

# WHEN THE WORST HAPPENS

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A college counsellor reflects on the impact of two student suicides in her establishment – and shares the steps the department took in the aftermath



I am a student services manager and counsellor at a sixth-form college in the South East. The worst has happened. This year two of our students have died from suicide in unrelated incidents. They were unknown to support services. There will be no details of them written here; theirs is not my story to tell. I was asked to share my experience in the hope that what I have learned may help others in a similar situation. This is why I have agreed to do this. I offer no clever links to theoretical research – I am simply writing as a human, a mother and a student services manager.

I have been a qualified counsellor for eight years, working that entire time in a sixth-form college. After three years, I took on the role of Student Services Manager and Deputy Safeguarding Officer. I work alongside another counsellor four days a week and our college has about 2,000 students. I love my job, I have always loved my job and I hope I continue to love my job. But it is getting harder.

## Changes to the profession

Eight years ago, counselling 16-19 year olds seemed easier, less heavy, and had less impact on me. So what

has changed? To start with, more young people are coming to our college already diagnosed with mental health disorders, some as the result of changes in society, how we bring up our children and the fall-out of social media. What else? I'm eight years older... slowing up maybe? Certainly this is all true, but I think the biggest change for me is that my own children are growing up. I am now the mother of teenagers as well as being the counsellor of teenagers. The countertransference and distorted thoughts this throws up have caught me unawares and given me many a sleepless night as anxiety takes hold. Good supervision has never been so valuable and so necessary. I remind myself, 'you are the counsellor at work and the mum at home', but I certainly notice these roles overlapping.

During a holiday period this year, my manager was notified about a student's death, the second in a four-month period. We sat together in the deserted college, talking, sharing jumbled thoughts and feelings, trying to understand. My thoughts started to run away with me. How do we stop it happening again? What if whatever we decide to do is the wrong thing? Shock, guilt and desperate sadness were swiftly joined by fear. I recalled the tragedies of Bridgend, which all started with one suicide. What if it was catching?

The overlapping within me, of 'me' the mum and 'me' the counsellor, like a Venn diagram, produces a strong urge to look after all our students, keep them safe from harm and help them when they need it. But somehow I hadn't done enough, causing complex feelings of culpability – why hadn't they come and talked? What could I/we have done differently? Did those students even know support was here, waiting?

How can I/we/the service be better? I knew I should have replaced those tired, worn, safeguarding posters... and so it goes on. I knew this was survivor's guilt doing

its thing; everyone who loses someone close to them has thoughts along these lines. But these thoughts have stayed, reducing over time to niggles which I can choose to act on, because it's a good thing to stay on your toes, reflecting, changing and improving.

### Working out a plan

We needed time to assimilate how we felt, because the news was just so shocking. Only then could we decide what was best for our college population. An appropriate, well-thought-out plan was what

we needed – as well as notifying staff who were not on the various social networking sites (over which news spreads in seconds). And of course, how best to support the whole college community. Our bereavement procedure gave no specific guidance on 'the suicide of a current student' because this had never happened before. We were thinking on our feet and didn't want to panic into a course of action we would later regret.

I went back to my office and emailed fellow counsellors on the counsellors in higher and further education JISCMail list. It was a plea for support, hoping someone else was also working during the holiday period. I felt the heavy weight of responsibility as it slowly dawned on me that, together with my manager, I was the best expert we had (and believe me, I'm no expert). The responses came quickly and couldn't have been better; they were just what I needed. They so got it. They picked up on certain words or phrases I had used (of course they did...), realising I needed practical help, along with good signposting and care. They gave me both, in spades. Counsellors are brilliant sometimes.

My fellow counsellors urged me to a) get good sound advice and b) look after myself. A few of them recommended a charity organisation called POPYRUS (Prevention of Young Suicide) set up by parents who had lost children to suicide. What a difference one phone call can make, when you are speaking to an expert in their field. 'Talk about it', they said. 'We need to break the stigma by talking about suicide and suicidal thoughts'. (Surely I knew this already?). If we are confident in talking about suicide, then maybe our students will be too.

### Asking difficult questions

Talking to young people about suicide is not pleasant, but it is necessary. Part of me would far rather bury my head in the sand and pretend all is well, but sometimes of course, it isn't. It is for some, at least right now, but things change. Young people's mental wellbeing takes a lot of looking after (just like yours and mine). Asking them difficult questions becomes less difficult the more you do it.

Losing our students affected all of us. The ripples move ever outward from close family and friends to classmates and teachers who had taught them and built up a relationship, met their parents at parents' evening and still had their work waiting in a pile yet to be marked.

I pushed for the entire staff to receive training, because I knew we all needed to be confident in asking these difficult questions. Our students are

far more likely to talk to a teacher, their tutor or a student supervisor than they are to come and find 'the counsellor'. Precious CPD days were already booked up, but with my manager's backing we arranged for POPYRUS to deliver in-house training

to all staff during one of those quiet days between enrolment and the first day of term. Our trainer was called Amelia and didn't seem much older than our students, which endeared her to us.

Her delivery was matter-of-fact, informative and reassuring. She dispelled the myths: 'If a student is suicidal and I ask and talk about it, might it push them to actually do it?' No. *Talking about it is often a relief.*

What we did:

- We emailed staff who had taught the student (as it was a holiday period). Feedback was positive – they appreciated knowing before coming back to college.
- We met together to advise all staff in the lecture theatre the first morning back before lessons began. Then following this, we met with the staff most closely involved.
- We offered to visit classes and speak with students. Some teachers accepted the offer; two, who didn't, later said they wished they had. They said they had felt lacking in using the kind of words a tragic loss like this needs.
- We offered a safe space daily, for students or staff to attend, facilitated by one of the counsellors.
- I put together an A4 poster for all classrooms, titled: 'How to keep yourself safe', with various wellbeing suggestions. Suicidal thoughts were one of a list of concerns rather than the headline. Links to Papyrus, Hopeline, Cruse and the Samaritans were also featured, and it was all made available on the college intranet.
- We amended various wellbeing tutorials that we already delivered.
- I went on a training course on 'Preventing Self Harm and Suicide'.
- Papyrus came to train all staff.
- Our safeguarding governor is a GP, who suggested we carry out a significant event audit, which is a National Health Service initiative. The template guided us to notice what we were already doing well, our safeguarding reporting procedure for example, as well as areas we could improve on. We also met with relevant staff in a safe, non-

judgmental space to review both events and how it had affected them, again to see what we could do differently or better.

– We liaised with the local safeguarding children board.

During the past two weeks, I have had three different teachers referring students who admitted to feeling very low. These members of staff had asked the difficult question, 'Are you having suicidal thoughts?' All of them told me they felt confident in doing so, because of the Papyrus training.

The biggest thing we learnt, was that talking about suicide does not increase the risk (unless of course you are talking about methods etc).

Papyrus says, 'Many young people don't actually want to die, but are looking for an answer to their problems, an end to their pain and despair – and suicide can seem to be the only way out. When this state of mind has been reached, *it is impossible to think straight* (although you will believe that you are thinking clearly) *and things can get totally out of proportion.*'

### The role of education

Recently I sat with a student whose suicidal thoughts came and went while he struggled with depression. Recent suicides in the media were stuck in his head on a never-ending loop. I'm stating the obvious here, but there needs to be better access to, and more funding for, psychiatric services for young people. The role of education in preparing young people for understanding and coping with emotional distress/mental illness is hugely important and tackling this is an ongoing process for us via the classroom, tutorials, staff training, posters and college intranet, as well as in the counselling room.

The experience will never leave me, and nor should it. The close working relationship I have with my manager and counselling colleague was enhanced and strengthened by this shared experience. As a college we are definitely more confident in talking about mental health, depression and suicidal thoughts, looking out for signs, 'invitations' as Papyrus refers to them, that students may give us. I like to think that on one level our young people feel and know this; that our confidence seeps out, is infectious and helps them to talk about it too. Like the film *Sliding Doors*, we will never know how many young people we have helped, steering them away from the no-going-back path which seems the only way out of their despair. That terrifying thought of 'what if' is no longer just a thought for us, because the worst has already happened. ●