

How a peer support group is supporting male students' mental health and wellbeing at Hallam

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Citation:

WOLSTENHOLME, Claire (2025). How a peer support group is supporting male students' mental health and wellbeing at Hallam. Sheffield Institute of Education. [Other]

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Title: *'We just sit and share the deepest things going on in our head'*. How a peer support group is supporting male students' mental health and wellbeing at Hallam.

It's stress awareness month again. In April last year, I wrote about the need to better support our male students with stress and mental ill-health, noting their difficulties in sharing emotions and seeking support where needed. This year I want to foreground an initiative that's making a difference to this demographic at Hallam.

Talk Clubs – peer support for men

Talk Club is a charity which was set up after the founders' male friend was lost through suicide. The premise is a men's talk and listen support group, based around asking the question, 'How are you out of ten?'

Peer support can be a positive approach for male students, offering an informal way to meet others and have conversations about experiences and feelings that might otherwise never happen. Attendees can experience a reduction in their sense of isolation in two ways. Firstly, Talk Club provides regular socialisation and therefore an opportunity to make new connections, and crucially Talk club enables a sense of 'experiential similarity'. Hearing other men describe how they feel relative to their experiences can provide men with a normalisation of their emotions, which reduces any stigma they may have felt, particularly around mental ill-health. The lack of power dynamics, often inevitable with more formal support, is enabling for men, and there is evidence that the male-only space provides psychological safety, which allows deeper conversations to happen. Research suggests that peer support can also leverage men's natural tendency for problem-solving and assisting others, ultimately enhancing their own wellbeing.

The Hallam Talk Club

Jozef Sen (Hallam's lead wellbeing practitioner) and I established a weekly SHU Talk Club for our self-identifying male students in January 2024. Three male student peer supporters deemed 'Captains', led the group for the academic year and have since been succeeded by three new captains for the 24/25 academic year.

A key component of the SHU Talk Club is the Captains being both peer facilitators and active participants. In this dual role, the captains model vulnerability through their openness to sharing their experiences thoughts and emotions with the group.

Attendees in turn experience a validation of their own feelings, allowing them the confidence to discuss these in the group, and if necessary, seek more formal support.

Early positive outcomes

[A small-scale evaluation](#) of the Hallam Talk Club, focussing on the captains as peer facilitators, revealed a number of positive outcomes, including improved relationships, a validation of interests and skills development. The Captains acts of intentional

‘emotional risk-taking’, by being open in Talk Club sessions, led them to more genuine and authentic interactions in everyday life, which they described as enhancing existing relationships and supporting relationship development. The Captains also felt a community developing through the weekly Talk Club sessions, through getting to know attendees and organising a ‘run and talk’ session.

Factors seen as enabling to the Captains were the Talk Club training alongside further ‘Look after your mates’ training, and vitally, the support of the lead wellbeing practitioner, who provided ongoing support to the captains to navigate their role, and a psychologically safe space to reflect and discuss issues arising in sessions.

Impacts and looking forward

Supporting community building and an [increased sense of belonging for students](#) is of great importance to universities, particularly in the current HE climate. Our findings related to reducing loneliness, isolation and developing feelings of belonging highlight what can be achieved in a highly cost-effective way to support male students, or indeed other demographics with their mental health needs. Talk Clubs could begin to help redefine support seeking and preventative measures for men as a mental strength.

Other initiatives at Hallam, such as [Calm Spaces](#) have been launched for staff and students. We plan to extend the research through an evaluation focussed on participants experiences in the next academic year. The university of Sheffield are keen to utilise the Hallam Talk Club for their own male students to attend, and we have had conversations with colleagues at York St John about setting up a Talk Club at their institution.

Email or follow us on LinkedIn for more information and to keep up to date with progress.