

Mental Health at University: Bridging the Gap



FOREWORD



Mental health is receiving more and more attention, among medical professionals and across society as a whole. We've all seen a lot of statistics and heard about high profile initiatives, such as the Royal Foundation's Heads Together campaign, designed to address the dramatic increase in reported cases of poor mental health. With charities and celebrities lending a voice to this cause, mental health is now firmly in the public eye.

Like many other organisations in the higher education sector, at Campus Living Villages we're passionate about supporting students. Based on feedback from university and charity partners and our on-site staff, in recent years we've invested heavily in staff training on mental health and introduced a number of different initiatives to help our residents.

But we know there is always more we can do, and so we set out to explore the issue in more detail through this piece of research. We are not and don't profess to be mental health professionals, but as one of the UK's leading student accommodation providers we are involved with young people during one of the most formative stages of their lives, and therefore feel we have a responsibility to contribute to the discussion.

We wanted to better understand the complexities of student mental health, as well as whether those struggling know about the help on offer from their universities and accommodation providers. With support from charity Rethink Mental Illness, whose core purpose is to change attitudes towards mental health, and The Student Room, the UK's biggest online student community, we surveyed over 2,000 students across the country.

Our research confirms the concerning trends playing out across the UK, but also highlights a worrying lack of awareness about the help available:

41% of students consider themselves to have poor mental health, with **69%** saying this has gone on for longer than two years. Distressingly, **39%** have felt suicidal.

28% of students don't know if their university provides information about stress and mental health, while **48%** don't know if their halls of residence provides this.

Only **53%** of students say they'd know who to go to for help or advice on campus or in their halls of residence.

FOREWORD

Despite the significant efforts of universities, accommodation providers and partner organisations over the years, it is clear that far too many students are still struggling. More needs to be done to support those experiencing poor mental health and ensure they know that help is available.

In this report we outline our research findings, and highlight some of the ways we and other organisations are working to address the issue of student mental health. We also offer recommendations of three steps we believe are vital to see genuine, lasting change:



Further exploration:

We must continue to explore how current university students are feeling and what prevents them from accessing the support they need. Institutions need to recognise the specific challenges facing their students by doing their own research to complement learning from national studies.



Smarter communication:

Universities and accommodation providers need to make sure that they are communicating with students about mental health on the right channels with messages that cut through the noise. Support must be easy to access, students need to know that they are not alone and the information they need must be available at the right time.



Closer collaboration:

With so many services available and initiatives designed to help, there is a risk that students will become overwhelmed and confused about how to access the support they need. Universities and accommodation providers must work together, in partnership with charities and medical professionals, to avoid duplication and identify the most effective initiatives to promote.

We hope this report will add to the ongoing debate around the issue of student mental health, and demonstrate that together we can all help develop creative solutions to overcome the obstacles students face in seeking help. We look forward to working with other organisations across the sector to consider how to implement our recommendations and share best practice.

Richard Gabelich,
UK Chief Executive Officer,
Campus Living Villages

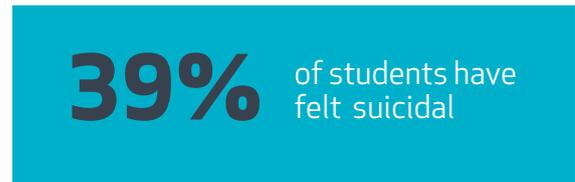
THE CURRENT STATE OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Students moving to university are often living far away from home for the first time. They are getting to know new people, adapting to new academic pressures, and making decisions which will impact the course of their adult life. It's easy to see that experiencing poor mental health can detrimentally impact students' time at university.

Organisations across the higher education sector have long recognised this challenge and worked hard to address it. But as awareness and reporting of poor mental health increases, and the stigma around it decreases, it's likely that more students will call upon support services in the coming years.

Our research reveals that 41% of students consider themselves to be experiencing poor mental health. This is significantly higher than the one in four people in the UK who experience a mental health problem each year¹, but perhaps unsurprising given the wider issues young people are facing today – financial pressures, an increasingly competitive jobs market, the rise of technology and prevalence of social media, and uncertain political and economic times.

Sadly, the survey also shows that almost the same proportion of students (39%) have felt suicidal. Again, this is almost double the one in five British adults who have thought of suicide over the course of their life². Regrettably, this challenge is all too familiar to student accommodation providers and universities. In 2015, an Institute for Public Policy Research report highlighted that the number of students who committed suicide that year had doubled to 134³.



One reason for the high levels of suicidal thoughts among students experiencing poor mental health may be that the majority (69%) have had poor mental health for longer than two years. Young people with existing conditions could find these are exacerbated by the major transition of coming to university, removing established support networks in place at home, such as family, friends and a perhaps a counsellor they have been seeing for a number of years.

Given this, it is more important than ever that trained staff are on hand at universities and in student accommodation to replicate this support system and point students towards healthcare professionals who can provide the help and support they need.



Being at university has made me more aware of mental health problems because you meet so many different people with different backgrounds and different problems, and you realise everyone is struggling with something. It made me aware that I'm not struggling by myself but there are others who are struggling with me and we can help each other.

- Survey respondent 

ARE MORE STUDENTS STRUGGLING THAN WE REALISE?

While universities and accommodation providers have introduced a number of measures to support students who come to them about poor mental health, our research suggests many people aren't aware of, or accessing, the help available. While some of this is due to lack of awareness, it may also be that students are brushing symptoms of poor mental health to one side.

Responding to our survey, almost three quarters (74%) of students said they have experienced low energy in the last six months, two thirds (66%) said they have experienced problems sleeping and almost half (47%) said they have experienced a change in appetite. These issues could be just another part of the student experience, fueled by too many nights out and an overreliance on quick and easy food. However, they could also be signs of something more serious.

74%

of students have suffered from low energy

66%

of students have problems sleeping

47%

of students have experienced a change in appetite

Universities and accommodation providers need to help students understand the symptoms of poor mental health, recognise when their behaviour has tipped from something fun to something that is not good for their mental wellbeing and be confident of where they can go to get help.

Early intervention is key here. Staff across the university, and particularly in halls of residence, need to be trained to spot students who may be at risk of poor mental health, and work with them to address the issue before it deteriorates.



Towards the end of my first term of undergrad, I spent almost all day in bed trying to sleep. I stopped seeing my friends, missed all my lectures, and only left the house for a single tutorial each week (it was compulsory and so would have been too obvious if I didn't show up.) Looking back, it was probably mild depression, brought on by homesickness and my steadily falling grades.

- Survey respondent



University of Bristol Student Wellbeing Service^{4,5}

The University of Bristol has announced that it is investing an additional £1million annually to enhance its student support services. This follows an increase in the number of students struggling with the transition to university life and reporting additional support needs, including mental health issues, and a number of suspected suicides among students. A key part of the additional support available will be a team of 24 Student Wellbeing Advisers, located in every academic school, to identify and assist students who might be struggling, so they can be supported before issues escalate. Director of Student Services Mark Ames says that the University's aim is to "get on the front foot and be much more proactive" in its work with students.

The University is also creating a new Mental Health Advice Team to ensure students can access healthcare services in a timely manner, with prospective students able to contact the Team prior to their arrival at the start of term. In addition, University GPs will have additional capacity to provide same-day extended mental health appointments to students.

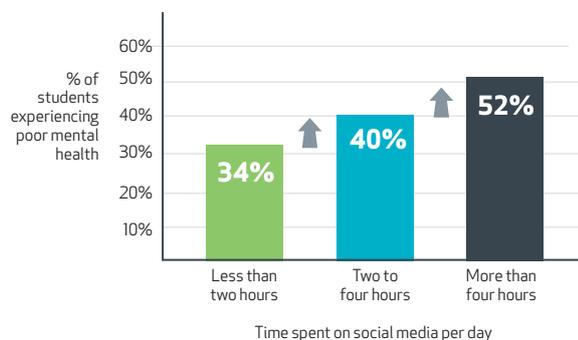
HOW DOES SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IMPACT STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH?

As well as investigating the symptoms of poor mental health which university students experience, our research also explores the impact of their social activities on their wellbeing.

Over the last few years we've seen interactions among residents in our villages move online, and have tried to reflect this trend in how we interact with them too. But we've also recognised the challenges that social media brings, and tried to encourage students to continue interacting offline too by providing relaxed, informal settings for them to chat.

The potential link between social media and poor mental health among young people has been a particular concern for medical professionals and policy makers in recent years. Research from the Royal Society of Public Health found that social media can often exacerbate poor mental health, being linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and poor sleep⁶. It also found that young people with anxiety say four of the five most used social media platforms make their feelings worse⁷.

This is reflected by our survey findings, which show a clear correlation between time spent on social media and mental health. More than half (52%) of students who spend more than four hours a day on social media consider themselves to have poor mental health, compared to two in five (40%) of those spending two to four hours a day, and just a third (34%) of those spending less than two hours a day on these sites.



Our research cannot prove causation. It may be that those students experiencing poor mental health are more likely to spend lots of time on social media. But these findings suggest that online bullying and the pressure to conform to unrealistic and unattainable lifestyles may be having a significant negative impact on students' mental health.



Social media definitely affects my mental health and wellbeing. In a society where everyone is linked and you can see exactly what everyone is doing all the time, it hurts to feel like you are missing out. I admit to having bouts of depression due to the fact no one had liked my picture. It sounds pathetic but when you are so low, social media can make it so much worse. - Survey respondent



Campus Living Villages' Resident Life Programme

Campus Living Villages' Resident Life Programme is just one example of how accommodation providers can build stronger relationships with students, allowing them to identify potential mental health struggles early and step in.

Campus Living Villages recognised that the current cohort of university students were born into the digital age and use technology as a crucial means of connecting and communicating with others, but can find it hard to take a break from their devices to make the most of real world experiences. So, it created a programme of activities designed to replicate the informality, diversity and community feel of the online world offline. Events such as cookery demos, international karaoke and movie marathons have helped students feel at home. They have also provided opportunities for students to socialise and allowed staff to identify residents who may be struggling, provide a listening ear and direct them to appropriate professional services.

One student commented that the different events have "allowed us to get together as a community, and when we're all stressed with exams it's a nice way to relax". Meanwhile staff say the programme allows them to "reach residents you may not otherwise have been able to easily connect with".

HOW DOES SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IMPACT STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH?

However, it's not all bad news; there are activities that seem to improve students' mental health. It's an age-old adage that exercise is the best medicine. Research by the British Journal of Psychiatry showed an inverse relationship between the amount of leisure-time physical activity and case-level symptoms of depression⁸, and our survey has shown the same.

When asked what they usually do in their spare time, those who say they play sports or go to the gym report the lowest levels of poor mental health (34%).

Encouraging more students to prioritise exercise could be an effective way to improve their mental health. With the average student spending £120 a month on health and fitness, including gym membership, exercise classes and sports club membership⁹, it's clear there is an appetite for this.

But some students report difficulty in balancing their academic workload with their desire to participate in sport, saying this is proving detrimental to their mental health.

"I do yoga and progressive muscle relaxation to alleviate stress and anxiety, and attempt breathing exercises. I think it helps because it is a physical reaction to a mental issue and it helps calm my flight or fight response."

- Survey respondent

The significant difference our research reveals in mental health between students who spend their spare time on social media compared to those who play sport is perhaps unsurprising, given the weight of medical evidence of the benefits of exercise. However, it is a timely reminder of the impact time spent outside the lecture hall has on students' mental health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, universities and accommodation providers should consider what more they can do to better promote a healthy student lifestyle, including

time away from the phone or laptop screen. In particular, we need to complement specific awareness raising activities with ongoing communications that promote alternatives to bad habits students can so easily slip into.

Student Minds' #BestNightIn Campaign^{10, 11}

Student Minds is a national charity focused on student mental health. It works to empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence, and skills to look after their own mental health, support others and create change.

It's #BestNightIn campaign is designed to challenge students' expectations of the typical social life during their first weeks at university. The charity notes that expectations of nights out and clubbing are often set through social media accounts, but these usually only include photos of parties and pranks – the exciting times – rather than quieter evenings when students look out for themselves. So, it encourages students to stop feeling they are missing out every time they choose to stay in by sharing their #BestNightIn photos. It also produces Best Night In postcards that student societies and university staff can use to start conversations with students.

Student Minds' campaign has engaged thousands of students since it started and has led to a noticeable change in how people talk about their Freshers' Week.

ARE STUDENTS GETTING HELP FOR THEIR POOR MENTAL HEALTH?

Around half of students say they'd know who to go to for help or advice about mental health on campus or in their halls of residence. With so many students reporting poor mental health, and many others potentially struggling without recognising the symptoms, it is vital that they know there is support available from their university and accommodation provider.

We know that many universities and accommodation providers already offer a range of services for students with mental health concerns, from an informal chat with a welfare officer at the Student Union to trained professionals on-site able to help with the most serious issues. But it can be difficult to ensure students know this help is available and how to access it.

In our survey, more than a quarter (28%) of students say they don't know if their university provides information about stress and mental health, rising to almost half (48%) unaware if their halls of residence provides this. Just over half (53%) of students say they'd know who to go to for help or advice on campus or in their halls of residence, meaning more than half of residents may be suffering in silence if they or somebody they know is experiencing poor mental health.

It's clear that too many students do not know about the support that is available. Either information about the help on offer is not being provided or, more likely, the methods of communicating that information are not effective.

Given the popularity of social media among students, and its correlation with higher levels of poor mental health, it is concerning that less than one in five (18%) students say their halls of residence provides them with information about stress and mental health online. Universities and accommodation providers need to think seriously about how best to engage students with information on mental health and wellbeing.

Our research has shown that students need more details on the symptoms to look out for and how to access help, but this information must be communicated in such a way that it cuts through the noise and reaches those in need.

In recent years we've seen universities and accommodation providers embrace the opportunities

for online engagement with students, through increased social media presence and specifically designed online hubs.

These are welcome moves, but we need to ensure that these digital channels are fully resourced with staff who are trained to identify potential issues and point students towards the help they need.

42nd Street

In 2016-17, Campus Living Villages ran a pilot project at our Salford Student Village with Manchester-based charity 42nd Street to improve staff confidence in identifying and responding to poor mental health among residents.

42nd Street ran training sessions on the language of mental health, seasonal trends, and symptoms of conditions ranging from depression and anxiety, to eating disorders and self harm. Staff were taught techniques to build resilience and have positive conversations about emotional wellbeing with young people. Top tips were also provided for responding to residents who admit they are struggling but won't engage, using active listening, and responding to aggressive behaviour or language.

The charity also reviewed Campus Living Villages' policies and procedures around data protection and safeguarding, and suggested improvements to systems so information about vulnerable residents is more effectively shared among those who need to know in order to provide support.

The pilot project was a huge success. Staff surveys showed that understanding, confidence and knowledge had increased across all aspects, with staff commenting that the training "made me more aware of how to react to somebody who has harmed themselves" and "will improve my communication with young people with issues". Campus Living Villages is now exploring how to roll the project out nationally.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health among university students is a serious issue. There are too many reporting poor mental health, far too many feeling suicidal, and lifestyle choices may be making things worse. Most worryingly of all, our research shows that students do not know about the help offered by their universities and accommodation providers.

We all need to act now to change this situation, so below we outline a series of practical steps we believe both universities and accommodation providers should consider as a matter of urgency:



Keep exploring

Although many organisations across the higher education sector and more widely have conducted research on mental health, there is still much that we don't fully understand. This is such a complex and sensitive issue, so it is vital that we explore further how current university students are feeling and what prevents them from accessing support services. The upcoming NUS survey, due to include views from around 185,000 students, is a step in the right direction, but it will only include 12 student unions. Institutions need to recognise that their students will face different challenges to those at other universities and do their own research to complement learning from national studies.



Communicate smarter

Institutions are working hard to support students who may be struggling with poor mental health. However, it is clear from our research that many are still unsure about what information their universities provide and where to get help in their halls of residence. Universities and accommodation providers need to make sure that they are communicating with students on the right channels with messages that cut through the noise. Applying behavioural science principles, they need to ensure that it is easy to access support, that students recognise they are not alone and that the information they need is available at the right time.



Collaborate more

Improving student mental health is not a new challenge, and most universities and accommodation providers already have initiatives in place to help those struggling. However, there is a risk that with so many different services being promoted, so many awareness days and weeks and events, students will become overwhelmed and confused about what they should do to get the help they need. It is vital that universities and accommodation providers work together, in partnership with charities and medical professionals, to avoid duplication of support and identify the most effective initiatives to promote.

Our research confirms the challenge facing the higher education sector when it comes to student mental health. But by establishing the scale of the problem and providing suggestions of how it can be tackled, we hope this report will enable universities and accommodation providers to better support students. Together we have the opportunity to positively impact the lives of millions of young people and dramatically improve their experience of university.

METHODOLOGY

The data in this report is taken from two surveys conducted on behalf of Campus Living Villages by The Student Room. A quantitative survey was conducted between 1st May and 18th July 2017, with a representative sample of 2121 students from across the UK. A qualitative survey was conducted with 53 of the participants from the first survey between 24th August and 22nd September 2017. Both surveys were conducted online and respondents included domestic and international students aged 17 and above, from Foundation Year to PhD level. The questionnaires were developed in collaboration with Rethink Mental Illness and the results of the surveys were analysed in collaboration with Search Laboratory.

ENDNOTES

¹ **Mind, Mental health facts and statistics** <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/#.WfNcAFtSzIU>

² **Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014** <https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748>

³ **IPPR, "Not By Degrees: Improving student mental health in the UK's universities"** <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/not-by-degrees>

⁴ <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2017/september/investment-in-student-wellbeing.html>

⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/09/26/bristol-university-spends-1-million-well-being-advisers-amid/>

⁶ **Royal Society for Public Health "#StatusofMind"** <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/social-media-and-young-people-s-mental-health-and-wellbeing.html#>

⁷ **IBID**

⁸ **The British Journal of Psychiatry, "Physical activity and common mental disorders"** <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/197/5/357>

⁹ **The Independent, "Students cut back on alcohol and spend four times more on fitness than they once did"** <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/students-alcohol-drinking-cut-down-fitness-spending-gym-membership-spce-finances-budget-a8011336.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.studentminds.org.uk/about.html>

¹¹ <http://www.studentminds.org.uk/best-night-in.html>



In collaboration with:

