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‘Persecutory Perfectionism: the key driver behind student mental health problems?’

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‘Improving Student Mental Health Outcomes’
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Setting the Scene

- Huge increase in students accessing University Counselling and Support Services in the UK. Increased expectations and pressures on those services.
- Increased awareness and promotion of mental health / psychological support for staff and students.
- Greater importance of ‘duty of care’ towards staff and students in terms of mental health support.

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Setting the Scene

- Greater publicity through media and campaigning charities increasing concern over student mental health problems
- Increased parental, institutional and government anxiety about student mental health problems
- Dangers of simplistic explanations and solutions for a complex issue
- Need to recognise that there is a continuum of mental health and stress levels. (Normal distressing life challenges to clinical symptoms/illness)
- Evidence of rates of mental illnesses, self harm and suicide. 2018 ONS report on student suicides.

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Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Importance of ‘joined up’ thinking and messages from the Institution as a whole
- Student Mental Health and Wellbeing is responsibility of whole institution not just the ‘Support Services’.
- Realistic messages of the challenges of higher education, transitions and realistic expectations (preparation and information before starting university)

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Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Importance of good, targeted, practical welfare training for front line staff across the institution (usually best done 'in house') http://learning.cwmt.org.uk - **Charlie Waller Memorial Trust E-Learning package for academic and non-academic staff to support students with mental health problems**

Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Developing innovative evidence-based therapeutic/clinical interventions
- Importance of balancing accessibility with the effectiveness of intervention
- Wide range of provision from preventative psycho-educational to more intensive therapeutic support for students with serious mental illness (often a combination of counselling, disability and medical services)

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Challenges of Supporting New Undergraduate Students: Transitions

- Transition to Higher Education
- Developmental challenges for young adults
- Attachment issues, why are people more vulnerable at times of transition?
- Factors influencing young adult mental wellbeing and psychology
- Culture of Anxiety? Students, Parents, Institutions, Media?
- Developmental and Life challenges of mature students

Persecutory Perfectionism

- Three Types of Perfectionism: Self, Other and Socially Prescribed

Work of Professor Andrew Hill and Dr Thomas Curran

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Persecutory Perfectionism

- ‘Committee Theory of Self’
- ‘Self’ as Chairperson of an unruly and conflicted committee
- Aim for improving mental health to achieve a balanced and democratic resolution
- Danger of a dominant voice taking over as ‘dictator’
- ‘Perfectionist Bully’ very aggressive and resistant to change

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Persecutory Perfectionism

- Feels like a helpful best friend but who has really become an enemy within
- This can make any idea of change feel like a threat
- ‘Helpful’ advice or interventions become ‘lost in translation’

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Persecutory Perfectionism

- Social Media
- Secondary Education: Result/Target Culture rather than experience
- Student Debt? Pressure to get exam, degree, job, etc. just to survive
- Neo-Liberal Economics and Competitive Individualism

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Key Factors and Context Affecting Young Adult Emotional Resilience

- Social media promoting unrealistic life expectations
- Transitional issues: different models of secondary to HE modes of learning
- Pressure on students to immediately get everything ‘right’. Real Learning is ‘getting things wrong, being confused, struggling, feeling unsettled managing uncertainty until knew knowledge emerges’ (Metaphor for becoming a mature adult)
- Transitional issues: Changes in parenting styles often giving mixed messages around separation and independence

Key Factors and Context Affecting Young Adult Emotional Resilience

- ‘Over-medicalising’ normal but distressing life challenges and difficulties
- Rigid expectations (students satisfaction based more on how reality meets their expectations rather than quality of experience itself)
- Increased uncertainty about economic/career future puts greater pressure to succeed academically
- Persecutory/unrealistic perfectionism: key driver for mental health difficulties and serious illness
- Catastrophizing difficulties and failure

Why is Emotional Resilience so Contentious?

- ‘All or nothing thinking’ around student mental health
- ‘Blaming students for their problems’
- Can it be seen as empowering or enabling?
- Many ‘mental health problems’ relating to feels of being overwhelmed by life
- Have young adults got the ‘internal resources’, self confidence and compassion to face life challenges
- Culture always beats strategy!

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Post Graduate Students: Specific Mental Health Needs

- Transition to PG education: Different educational and psychological tasks
- Transition from previous background: Life and developmental pressures
- Isolation and need for structure
- Range of projects/initiatives: HEFCE catalyst funding

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Key Challenges of Effectively Supporting Student Mental Wellbeing

- Major national initiatives: UUK ‘Steps for Changes’, ‘Suicide Safer’ and OfS ‘Student Charter on Mental Health’
- Mental Health Spectrum: Need for range of provision, services and interventions
- Wellbeing initiatives: Prevention or increase demand?
- Gap in provision between NHS provision and university services for students with complex needs

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Evaluation of Student Support Services and Wellbeing Interventions

- Evidence of effectiveness of wellbeing interventions? Example of ‘Fridays @4’ Maths Institute OU.
- Satisfaction surveys do not indicate effectiveness
- Examples such as MHFA and risk assessments
- Need for more quality research and data of effectiveness: clinical measures in counselling: BACP-UC research project
- Linking education progress and functioning as outcome measures?

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Thank you for Listening

Any Questions?

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