WELL-BEING IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

By

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Well–Being in the FET Environment

Positive mental health is of fundamental importance for all people, including teaching staff and learners.

What is mental health?

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as:

> A state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.
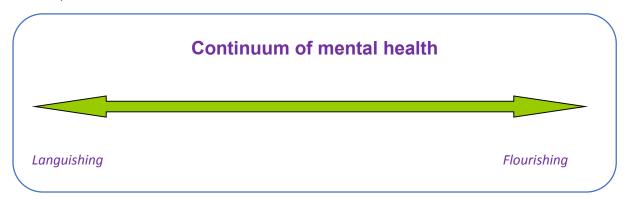
Another definition from www.spunout.ie, an Irish organisation promoting mental health in young people, is:

> The balance between all aspects of life–social, physical, spiritual and emotional ... Mental health is far more than the absence of mental illness and has to do with many aspects of our lives including how we feel about ourselves, how we feel about others and how we are able to meet the demands of life.

The emphasis in these definitions is on being able to cope with life's inevitable difficulties; on _resilience_ rather than happiness.

Continuum of mental health

It is helpful to view mental health as a continuum:

Continuum of mental health

Languishing   _Flourishing_

None of us stays in the same position on the continuum all our lives. We all experience lows, anxieties and difficult phases as well as times when we are feeling great. There is no dividing line between the 'mentally ill' and the rest of us; between 'them' and 'us', as has been perceived to be the case in the past.

Some facts and figures

About one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year (World Health Organisation)

Over 320,000 adults attend their GP for mental health problems each year (Irish Health Research Board)

People in unskilled groups are four times more likely to be admitted to psychiatric hospital than professional groups (Irish Health Research Board)

Nationally, 20 – 25% of disability payments are on mental health grounds (Department of Social Protection)

Stigma and Disclosure

The above statistics imply that it is likely there will be some learners with mental health problems in every FE class group. Many of these learners will not have disclosed their problems because of the stigma which still clings to mental health difficulties.

Even though there is now greater public awareness of mental health problems, they are still ranked at or near the bottom with regard to public acceptance of difference. Surveys by the National Disability Authority repeatedly find that people are relatively less comfortable having a work colleague or neighbour with mental health difficulties than with other disabilities. Another survey (Ahead) found that 63% of people with mental health problems would not tell their employer.

It is likely that a significant percentage of learners with mental health difficulties do not disclose this on enrolment in further education. Applicants can be encouraged to disclose through the use of equality-based procedures emphasising inclusion and support in publicity material, application forms and interviews.

Recovery

The **Recovery Model** is now advocated in mental health services around the world, including Ireland. Recovery is not the same as 'cure'. It is about claiming/reclaiming a socially valued lifestyle and social empowerment rather than becoming 'symptom-free'. It means taking control of one's life rather than being a passive 'patient'. Key factors in recovery are

- o Hope,
- o Empowerment and
- o Social connectedness.

All of which may be developed through participation in education. There is no single path to recovery, but, for some people, the opportunity to engage in education and learning can be a powerful way of (re)gaining autonomy, meaning and hope.

Support

Just as there is no such person as a typical learner, neither is there any such person as a typical learner with mental health problems. Learners with mental health difficulties experience the same range of barriers to learning as other learners. However they may experience some particular challenges. When people have been part of the mental health system over time, or when they have experienced processes of labelling and diagnosis, their **self-confidence** may be eroded. Their social stamina may decline as the result of isolation, particularly if they have spent time in hospitals or other institutions. Medication may interfere with their concentration, memory and sleep patterns. Resulting difficulties may include:

➢ becoming anxious more quickly than others
➢ becoming distressed by certain stimuli such as noise
➢ becoming tired much more quickly than others
➢ lacking in confidence
➢ underestimation of their abilities by themselves and others

As learners settle into the course they begin to get a better sense of what is required of them and what they can expect. Some perceived barriers may disappear while others may crop up. Ongoing support will enable the learner to identify any new barriers to learning and to access support to deal with them. If you can provide an environment where support is easy to access, and learners know that their concerns will be taken seriously, then they are more likely to access support early rather than when the problem is bigger and they are considering withdrawing.

Support is a continuous process - it doesn't just happen at the beginning of the course. Support needs should be reviewed regularly in negotiation with the learner(s).

Universal design

Universal Design is defined as design which 'may be accessed, understood and used to the greatest practicable extent … without the need for adaptation, modification, assistive devices or specialised solutions, by persons of any age or size or having any particular physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual ability or disability.' (Disability Act, 2005)

Design which facilitates people with disabilities can actually improve function for everyone. For example, providing notes, e.g., on Moodle, while helpful for all learners, provides support for those with mental health or other difficulties, who may miss some classes or may find concentration particularly difficult - a good example of Universal Design. The same applies to most of the suggestions for support listed below.

Building up good policies and procedures to promote inclusion of learners with mental health difficulties will improve the experience of adult learners in general as well as developing the quality and equality of the education service. **Good practice in relation to learners with mental health problems is simply good education practice.**

Some suggestions for supporting learning

> **Learners with mental health difficulties report that encouraging and positive attitudes from staff are the most important support**

There is funding available from the Higher Education Authority National Access Office for mentoring/ learning support for learners at levels 5 and 6 with mental health difficulties (psychiatrist's report required, see HEA website www.hea.ie).

What teaching staff can do

- Provide time and non-threatening activities to settle learners in and enable them to start to get to know one another
- Ensure that learners know where to find things, where to get help and support and what will be expected of them
- Spend time agreeing some group ground rules to promote respect for diversity within the group, respect for everybody's right to learn, etc.
- Challenge and deal with any negative or discriminatory comments or reactions of other learners or staff
- Support organisation of work and time management including providing study skills support/ tools e.g. planning structure, revision timetables
- Create a climate in which the learners' views and preferences can be expressed
- Ensure that learners experience some success straight away
- Help learners recognise their achievements
- Provide positive and encouraging feedback
- Show where progress is being made
- Emphasise the positive
- Ensure you never humiliate or embarrass any learner
- Be friendly and interested
- Find out what the learner wants to get out of the learning experience and allow them to set their own targets
- Break large tasks into smaller steps if this is necessary
- Ensure that a variety of media and of teaching/learning styles are available
- Provide helpful comments on assignments and suggest ways in which improvements could be made
- Provide notes, e.g. on Moodle
- Allow learner to sit near door/leave room for a break if feeling very anxious/claustrophobic

Some suggestions for supporting learning (continued)

What co-ordinators can do

- mentoring/learning support – support in planning and organising work, study skills, time management
- regular review times with co-ordinator/resource person/guidance counsellor
- peer support – linking learners/study buddies/self-help groups
- phone call from co-ordinator when absent for a few days
- flexibility re time off for medical/counselling appointments
- ensure that the learner knows how co-ordinator can be contacted if problems arise and that s/he will respond appropriately
- help to negotiate leave of absence/part-time attendance/extension of course
- support and liaison to organise successful return to course

Possible modifications to assessment

- alternatives to group work assignments
- extension of assignment deadlines
- extra time/separate room in examinations

Useful Resources

Aware Provides support & information for people who experience depression, anxiety or mood disorder and their concerned loved ones www.aware.ie: 1890 303302

Bodywhys (The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland) Support for people affected by eating disorders www.bodywhys.ie HELPLINE 1890 200 444

Grow Peer support and mutual-aid organisation for recovery from, and prevention of, serious mental illness www.grow.ie 1890 474 474

Headstrong Organisation supporting young people's mental health www.headstrong.ie

Mental Health Ireland's website is an information and signposting resource www.mentalhealthireland.ie

Mental Health Matters for FE Teachers Toolkit Free download on http://www.niace.org.uk

Mental Health in Further Education (**MHFE**) E-network for anyone who has an interest in mental health and adult learning www.mhfe.org.uk

Mental Health Services Website giving information on HSE mental health services across Ireland http://www.hse.ie/eng/

Pieta House Free, therapeutic approach to people who are in suicidal distress and those who engage in self-harm www.pieta.ie

Recovery International Ireland Self-help group for improved mental health and recovery from nervous symptoms www.recovery-inc-ireland.ie 01 6260775

Samaritans Confidential emotional support service www.samaritans.org
 116 123 (Freephone)

Shine Dedicated to upholding the rights and addressing the needs of all those affected by enduring mental illness including, but not exclusively, schizophrenia, schizo-affective disorder and bi-polar disorder www.shineonline.ie HELPLINE 1890 621631

Spunout.ie www.spunout.ie Irish youth information website which aims to educate and inform about the importance of holistic wellbeing

Your Mental Health HSE website with information on mental health, supports and services www.yourmentalhealth.ie