

‘How can we support students with mental health problems?’

In 2018 the BBC news reported that the number of students disclosing mental health problems had increased fivefold in a decade. Sir Anthony Seldon, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham and a campaigner on student well-being, said: "Student suicide rates and emotional distress levels could be reduced at university if we act differently."

Before the Covid pandemic, record numbers of university students were already seeking help for mental health problems. In 2018, universities were told by the government they needed to do more to support students' mental health. In Dec 2020, the BBC reported that "universities can access up to £256m funding to use towards mental health support in 2020/21 and the government has worked closely with the Office for Students, providing up to £3m to fund the mental health platform, Student Space, which aims to provide additional support outside of university and NHS services."

I have been increasingly aware of the number of students who seem to be struggling with what is commonly termed ‘mental health problems’ even before the recent pandemic. I am NOT a health care professional in terms of possessing the clinical skills to diagnose these symptoms nor do I wish to discuss the possible causes of these increasingly distressing claims. I am merely musing here about how we can support these young students even before they get to the stage of suffering some kind of distress. I am talking about the duty of care and a genuine human concern about another’s well-being.

What do students tell me?

I have been a keen practitioner of the SEJ as it has taught me so much about the importance of being fully engaged in the moment, paying full attention and acting from true genuine love and compassion for another. I see students looking less than their usual self, often lost in thoughts and just not looking ‘themselves’. I see students who are looking vulnerable, out of sorts and, despite their youth, not looking energetic but quite frankly worn down by life. I started asking them questions about how they were or simply saying hello.

I remember a particularly chirpy first year male student who was missing some classes, when I saw him I just called him by his name and he said ‘... oh you remembered my name..,’ as if he has never been called by it before. I wept as it struck me how a connection such as remembering their name means so much to them. This is NOT just for students but for anyone!!!

Another student, who has complex mental and physical challenges, simply looked at me more than once and said, “I just want to get better and be myself, I don't want to be taking medications for the rest of my life.” They also repeatedly told me that they didn't want counselling as they did NOT want to talk about the past over and over as it's all in the past. They were exasperated by their desire to move forward themselves but unable to do so as they didn't feel they were supported except being given medication.

So how can we support them?

I offer no solution as I am not an expert but what I am proposing here is this:

- Pay attention to them as an individual
- LISTEN to them with genuine interest
- See them as a whole person without illness/conditions
- Have genuine concern and love from one human being to another

Be there for them, act differently, be their support when they need you, is that too much to ask?

(I will be sharing with you further musing as to what the educational setting can do to support these young people in future blogs!)

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