Enhancing Student Mental Health: Evidence to Practice

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What do we mean by **Enhancing Student Mental Health**?

- Concerned with strengthening protective factors for good mental health
- Aim is to increase the wellbeing and resilience of student population
- Operates at three levels:
  - Strengthening individuals
  - Strengthening communities
  - Reducing structural barriers to mental health at societal level
- Mental wellbeing - associated with better physical health, positive interpersonal relationships and socially healthier societies
  - Positive impact on attainment
  - Positive impact on performance at work
Universal interventions to improve students’ mental health and wellbeing:

- Cognitive-behavioural therapy interventions
- Mindfulness based intervention
- Psychoeducational interventions

Skills training interventions effective in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, general psychological distress and improving social-emotional skills

- Skills training interventions with supervised practice
  (Mean effect 0.45 vs 0.11 without supervised practice)

Gaps in evidence base: Scale up and sustainability

Conley et al., 2015; Winzer et al., 2018; Worsley et al., 2022
• **Targeted interventions** for at-risk higher education students with subclinical levels of depression, anxiety, distress

• Interventions effective in reducing symptoms at post intervention (Mean effect: 0.49).
  • Type of presenting problem moderated intervention effect.
  • Briefer programmes were as effective as longer ones (Conley et al., 2017)

• **Technology delivered interventions** effective in enhancing student outcomes
  • Universal interventions: Mean effect = 0.19
  • Targeted interventions: Mean effect = 0.37
  • Better outcomes with access to support (face to face or online) (Conley et al., 2016)
Strengthening Individuals: Evidence to Practice

- HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing & National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) & School of Veterinary Medicine UCD
- Development of universal and targeted mental health promotion and suicide prevention supports.
- Delivered as part of Professional Growth Module within 5 year degree
• **Year 1: Minding your Wellbeing Programme** for first year veterinary students

• N = 20 facilitators trained

• Delivered Sept – Oct 2023 in groups of approx. 15 students.

• Process evaluation of programme (N = 72 participants)
  - Significant increase in self-care & positive mental health attitudes
  - Recommended need for further adaptation
  - **Next phase**: refinement co-development with students and staff, further testing, delivery model across higher education
Strengthening Communities: Developing an evidence base

- Need for ‘whole university approach’ to promote social connection, inclusion and belonging
  - Interpersonal difficulties (loneliness, lack of social support) one of most common sources of distress for college students
  - Potential role of **Social Prescribing** in addressing this need at “whole university” level
**Social Prescribing**: way of connecting individuals with non-clinical services and supports in the community which can improve their mental health and wellbeing.
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- Community supports:
  - Connecting with others – arts, sports, volunteering group
  - Support in relation to finance, housing, education
  - Step down support
• Ideal setting for Social Prescribing Model
  • Diverse range of services and supports currently in place (e.g. clubs and societies, local community groups, digital resources, supports in relation to finance, housing)

• Potential to address significant need in relation to social isolation, loneliness

• Key ingredient: Skilled Link Worker
  • Ability to offer personalised support throughout pathway
  • Knowledge of supports available across the campus
  • Normalise mental health and wellbeing issues and development of resilience
• Gaps in our knowledge of mental health and wellbeing in higher education
  • Effectiveness of interventions
  • Scaling interventions and sustainability
Research and Innovation

- Gaps in our knowledge of mental health and wellbeing in higher education
  - Effectiveness of interventions
  - Scaling interventions and sustainability

- HEA National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework
  - Cross disciplinary and evidence-informed approach to designing mental health and wellbeing supports
  - Co-designed by students and support staff
  - Embedding evaluation of interventions and services