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EDUCATORS TRAINING DAY 1

Background

Once the Teachers' Focus Group results have been collated and studied, one might find that the concerns tend to centre around how to deal with crisis situations. A crisis approach may echo an attitude common in society at large that mental illness is a problem and one to be dealt with using what expediency one can. It would be very easy at this stage to fall into the trap of perpetuating stereotypes by focusing on extreme or dramatic scenarios in the workshop.

The purpose of the Training day is to broaden the agenda and invite to a deeper reflection on mental health in the educational context.

Key to this new approach is to bring the Educators in direct contact with a someone who has had self-experience of being mentally unwell in an educational setting.

The Open University's Teaching Toolkit, *Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties*¹ contains several case scenarios with commentaries that are mind- and agenda-broadening in regard to mental health attitudes. Some of these stories can be re-edited and re-cast in the context of an Irish Further Education Institute like your own to form the basis of a workshop that would be the second part of the morning. All the selected stories may be distributed to participants as a resource, though only two of them will be used as material for the workshops

Training Pack

The Training Pack supplied to the Educators consists of

- The timetable of the morning.
- Four Stories, each with 'Pause for Thought' questions, and informative commentary.
- Personal Action Planning Sheet
- Project Suggestion Sheet
- Evaluation Sheet

Workshops

Educators were divided into six groups. Each group was assigned one of two stories for thought and discussion: three groups with one story and three with the other.

They were allowed 30 minutes and asked to appoint a note taker to take notes for the project input and a rapporteur for the debriefing.

They were also asked to read the other story and notes before coming back so that they could relate to the reports on the discussion of that story.

After the Day

Sift the evaluation sheets and the Project Suggestions as background for the next Training Day.

¹ Open University (2000) *Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties*. Open Teaching Toolkit. Second edition.

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Timetable of the morning

Time	Item	Facilitator(s)	Content of Item
9.15 - 9.40 am	"The Mental Health in Education Project" PowerPoint presentation	Project Coordinator	
9.45- 10.15 am	"The experience of student mental health difficulties and current thinking on mental health"	A person with self-experience of mental illness and recovery in a student context	
10.15 – 10.30 am	Questions and Answers	Panel: • The person with self-experience • A Community Mental Health Development Officer • A Mental Health Rehabilitation professional	
10.30 – 11.00 am	Coffee Break		
11.00 – 11.35 am	Teacher Workshops (2 stories for discussion and feedback. Discussion questions will accompany each story. Insightful input will given by facilitator) The other stories with input will also be distributed as a resource	The above Panel with three other experienced Development and Rehabilitation professionals	Story 1: Miriam. Issues: setting boundaries, avoiding dependence Story 2: Paul. Issues: flexibility, empathy, not making assumptions Story 3: Angela. Issues: empathising, not making assumptions, focussing on the student Story 4: Simon. Issues: Assuring personal safety, avoiding misinterpretation of behaviour
11.40 – 12.10 pm	Debriefing		Airing (pointing to resolution) of issues raised. Was there anything new, different?
12.10 – 12.30 pm	Action Planning: 1) Personal development aims 2) Project Development suggestions 3) Evaluation	Project Coordinator	Guided by • Action Planning Sheet • Project Development Suggestion sheet • Evaluation Sheet

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Story 1: Issues: setting boundaries, avoiding dependence

Miriam

Miriam is a College student halfway through her second year in the College and is aiming for a certification next year. She has a fairly severe anxiety problem about which she told the College when she started her studies. Miriam was very lucky in her tutor in first year, Sara, with whom she built up a relationship of trust. Sara has been very patient and understanding and has not minded Miriam continuing to talk to her in second year when she needed advice. On occasion Sara has liased with Miriam's current tutor on her behalf when she was going through a bad patch.

Miriam has heard that Sara will be moving on from the College next year. She is very distressed at the news. Miriam had decided not to use the College Counselling service for counselling support as she always had Sara. The thought of loosing Sara is having a serious effect on Miriam's ability to concentrate. She is very tearful and is getting seriously behind. She feels she cannot talk to her present tutor and Sara is away on a month's training course in the UK. Miriam plucks up the courage to approach one of the teacher's on her course but as soon as she starts to talk ends up turning away in tears and embarrassment.

Pause for Thought

You might like to spend a few minutes thinking about the following questions before discussing them within your group.

How clear does the College define the role of tutor?

What factors might lie behind Sara becoming as involved with Miriam as she did?

What might be an appropriate response from the Class teacher?

How could the College ensure that Miriam is adequately supported throughout the remainder of her study

The tutor role

Of necessity, the tutor role has to be flexible in terms of responding to student needs. The College wants to take an individualized approach to students, assessing students' needs and attempting to meet them in an effective way. However, it is important that the tutor does not feel fully responsible for this. There are limits to the tutor role, which it can take new tutors some time to fully appreciate. For instance, it would have been entirely appropriate, even necessary, for Sara to discuss Miriam with the Counselling Service. Miriam's level of emotional need is high, and for her sake (as well as for the tutor's) support should have been shared in her first year and provided by someone other than the tutor in subsequent years.

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Contact times

It is important for tutors to be clear at the start of each course, about the times it is acceptable for students to contact them. We assume that Sara had done this. However, it is more difficult to set boundaries about the frequency of contact. So it was probably not until Miriam had already established a pattern of frequent contact, that Sara became aware of the difficulties this could cause, both for herself and for Miriam.

Extra support

Miriam had told the College of her anxiety problems. She was very lucky, to have a tutor who was prepared to offer the level of understanding and non-academic support that Sara was. It might have been possible to relate Miriam to a Counselling Service counsellor for extra support. Sara may not have appreciated this aspect of the College support services. For her own reasons, Sara might not have minded continuing to support Miriam; she probably gained a lot of satisfaction from the contact, and perhaps did not want it to diminish in subsequent years.

Dependence

Not all tutors would have the time or inclination to offer this level of extra support to a student or to remain in contact in this pro-active way. But could Sara have avoided getting into this situation? One strategy for trying to reduce the frequency of contact might have been always to end a conversation with Miriam with a pre-set, agreed time for the next meeting, which might have been a week or more ahead. This would reassure Miriam that Sara was available to her but would begin to set clearer boundaries about the level of availability. Sara was new to the College and might not have been familiar enough with the College support structures to know how to respond. She might therefore have been unsure about the appropriateness of discussing Miriam's difficulties with College authorities. If she had had on-going contact about Miriam with a senior member of staff, she might have been able to prevent Miriam's growing dependence on her, which, as it turned out, would be difficult to break.

Getting back

Miriam has notified her difficulties to the College. When the teacher she approached in the corridor enquired about her it would be clear from the records that she had 'learning needs'. The distress that Miriam was in might indicate the onset of a serious anxiety episode.

The Teacher should come back to Miriam, but perhaps not immediately. She probably needs time to calm down a little. She has made a very difficult move. It was made out of desperation, but it was a very important first step for Miriam to take, towards weaning herself off Sara. Whoever comes back to her needs to have time and patience to talk through the issues with Miriam.

Future support

It may be some time before the situation is entirely clear, as Miriam may be reluctant to reveal to someone new the extent of her anxiety problems or the strength of her bond with Sara. It is important to set up some on-going support for Miriam, to get her over this difficult time. This would preferably be from a named person whom Miriam could gradually begin to trust and remain in contact with for her final year. This might be a counsellor from the College Counselling Service. It would probably be appropriate to set up a meeting with this person at some point, once a rapport had been established.

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Academic progress

To help Miriam over the difficult time she is having and to prevent it from affecting her progress, she could be offered some extra academic support from either her tutor or another teacher on the course. She may well need an extension of more than three weeks on her current assignment. It is important for Miriam to get back on track in time for the exam period. It is vital that she re-focuses on her studies and not on her imminent loss of Sara for support. If the opportunity is available participation in a group sessions on exam anxiety might be of great help to Miriam.

(Adapted from "*Open Teaching Toolkit: Supporting Students with mental health difficulties*", (The Open University, Cambridge 2000)).

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Story 2: Issues: flexibility, empathy, not making assumptions

Paul

Paul describes himself as having a 'recurrent serious depressive illness' that he has had to live with for some years, and about which he told the College when he began his study. He lives with his partner, whom he met a couple of years into his difficulties. He manages life pretty well between episodes, but knows that he needs to go into hospital when he gets bad, usually for a couple of months. He has managed to study successfully in the College for a year without a serious episode. It is two years since his last episode. This is his longest period without going into hospital since his difficulties began in his late teens.

Paul is a couple of months into the course, and has got good grades on his first two assignments, when he experiences a family trauma. His sister, to whom he is very close, attempts suicide. He has a period of intense hospital visiting followed by her coming to stay with him for a while. He finds all this extremely stressful and becomes panicky, especially at night. He rings his tutor and says that he might have to go into hospital for a while. He asks for an open-ended extension on his next assignment. His tutor is taken aback and says that he doesn't think that this is possible. Paul is very angry.

Pause for Thought

You might like to spend a few minutes thinking about the following questions before discussing them within your group.

How clear does the College define the role of tutor?

What factors might lie behind Sara becoming as involved with Miriam as she did?

What might be an appropriate response from the Class teacher?

How could the College ensure that Miriam is adequately supported throughout the remainder of her study?

Open-ended extension

In his panic, Paul may have used the phrase 'open-ended extension' without thinking. At the moment, he can probably see nothing but bleakness in the immediate future, and cannot imagine a time when he will be able to concentrate again. It may have been difficult for the tutor to explore with Paul exactly what was going on, because of Paul's distress. As a result, the tutor may have taken Paul's request rather too literally and responded a little hastily.

The next step

It would be helpful at this point for Paul's tutor to discuss the matter with someone on the

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Staff who knows more about Paul's situation, perhaps before getting back to him. It isn't possible at this stage to be sure what Paul will be needing over the next few months, but it is important to keep options open to him while being clear about the implications. He needs to be able to go into hospital without compounding his anxieties with worry about his study. He may need to speak with someone while in hospital.

Options

If Paul is only out of action for a few weeks, he may well be able to pick up the threads of his course and continue for the rest of the year with no further difficulties. He would, of course, need an extension on the next assignment and possibly on the one after that. However, he may be in hospital for a couple of months. If he is unable to study while in hospital, then on returning home, he will need to discuss with his tutor the best strategy for the future. Paul may prefer this to dropping out completely. It may give him a useful focus after coming out of hospital.

It would be helpful to bear in mind that Paul is likely to be emotionally fragile on discharge from hospital. So the last thing he will want on returning home, is extra stress from a seemingly impossible task. If catching up is really going to be counter-productive in terms of Paul's mental health, then he might be best advised to consider withdrawing from the course and starting it again next year. If he is in hospital for more than a couple of months, then this would almost certainly be the recommended course of action.

Paul's needs

It is important not to make assumptions about what is best for Paul at any stage. He will know better than anyone how he is feeling, and his tutor and any staff who may speak with him, either while he is in hospital or when he returns home, need to recognize this and take seriously Paul's assessment of what is possible.

Future support

Paul should have had extra counselling support from the College. A student who discloses a 'serious depressive illness' on registering, needs to know that there is someone to whom they can turn at any time during their study with the College. If this extra support is actually in place, then Paul's tutor will need to liaise with the counsellor. It may be appropriate for the counsellor to visit Paul in hospital; it depends on Paul's needs.

If this extra support is not already in place, then now is the time to set it up. It will be reassuring to Paul to have extra support that will span his remaining years with the College. This will also be of help to Paul's tutors in future years. The counsellor can put them in the picture about Paul and the need for flexibility, so that any request such as the one that seemed to take Paul's current tutor by surprise, can be accommodated more smoothly.

Wider issues

It may be possible for some students to 'stretch' modular courses over more than one year. If the student can carry over the credit for the assignments completed, this would ease the pressure in the second year.

(Adapted from "Open Teaching Toolkit: Supporting Students with mental health difficulties", (The Open University, Cambridge 2000)).

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Story 3: Issues: Assuring personal safety, avoiding misinterpretation of behaviour

Simon

Simon attends classes regularly and seems to be engaging with the class activities and course material. In the middle of the last class of the day Simon suddenly picked up his bag and walked out of the room, leaving an A4 pad behind on his desk. When she was tidying up the room after the class had gone the teacher picked up the pad intending to put it away for Simon. She couldn't help but notice that the pad was covered in drawings of and phrases about angels. Just then Simon suddenly reappeared. The teacher felt uneasy and wasn't sure how to respond.

Pause for Thought

You might like to spend a few minutes thinking about the following questions before discussing them within your group

What possible anxieties might be going through the teacher's mind at this point?

What are the immediate issues?

What are the longer-term issues?

Misinterpretation of behaviour

The teacher may well have been very surprised by what she had noticed and be questioning her own abilities to respond. She had been convinced that Simon was engaging with the class work when, in fact, he wasn't. She may be thinking that she has badly let him down. She may be feeling very foolish. So, one longer-term issue is whether Simon was distracted just on this occasion or is not engaging with the course. The tutor will have more of a sense of this when Simon's next piece of work is submitted, but there may be a need for her to explore this with him sooner than that, for her own peace of mind. She may not have the time immediately after the class; so she could make a general enquiry about how the course was going, in a day or two. There is, of course, no need at all to refer to what was on his pad.

Possible explanations

There is the possibility that Simon's mind was on other things for perfectly ordinary reasons. He might have been distracted by something that had happened in his life. He might have been under the influence of alcohol or illicit substances. He might, however, be experiencing longer-term distress, for some reason. His concentration may have been seriously disturbed by his mental state. Whatever the cause of his non-engagement with the class, he is likely to appreciate a conversation, and it is possible that he may throw some light on his situation during the conversation.

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If his distress seems likely to present a major difficulty, then it might be a good idea for the tutor to discuss the matter with Simon and with the Counselling Service. If it seems more of a temporary state, then some extra time to produce the next assignment might be helpful to Simon.

Personal safety

Some parts of the College are minimally used in the evenings and at the end of a late class, when most people have left the building, they can feel empty, isolating and sometimes a little threatening. The class room might be some way from the reception area, and there might be no security staff in evidence. It is possible that Simon's tutor was feeling ill-at-ease and a little frightened by Simon's sudden reappearance in such surroundings. The immediate issue, if this is the case, is to ensure her own safety by observing the common-sense guidelines for personal safety that the College recommends at all times. The tutor needs to get herself to a place that feels less threatening to her. It would be perfectly appropriate for her to say to Simon that she is in a hurry and needs to rush off. Another approach might be to say that she is going to reception and that if he wants a word, she would be happy to speak to him there. He may not actually want to talk; he may simply be returning for his notebook.

(Adapted from "Open Teaching Toolkit: Supporting Students with mental health difficulties", (The Open University, Cambridge 2000)).

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Story 4: Issues: empathising, not making assumptions, focussing on the student

Angela

Angela has just started in College. She appears to be a lively member of the class and contributes a lot to discussions. However after a week, two students from the class go to talk to the Class tutor during lunch break.

They are slightly alarmed by some of the things that Angela said in the morning tutorial and by the manner in which she said them. They describe Angela as highly animated, loud and talking very fast about various things that were not really connected to the course material. Some of the things she said were quite bizarre. Some of the other students found this amusing, but these two who knew her some years ago in school and are quite concerned about her.

They say that she is known to be drinking a lot, staying up until all hours and engaging in loud shouting matches at home.

Pause for Thought

You might like to spend a few minutes thinking about the following questions before discussing them within your group

What are your concerns about Angela?

How should the tutor respond to the two students?

What action should be taken?

What issues does Angela's situation raise?

Concerns

Starting College can be extremely stressful for students and stress can manifest itself in various ways. Students sometimes become tearful or withdrawn and may stop participating in group sessions. Sometimes, stress manifests itself in aggressive behaviour that is born of high anxiety and eventually settles down. Occasionally, students try to handle their stress with alcohol. Sometimes, in an intense environment, stress can trigger mental health difficulties that the student had been managing perfectly well until then. The College may not have been informed of these difficulties. And sometimes, mental health difficulties can be triggered for the first time by going to College. The tutor may have concerns that this is the case with Angela.

Fellow students

The students may be feeling embarrassed about talking with the tutor. They may need reassurance that they did the right thing. They may also be feeling out of their depth with Angela and seeking permission to detach themselves from the situation. It is important

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that the tutor outlines for them any proposed action and leaves them feeling comfortable that the matter is being taken seriously.

Strategy

It is important that the tutor talks with Angela. This may involve seeking her out and creating an opportunity for an informal chat. It must be established whether Angela is just having a really good week and being somewhat 'over the top' in her behaviour, or there is a fairly urgent need of help. It may simply be that Angela needs to take a break and ensure she gets some rest. Other staff may need to be alerted to the tutor's concerns and asked to speak informally with the tutor about contact with Angela that they have had. It is vital not to lose touch with common sense. A lot of things that appear bizarre can have perfectly simple explanations.

Options

In the event of Angela acknowledging that she is find the course very stressful, she needs to know that reapplying next year is an option open to her, if she thinks that might be for the best. If her behaviour becomes more bizarre and disturbing to others, the tutor (with a colleague) needs to talk with Angela about this and point out the effect she is having on other students. She may or may not appreciate this, and may or may not respond to the requests. In extreme circumstances and if the effect on others continues to be disturbing, the tutor or the school head would have to warn Angela that disciplinary proceedings might have to be taken.

Angela may be experiencing auditory hallucinations (voices), which could explain the bizarre things she is saying. This need not necessarily be a problem. Many people who hear voices manage them perfectly well.

However, it is as well to be aware of the very slight possibility that Angela's behaviour may be rooted in fairly serious mental health difficulties and she might be beginning to lose touch with reality. If it looks as though this might be happening, it is important for the tutor to contact the medical services, with Angela's agreement. This would be the school GP in the first instance, or the social worker for the area. Certainly, advising her to take herself away from the stressful environment of college might be best for her

Angela's future study

If it transpires that Angela does have a mental health difficulty that she has not told the College about, it would be helpful if she were to agree to this information being conveyed to the College Support Officer. This would enable some extra counselling support to be set up for her, for the remainder of her study

(Adapted from "Open Teaching Toolkit: Supporting Students with mental health difficulties", (The Open University, Cambridge 2000)).

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Mental Health in Education Project Personal Action Planning

First Training Day

Channelling the energy of the morning into something definite

In the Domain/Area of ...	I want to ...	To achieve this I will ...
My own knowledge and attitudes about mental health		
My dealing with students		
Contributing to College Policy development		

Signed:

Date:

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Mental Health in Education Project

First Training Day

Project Development Suggestions

The following occurs to me in regard to the direction and development of the Mental Health in Education Project:
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Signed:

Date:

