for over ten years. Since August 2007 there have been two part-time counsellors; ensuring that counselling is as accessible and flexible as possible to all

students, whatever their timetable. The aim of the counselling service is to provide confidential support for students on a short or long-term basis and to be able to respond to their needs. Being easily accessible means that they can drop in anytime and therefore don't miss classes (this is an especially important consideration for students who claim EMA who would lose payments or compromise their right to confidentiality).

The immediacy of having a counsellor to talk to eases the anxiety or upset of a student and helps them to discuss and assess their current situation. Although counselling does not usually provide an emergency service, in the context of working in college with this age group there are occasions in which the counsellors can use their skills to assist the staff to respond in this type of situation. This does not replace the role of the 'named person' who deals with child protection in college rather it offers support and expertise.

Other counselling options for students would be via their G.P. or private arrangements. These may involve travel, waiting time, finding a counsellor who specialises in young people, time-limited sessions, or incur a financial commitment (currently £30 - £50 per hour). The absence of pressure over finances enables the student to use the sessions at their own pace. This way, they have time to articulate feelings, understand issues, work through them and find ways of moving forward.

Learning to understand yourself and make your own decisions are life skills that

empower students and go hand in hand with the college mission statement of providing "a supportive environment in which individuals feel valued, grow in confidence and fulfil their potential for academic, moral, social and physical development."

Transition and retention

The impact of the having a counselling service within the college is vast. Many students find the transition from school to college or from college to university difficult. We support these students through this period of adjustment.

In our experience it helps with student retention; often they feel there's no choice but to leave college, until they come to speak to us and we look at options. Counselling helps to look after their emotional, mental and often physical health and by doing so, it can help with their confidence: in making their own choices, coping skills, academic work and quality of life.

Referrals from tutors and staff are vital to the service. Identifying students' needs ensures they get the correct support and reduces pressure on staff. As counsellors, we are also able to offer our support to staff if they need to offload or have concerns about a student. Providing INSET for tutors and enrichment training programmes for students on basic listening skills we have become a part of the whole college structure.

Location and knowledge

Being part of the college means we have a unique understanding of the rhythm of college life, alerting us to the possible added stresses and requirements of our students (internal monitoring, modular exams, application process for UCAS, decisions and options for life after college).

Knowing the structure of the college and what is available helps us to empower them and overcome any barriers facilitating their access to useful support whether it be with dyslexia, careers advice, study resource centre or simply how to ask a teacher for help.

The value of talking to someone in confidence and being 'heard' can be underestimated - for the student it can be liberating and a way of managing a challenging situation. When a student gives such feedback as: 'they take time to listen', 'it enabled me to put things in perspective', 'I feel so much happier and confident', 'I was believed' and 'I have learned to trust in myself', it highlights how important and successful counselling has been for them. It is also clear how the experience has impacted on their self esteem, choices and future.

When a client tells you the counselling that they received, 'literally saved my life', the importance of being able to access it easily with as few barriers as possible cannot be ignored.