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Student suicide: improving prevention and response

With the growth in the number of UK higher education students and the proportional increase in widening participation, student support services, including counselling services, have often struggled to meet students' rising need for emotional and psychological support. **Ruth Caleb** reports on the result of a study aimed at helping higher education institutions develop services to support students and families on the issue of student suicide

While the rate of suicide in young people in the UK population has fallen in the last decade, there is still major concern that the rates of young male suicide and female attempted suicide remain worryingly high. The Responses and Prevention in Student Suicide (RaPSS) study was commissioned by POPYRUS, a group founded by parents of university and college students who had committed suicide during or soon after their time in higher education.

The study

The findings and recommendations of the study were outlined at a seminar hosted by the RaPSS Advisory Group at Woburn House on 15 February, 2007. After a welcome and introduction by Eileen Smith, chair of the UUK/Guild HE Committee for the Promotion of Mental Wellbeing in HE, a keynote

speech by Dr John Coleman, senior research fellow at the Department of Educational Studies, Oxford University and former director of the Trust for Adolescents, outlined the context of the RaPSS study.

The study was undertaken by Nicky Stanley, Sharon Mallon, Jo Bell, Susan Hilton and Jill Manthorpe, researchers at the University of Central Lancashire, and Kings College, London and focused on both the prevention of and responses to student suicide. Three sets of data were collected:

- Case studies of 20 students (18 male and 2 female) mostly in their early 20s, who had died by suicide, using interviews with parents, close friends, academic staff and student support staff involved with the student.
- Interviews that focused on parents' and friends' perspective of the experience of the loss of their son or daughter.

- Interviews with 10 staff members, in different professional roles, working in higher education institutions. Referred to as 'positive practice' interviews, these were used to examine good practice within the sector.

Major findings

Although it must be remembered that the sample was small and limited to those cases in which family and friends were willing to participate in the study, several findings offer counsellors in HE guidance as to when a student may be most vulnerable to suicidal behaviour:

- 75 per cent of the case study students died in periods of transition, at the beginning or end of an academic year.
- There was often a combination of risk factors that culminated in suicide. A need for perfectionism within a context of transition appeared to be particularly relevant for some cases.

- Half the studied group had a history of academic difficulty which, combined with a fear of failure, may have contributed to suicidal ideation.
- In nine cases there had been a diagnosis of a mental health problem (usually depression) during their student years, with seven having attempted suicide in the past. Antidepressants had been the major intervention offered by GPs.
- Several students had talked previously of their suicidal feelings, to close family and/or friends.
- In a number of cases the students' suicidal behaviour seemed to be influenced by another death.
- The majority of the cases in the study lived in privately rented accommodation.
- A lack of coordination was noted in terms of support for the student, both within and external to the higher education institution, and families felt excluded from supporting their children, due to codes of confidentiality.
- Support services seemed to be perceived as ineffective and/or stigmatising to the students who had committed suicide.

Major recommendations

The study offered recommendations that challenge the ways that some higher education institutions (HEIs) have responded when dealing with the tragic event of suicide by a student:

- HEIs need to take a proactive role in disseminating the news of a suicide to students, to avoid them having to take on this task themselves. Rumours should be discouraged with appropriate information, although the report suggests that details of method of death should not be circulated
- Support should be offered to those housemates, friends or staff members who found the body.
- In particular there needs to be increased support for students in off-campus rented accommodation, who have to bear much of the responsibility for the practicalities that occur when a housemate has died.
- There should be a designated point of contact at the institution for the bereaved to use as required.
- Staff members connected to the student should also be supported.

- Families should be involved with memorials, posthumous awards etc.
- There should be awareness of and allowance made for the emotional impact of the death by suicide on the student's friends and housemates.
- HEIs should have information on bereavement by suicide and support agency information available to offer students and family members.
- Policies on sudden death are helpful especially if they set out a chain of communication and identify responsibilities. Special guidance will be needed in the event of the suicide of an international student, to ensure that cultural needs are met.

Positive practice for the prevention of student suicide

It is suggested that the prevention of suicide can be supported by:

- the promotion of positive images of mental health
- ease of access to support services
- removal of the stigma that students may feel about student support services and, in particular, by identifying ways of communicating effectively with male students who are less likely to make use of their services by traditional means
- the use of peer support
- out-of-hours service provision
- support and training for HEI staff in mental health awareness and the support of disturbed and distressed students.

Conclusion

The findings and recommendations made as a result of the RaPSS study are largely relevant in the event of any student death but offer insight into the particular sensitivity and support required after a verdict of suicide. The study outlines the need for further resources to support a core group in every college and university that could affect a change of attitude, increased mental health awareness and greater support for students with mental health difficulties. Counselling services can have a major role in developing awareness of the emotional and psychological support required by an HEI in the event of the suicide of a student, and an understanding of the impact it may cause to family, students and staff.

The study's recommendations lead counsellors in higher and further education institutions to consider factors that might be experienced as supportive by students who currently have suicidal feelings, or who have experienced suicidal ideation in the past, especially at times of transition. The Royal College of Psychiatrists' report entitled *The mental health of students in higher education*¹, stated that students 'are at no higher risk of suicide than the general population, and may be at lower risk' and that 'the significance of reported suicidal ideation requires urgent evaluation'. As Ann Heyno² observed recently: 'While intense public scrutiny, particularly from the media, continues to surround student suicide, the prevalence of suicidal ideation in our universities has not yet been addressed'. Therefore, in addition, it is important to research the incidence of suicidal ideation, and the identification of pre-suicidal behaviour that could alert academic and service support staff to the fact that a student would benefit from urgent support. Research is also indicated to explore the particular mental health support needs of international students, who are known to feel lonelier and face even more difficulties than home students. This is also true of ethnic minority students – no parents of students from ethnic minorities were interviewed as part of the RaPSS study. ■

Ruth Caleb is head of counselling at Brunel University. Particular thanks are due to Eileen Smith, head of the University of Hertfordshire counselling service and chair of the UUK/GuildHE Committee for the Promotion of Mental WellBeing in HE, and Ann Heyno, head of the University of Westminster counselling service, both members of the RaPSS Advisory Group, who kept to the forefront the professional support and expertise offered by student counselling services to their clients and their institutions. For more information: www.rapss.org.uk

References

- 1 Royal College of Psychiatrists. The mental health of students in higher education. 2003.
- 2 Heyno A. On being affected without being infected: counselling students with suicidal thoughts. Unpublished paper.