

Psychological Distress in the UK Student Population:

Prevalence, Timing and
Accessing Support

Final research findings

The research

This research was conducted by YouthSight on behalf of Nightline Association between 25–30 April 2013. The sample consisted of 1000 questionnaires being completed by full-time students representative of the UK undergraduate population in terms of gender, year of study and university type.

Context

Nightline Association (www.nightline.ac.uk) is a student-led charity that provides support to 36 Nightlines covering over 90 universities and colleges in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Nightlines provide an anonymous and confidential through-the-night listening and information service which is managed and delivered by students for students during term time. Nightlines are open when other university welfare services are usually closed.

As the leading provider of an out-of-hours support service for students, it is essential that Nightlines understand the level and variety of psychological distress in the student population so that they can ensure their volunteers have the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to deal with whatever student callers bring.

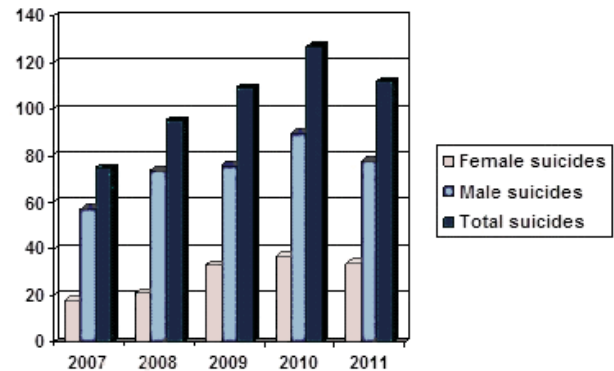
Pre-existing research

Mental health problems often only make their first appearance in late adolescence or young adulthood¹ and students have been identified as having increased mental health symptoms compared with age matched controls². Young people (16–24 years) are more likely to attempt suicide than those in older age groups³. Indeed deliberate self-harm – a risk factor in suicide – is more prevalent amongst young people, especially women⁴. In 2012 data from the Office for National Statistics revealed a 49% increase in student suicides between the years 2007–2011. Whilst male student suicides were up 36%, female student suicides almost doubled in the same period from 18 in 2007 to 34 in 2011⁵.

“I am so lonely here. I can go whole days without seeing or speaking to a single person”

“I’m not ready to move to university. I don’t think I can cope with the stress of change”

Chart to show deaths by suicide for students aged 18 and above, 2007–2011, Office for National Statistics



A previous study by the suicide prevention charity Papyrus⁶ found peer support to be beneficial for young people – especially where peers have had similar life experiences to those they support. It concluded that support delivered out-of-hours by student volunteers may be more appealing and accessible to students at risk of suicide.

Current research: Psychological Distress in the UK Student Population

Methodology

The sample for this research was selected from the YouthSight Student Panel. The Student Omnibus interviews a UK representative sample of 1,000 full-time undergraduate students in terms of gender, year of study (1, 2, 3+) and university type (Russell Group, other Old universities, New universities, other HEIs). Targets for the quotas were acquired using data supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The questions were supplied by Nightline Association which were then scripted and hosted by YouthSight. Student Panel members receive £1 in Amazon vouchers.

Quantitative findings:

Prevalence

YouthSight’s research found that psychological distress including depression, anxiety, and stress is prevalent in the UK’s student population. The research found 75% had personally experienced psychological distress whilst at university: 65% stress; 43% anxiety, loneliness, feelings of not being able to cope; 1/3 depression or homesickness; 29% worried about not fitting in; and 1 in 12 students had experienced suicidal

1 Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2011). *Mental health of students in higher education*. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

2 Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2003). *Mental health of students in higher education*. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

3 Meltzer, H. (2002). *Non-fatal suicidal behaviour amongst adults aged 16–74 in Great Britain 2000*. London: ONS

4 Hawton, K., Simkin, S., Rue, J., Haw, C., Barbour, A., Clements, A. et al. (2002). Suicide in female nurses in England and Wales, *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 239–250.

5 Office for National Statistics. (2012). *Deaths by suicide for students aged 18 and above, 2007–2011*. Available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/search/index.html?newquery=SUICIDE+STUDENT>

6 Papyrus. (2007). *Responses and prevention in student suicide study*. University of Central Lancashire: Department of Social Work.

thoughts – nearly half of which were based in the Midlands or Scotland.

The survey also found that female students were significantly more likely than male students to experience stress, anxiety, homesickness and feelings of not being able to cope.

Timing

Around 1/3 of the students who had experienced psychological distress whilst at university explicitly recalled it being at night – compared to only 12% explicitly recalling psychological distress during the day. Note university welfare services are usually closed at night.

Accessing Support

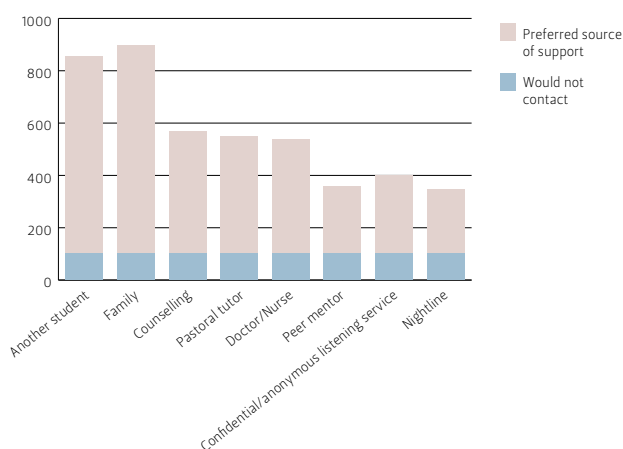
Of those who had experienced psychological distress whilst at university, around 1/3 accessed support with students preferring to talk to another student about their problems rather than a university counsellor or pastoral tutor. Indeed nearly as many students turned to another student for support (54%) as their family (60%). Conversely 1 in 4 accessed support from a university counsellor and 1 in 5 accessed support from their pastoral tutor.

The survey also found that female students were significantly more likely to access support than male students and that students in their third year and beyond were significantly more likely to access support than first or second year students.

Accessing Support in the Future

When asked who students would turn to should they experience psychological distress in the future, another student and family were stated more often by more students as a preferred future source of support (86-90%). This was followed by the medical profession, pastoral tutors and counsellors (54-57%) and Nightline, peer mentors or a confidential listening service (35-40%).

Preferred sources of support in the future



After receiving a brief explanation of what Nightline does, 25% of students surveyed stated they would be likely to use the service in the future for information and 20% stated they would be likely to use the service to talk to someone about a problem in the future.

Factors which would deter students from using Nightline for information included: other people's problems are worse than mine; I'll never need to; I'd be too embarrassed.

Factors which would deter students from using Nightline to talk to someone about a problem included: other people's problems are worse than mine; I'd be too embarrassed; I'd be too nervous.

Female students were significantly more likely than male students to state that they would be too embarrassed to use Nightline for information and too embarrassed or too nervous to use Nightline to talk to someone about a problem.

Qualitative findings

All respondents were given the opportunity to comment on Nightline and its services.

159 respondents stated that they thought Nightline was "a great idea"; 59 thought Nightline services needed to be advertised better; 13 thought Nightline should be available in more locations; and 6 suggested that Nightlines better advertise the training and quality of their volunteers.

There was acknowledgement that Nightline may be useful to students feeling lonely or struggling to adjust to university life although some respondents thought Nightline may not be useful due to its non-advisory and non-directional ethos.

"Very good service - incredibly friendly volunteers who genuinely seem to care without judging or appearing to want to gossip about your experiences. Very possibly the only reason a few of my friends are still with us"

Outcome

In response to the prevalence of psychological distress in the student population and in keeping with our vision to have fewer students die by suicide, Nightline Association is embracing the new *Connecting with People*⁷ evidence-based Suicide Awareness and Emotional Resilience training for its student volunteers. This training will allow Nightline volunteers to deal more competently and confidently with student callers – including those expressing suicidal thoughts whilst at the same time address their own emotional resilience in dealing with difficult calls.

The trust funds supporting this initiative are: The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust (cwmt.org.uk); The Matthew Elvidge Trust (thematthewelvidgetrust.com); and the James Wentworth Stanley Memorial Fund (jwsmf.org).

“The YouthSight evidence highlights what university student services have been aware of for some time, that students prefer to turn to their peers, friends or relatives as the first port of call, rather than those in formal pastoral roles. Nightline is on the front line in terms of offering trained student support for mental ill health or emotional problems, and the MWBHE working group is delighted to include a Nightline member, so that we can benefit from their unique perspective”.

Ruth Caleb,
Chair, Mental Well Being in Higher Education Forum



“Connecting with People is delighted to be collaborating with Nightline to empower students. Ever since being a student I have known the invaluable support they provide. Our mission is to ensure that anyone who has suicidal thoughts can recognise that they need help but also that those they confide in respond with compassion and constructive help. By training the Nightline volunteers we know that they will be able to offer their support more confidently and safely. This will help prevent unnecessary loss of promising lives. Connecting with People is an innovative, evidence based, peer reviewed training programme that is being successfully rolled out across the UK”.

Dr. Alys Coles-King, Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist
Developed Connecting with People training

