

How can we better support male students with their mental health?

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How can we better support male students with their mental health?

'I think one of the natural aspects of being a man kind of can't coexist with the idea of looking for support.'

April is stress awareness month. We all experience stress at some point in our lives, and hopefully have support we can access through friends, family, the workplace or our communities. But there is a perception that men should be invulnerable and therefore not be in need of support, and this can exacerbate stress for our male students. Being classified as 'privileged', and a beneficiary of a patriarchal society can, for some male students, make seeking support feel incompatible with their identity.

What do we know?

My recent research has shown that although often not presenting the same symptoms as females, we know that male students certainly experience mental ill-health. Student mental ill-health may be caused or made worse by isolation, loneliness, stress. For male students in particular, the pressures and expectations of an often narrowly conceptualised, masculine identity - alongside a perception of privileged status - make it hard for them to accept they need emotional support.

We also know that men can experience mental ill-health differently from women: they are less likely to talk about emotional issues with peers; less likely to identify symptoms of mental ill-health; and less likely to seek formal support. And because mental ill-health may manifest differently and have different causes for men, they may need different types of support. Individualised support can be difficult for universities to provide, but training in male specific wellbeing counselling, and an openness to acknowledge that the needs of male students may be different from those of females, would be a good place to start. Gender sensitive support could be offered. This might entail offering a choice when it comes to the gender of the wellbeing-practitioner, understanding that masculine identities are varied and wide-ranging, and where possible, tailoring support for the male students' lived experience, through for example, person centred approaches.

And finally, we know that male students need more encouragement to seek formal support. Although work to normalize and remove the stigma of mental ill-health in men is happening, more needs to be done. Male students need to feel that they, as men, are permitted and justified in experiencing mental ill-health, and that seeking support is an act of self-care and strength building. Males need to see other males talking about their wellbeing and mental health, and this being accepted. They need to be pointed in the direction of mental health support often and by people they trust and respect. For example, if lecturers, particularly male lecturers, could act as verbal sign-posters to wellbeing support periodically at the start of lectures, this would help to embed the

message that any student, male or female, can develop mental ill-health, and that it is okay to seek the support available at the university.

What are we doing at SHU?

Firstly, I have been working with Jozef Sen (Lead Wellbeing Practitioner at SHU) to [research ethnic minority male students' views of wellbeing support here at SHU](#).

Second, we have established a '[Talk Club](#)' at SHU. Talk Club is a peer led space for male students to attend and focus on their personal wellbeing. The evaluation is underway and is being supported by two student researchers.

SHU is providing 'Look after your mates' training to support students in spotting and supporting with mental ill-health for their friends. In addition, SHU is working on developing compassionate communication with students, and training for frontline staff to ensure students are signposted to the correct areas for the support they need.

But still more should be done to reach out to men. At a time where we are rightly focussing on equity and diversity, we must ensure we keep an understanding of the potential harm caused by assumptions of innate privilege based on the male gender and ensure our male students do not become a forgotten demographic when it comes to mental health support.

Claire Wolstenholme is a Senior lecturer (seconded to) Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research (STEER). Her current research focus is on male students' mental health.

References

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