

Connecting Minds

Season 1 Episode 2: Student Counselling Services and Exams

Useful links:

List of counselling services available through PCHEI:

<https://www.pchei.ie/index.php/students1/student-counselling>

USI Destress for Success campaign: <https://usi.ie/destress/>

USI exams resources: <https://usi.ie/exams/>

TU Dublin platforms: <https://twitter.com/WeAreTUDublin>

<https://www.instagram.com/tudublin/>

<https://www.facebook.com/TechnologicalUniversityDublin.TUDublin/>

USI Mental Health Website: <https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/>

USI Mental Health Social Media: <https://twitter.com/MentalHealthUSI>

Sources of Help & Support for your mental health: <https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/i-need-help/help-in-a-mental-health-emergency/>

National Office for Suicide Prevention: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/>

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SPEAKERS

Scott Ahearn, Sarah Hughes

Sarah Hughes 00:08

You're listening to Connecting Minds; the student mental health podcast, brought to you by the Union of Students in Ireland. Hello, and welcome to season one, episode two of Connecting Minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. I'm delighted to be introducing you today to Scott Ahearn, a college counselor at TU Dublin, and a member of the executive committee of the Psychological Counselors of Higher Education in Ireland. He's also a former Vice President for Welfare with us here in USI. Welcome, Scott, thanks very much for joining us today.

Scott Ahearn 00:35

Hi, Sarah. Yeah. Hi, Sarah. Thanks so much for inviting me along and delighted to be here.

Sarah Hughes 00:41

Delighted you could be here. So we might just dive right in, if you don't mind. For starters, I think I personally would love to know, and I'm sure our listeners would be interested to know, what's it like to be a counselor in the higher education setting?

Scott Ahearn 00:55

I love it. Personally, I love it. It's a great opportunity. Having been a student, having been a student officer, worked on student mental health for the last 10 years to have the privilege to work in a capacity to support students on their journey, not only through education, but also through life. Because our role as a college counselor, or as a student counselor, which we're commonly known as, it isn't just about the academics, it can be, but it's so much more, it's about relationships, it's about fitting in, it's about dealing with the ups and downs that life has, and to be in a role that allows me to have insight to support someone on that journey. It's just such an honor. And I really, I love it, I really do. And it's also great that we get to be part of college community, with workshops, and being innovative, and being inspired and up to date and being challenged by the students as well. But for ourselves to keep up to date on trends and things that are happening for them as well. So it really keeps you on your toes and it's exciting.

Sarah Hughes 01:58

Absolutely. Your passion for your role really, really comes through very clearly there. So I'd say a lot of our listeners, they possibly might not have ever attended a counseling service before, they might not even know what that looks like. Could you talk us through what it might be like for a student when they first reached out to a counseling service?

Scott Ahearn 02:16

Yeah, so it's important just to note that in vast majority, or maybe even all HEI colleges in the country, they would have some form of mental health support in their, in their colleges, for most of them are if not all, they would have a counselling service available in their colleges. So to access or to reach out to a counselling service, it's also a little bit different, now with COVID. But irrespective of COVID scenarios, or before COVID, or as we transition out of this counseling services will be based on each of the sites. And they will each have a website, where a simple Google of that Institute followed by the word counseling will bring you to that landing page from a search. And on that webpage, it will give information about you know, filling out an intake booking form where they get to book an appointment, or they might be given contact details for the administrators or for directly the counselor to email the contact and to arrange to meet with them. And that will be done at the current moment for most services will be done online through different platforms. But equally, there are some services that are often face to face. And it's important that when a first session happens with a counselling service, there's a little bit of housekeeping for us as counsellors we need to do. So this is where we take an opportunity to share the overview or the structure of how a counselling service works, then we'd speak a little bit about confidentiality, because it's really important for any students, when they're attending to know that what's been shared, and what's been spoken about, is kept in that in that space. It's

very sacred and very important. But equally, we outline some limitations that if there's a concern, or there's other things that may be happening, where we might need to invite or to involve other people, we outline those scenarios. And, and then we also have the opportunity to for the student to share as much or as little as they want about the reasons or what's contributed to them to have to make the appointment. So it's very, very easy flowing, in terms of the start. There's no expectations and it's a real opportunity to hear what's brought the student to the service. But then also for us to make a plan or a support plan, or what we might call it. And and that's done in conjunction with the student as well. And then that begins the process. It doesn't have to be just one off. It could be a number of sessions. It might just be one session, but it's very free flowing and the student can, is very much in control of when and how they want to engage with the service.

Sarah Hughes 04:48

It sounds like you know, one of the main aims is to make students feel as comfortable as possible within that first session. You know, we know from you know, feedback from students and stuff, they're often quite worried about going to counseling for various different reasons. Our research that we did in in USI in 2019 showed that a lot of students felt like their problems weren't enough to warrant seeking counseling. And what what advice would you have for students who are maybe thinking that or they're worried maybe for other reasons.

Scott Ahearn 05:20

So it's important first off, the role of the Student Counseling Service is there to support students on their academic, social, and personal personal issues that may be happening in our lives. So it's not just exclusively about education, or about the college environment, it can be about a student's family dynamical issues that they may be having, it could be about self esteem or motivation. So it's really wide ranging in terms of what type of insight or support a student might be looking for. Some of the common issues that students may come may relate to feeling overwhelmed, it could be about anger, it could be about resentment, it could be about anxiety, hopelessness, feeling a sense of loneliness or feeling not connected within the college itself, or maybe within the community, its itself on the grounds. So there's many, wide ranging issues that would result in someone coming. But it's really important for me to say that there is no small there is no problem too small to come to counseling, it all has benefits at the core, within counseling, it's for us to be able to listen to hear what's happening, to offer, perhaps perspectives or suggestions that a student may take on to help them on their road. And it also gives a an opportunity to offer a student to have some aware self awareness or its insightfulness on their own issues, and to resource them about how they might be able to manage that situation. So it doesn't have to be a crisis. And it's also important when you're Sarah, and you're mentioning about the research, research in a different capacity from other institutes also shows that early intervention helps to alleviate something from becoming a crisis too so sometimes coming towards much earlier can be much can be really helpful, rather than letting something get to a situation where it becomes a crisis. So it's, it's either or there's no parameters or that is restrictive about why someone should come to counseling. There's that kind of hope that kind of answers the question.

Sarah Hughes 07:26

Yeah, absolutely. I think that points about you know, there is no problem too small is one that I think is really important for everybody to understand, particularly when you match it with what you say about,

you know, if you if somebody gets help sooner, it can stop that maybe becoming a bigger problem for them down the road, which I guess is always always a good thing to aim for so in terms of the kind of things that you see coming through your door in terms of what students seek counseling for um could you give us some maybe examples of that kind of thing?

Scott Ahearn 07:58

Yeah, so it's kind of touching on that in the in terms of last question, but many, the most overriding issues that most students will come to, and this will be supported with a lot of research as well as in the area of anxiety or depression, feeling low sadness. And there can be also other aspects in regards to feeling overwhelmed stress, with demands that they may have on their lives, it could be due to relationship breakdowns, it could also relate to many issues regarding interactions one has had with others in terms of sexual consent has been an issue that's coming up on our doors, sexual orientation, finding oneself, gender, you know, seeing where that fits for an individual on that journey, seeking support on maybe learning disabilities, you know, in regards to ADHD, or, or in terms of many other kind of aspects, you know, students might come to counseling to seek further support on those. So it's really wide ranging in terms of what what some of the issues are, what's really important that there isn't a parameter that's set, that your problem has to fit into this area to be seen by a counselor. It's really about if the availability is there, obviously, with services and you can make an appointment, it can be really useful to make that appointment to work with a counselor. Now, it's important. However, however, the issue or whatever the issue that an individual might be going with, it's also important to mention that there are many benefits from therapy or talk therapy that will be offered. So one of the pieces when when you're engaging with counselling is that it gives you an opportunity to learn more about oneself. therapy can also help and support you to reach maybe the goals that you've set through your own life or where you want to go and develop what might be realistic or not. therapy can also be quite useful at developing fulfilling relationships that you might have with your partners or maybe with your friends or maybe you've had a fallout or a breakup or maybe in a family dynamic as well, in terms of looking at ways to communicate, maybe differently. You You know, in terms of looking at tools to be able to share what you're feeling or what you're going through and having others to hear that. And it can lead to a lot of improvements in all areas of lives in your life. So I think it's, it's really wide ranging in terms of what counseling can offer and how we can support many students, but also their families and their community within the college itself.

Sarah Hughes 10:22

I think that's a really interesting way of looking at it. That it's not just a sort of a problem solving assistance that you're getting. It could be, you know, just a space to explore things and help you kind of develop it in a more positive way, which I think is really, really interesting. And so I want to ask you, when this podcast is going to be going out, to our listeners will be in the middle of exam season. And I think that's, that's an area that's timely, throughout the college year. You know, there's continuous assessments, there's different exam deadlines, and all that kind of stuff. What would you say to students who are going into exams assessments, and they're in that kind of preparation period?

Scott Ahearn 11:06

Well, it's first off who you know, anyone who may be listening who has already sat exams before, it is very common to feel stressed. So I want to normalize that experience. When you're going into an exam,

not knowing what the questions will be, and what the way they might be phrased, is naturally going to bring up a sense of anxiety for an individual. So I think what I really want to just say to anyone who's listening is that it's okay, you know, what you might be feeling, but it's also important to process what you're feeling. And if we're looking at the piece of you feeling unprepared, well, it's never too late to get organized. And to give yourself your best shot at looking at what you can contribute to an exam paper. It's important that, you know, when it comes to exams, examiners, when you have your paper, it's not like as if you're starting on 100%, and then they're looking to take percentages away from the paper, it's actually you're going into the exam with 0%. And this is your opportunity to write down as much as you can to get the percentages to go up. And that simple reframe can be quite useful at saying Actually, this is my opportunity to show what I know, rather than feeling you need to prove or earn them, that to not to not take percentages and marks from you. Another piece I would most certainly be saying is not to be overworking. You know, it can be that's counterproductive. If we're doing 10, 12 hours, it's important to really develop breaks, not breaks that last for two hours or three hours, where you're, you're maybe doing Netflix or playing video games. But it's important to really bring about short breaks that allow yourself to have some focus into some rest, but also truly engaged with, you know, having meals in terms of drinking water, and, and to give yourself that kind of structure of maybe study blocks that can be quite useful. With the available time that's there for you to give yourself as good of a shot as you can to get through the exams. And it's important that above anything else, and Sarah you might notice yourself, it's not the end of the world, there is always an opportunity to resit the exam or, or for another facility, to where you may get to proceed with a new college course. And it's important to always to look at this isn't this isn't a cul de sac, you know, in the context that if this doesn't work out, that's it. There's always an opportunity to try to renegotiate or to re engage with college, and to look at what further options will be available. And I think that's really important as well to say,

Sarah Hughes 13:45

Yeah, absolutely. And I think you're right, it can feel in the moment like this is the be all and end all like if you don't pass this exam, that's it. That's the end of everything. And but you're absolutely right there, there are ways around, you know, if you if it's something that you really want to achieve, there are ways in which you know, you can kind of find your way. I think I really liked what you're saying in terms of it's it's normal to feel certain levels of anxiety, and it's okay to feel those and to work through them. But they're there for some there are going to be times where that kind of becomes, you know, they feel very heightened levels of stress, and they really struggle to manage that. Can you talk a little bit maybe around what those feelings of stress and overwhelm might feel and look like and what maybe students can do to kind of help work through those feelings.

Scott Ahearn 14:36

Yeah, so it's important to kind of just kind of expand and offer a little bit more, you know, in terms of what stress is. stress occurs when the demand on is greater than the available resources we have. So it's not unusual to feel stressed and anxious. But the amount of stress we experience in certain situations is determined by our perceived ability to cope and the supports we have in place to respond to that. So how this kind of kind of comes up is that in regards to stress can impact on mind racing, difficulty to focus or concentrate, almost building up that sense of panic, it can bring on, you know, many people might relate to stress is that kind of heart or the tummy nausea, the butterflies that can kind of happen, difficulty sleeping, it can also bring on heightened intense scales of procrastination,

where we're just not engaging in in the work that needs to happen, and doing anything else but that and all of a sudden cleaning the oven or cleaning the shower becomes a priority when there's work elsewhere to be done. And it's almost like the avoidance behavior that can sometimes develop. So it's really important that for anyone listening is to really take stock and take a take a pause, what's been asked, what are the demands been asked to view what available resources do you have in yourself and in your community of supports to respond to those demands? And if the goalposts need to be changed? What might that look like? So do we need to defer the exams Do we need to lets just sit them and see how they go and just accept that we may have limited time to prepare as best as or as well as we wanted, but we have an opportunity to prepare in some in some regards. So it's about offering yourself a chance to be able to use what available time you have, or to use the resources or opportunities that are that this presents in terms of doing these exams. And the exams, we're we're kind of doing at the moment that for many students are a little bit different, because for some students, they may they're potentially going to be mostly online, I'm assuming for most students, some will have open books, which you know, kind of gets a bit of a difference, maybe the stress might be a little more manageable in those cases, or if they have a whole day to do an exam. Some might be close booked or quite curtailed times. And it's important just to know that, if the internet connection goes, if if a fault happens with the technology, just to engage with the college, you know, contact the exams office, speak to the Students Union, or to a student advisor or a student support officer, and to get to know what the options or the alternatives are, and engage in the conversation if things don't work out. And I think that's also really, really important. Just to highlight,

Sarah Hughes 17:29

yeah, I think that idea of having like, if I could, if I could sit beside every student doing an exam and just kind of remind them, they're not alone, they don't have to go through what they're going through alone like you say, whether it's the Students Union, or whether it's particular faculty within the college, or whether it's the college counselor, you know, there is somebody there, whatever the problem that they can reach out to, and I think it's one of the earlier they reach out the better as well. Same with kind of going to the counseling service, before you're in crisis, the earlier you reach out for help across the board, the better really.

Scott Ahearn 18:05

It's just to come in there because it won't mince my mind when you're speaking there. We also need to sometimes say the college doesn't want to hang on to you in and I mean that in a respectful manner that the college wants to take you on for a period of time to give you an education to which you can take away with yourself. So the college isn't going to be out to get you or want you to stay in college for longer, because that's that's not, you know, that's not what what they're designed to do, you know, so they also want to support the students to get what they need, as they go on to the next chapter of their lives after college as well.

Sarah Hughes 18:39

Yeah, that makes absolute sense. And I think it's something worth kind of bearing in mind when we look at things like exam periods. And so there are there are two questions that I ask every everybody who comes on the podcast. And I'm going ask them to you now. So the first one is, what is the one thing that you wish every student knew that you could sit in front of every student and tell them one

piece of information about their mental health or about mental health in general? What would it be do you think,

Scott Ahearn 19:09

on in terms of the subject matter what we're talking about, with no exams on what people might be dealing with? I think the number one thing I want them to take away is that there's always a second chance. So that was definitely one. The other piece will be that it's normal to feel stressed and anxious. So I think that's that's another kind of really important takeaway points that I'd like, you know, people to really have an understanding about.

Sarah Hughes 19:37

I think that's that's a really important point. I think, you know, when somebody is in that period of where they're not feeling like their best self, it can feel like there is something inherently wrong or that you're somehow different from everybody else. Really, it's quite a shared experience to have mental health difficulties, struggles at different times through your life.

Scott Ahearn 19:59

Yeah, Absolutely, you know, and it is a shared experience. And you know, Sarah, I'm assuming you've sat exams before I've sat exams, and they are stressful, they're not easy. And people take different approaches, you know, people pressure themselves in the hopes that that will actually ignite some sort of energy or method of work that will bring on something, we're actually gonna be quite counterproductive. Sometimes we need to, we need to accept, I've prepared as well as I can, with what was given to me, and let's, let's just put that down on a piece of paper, or onto the laptop or, you know, Microsoft Word screen. And it's by just displaying as much as you know, to give an examiner the opportunity to give you marks. And that's a really important piece with this. Yeah, I think it can be easy to forget to sort of have trust and faith in ourselves when we're in periods of stress and pressure. And I think that sometimes we just need to kind of trust our own ability, you know, that we've, we've done the best that we can whatever level that is up to this point. And we just need to demonstrate that as best we can. Yeah. The other question I wanted to ask you was what is your your favorite act, or, your main act of self care that you would engage in? Do you think, my own self care, I think in terms of COVID, engaging with my my own personal friends, where we have a virtual obviously, we can't resolve the moment, but a virtual meetups where we do kind of games and type of quizzes, sound like a kid there now when I'm saying that, but it's so important and allows you to laugh and have fun, and to enjoy company with with others, being able to talk to them. So that's more certainly a huge self care, and contacting my family being in touch with them knowing that things were okay. And, and hearing with the updates about my niece and nephews, you know, that's all very important. On a more practical, practical, you know, day to day kind of piece. Sleep is really important. And, and also, I have a switch off time, every evening that I don't work past. So, particularly time in the evening, I stopped what I'm doing. And that's that, and then I either watch a TV or TV show or a movie or play video game, or go for a long walk in the evenings. That's also helpful, because allows me to wind down and to adjust myself and for sleep as well. So that's another thing I practice.

Sarah Hughes 22:21

I think something that you're really tapping into there is that idea of boundaries, you know, between your work and the rest of your life, which is something I think, particularly for students who might be doing college and everything else in a small space at the moment is quite important. And I also loved your reference to being like a kid, I think it was something that was mentioned in our first episode, one of our guests mentioned that she did a lot of coloring as part of her self care. And I think there's something about tapping into, you know, the the simple pleasures of of what a kid would find enjoyable, or, you know, that it's, it's, there's a simple pleasure to be found there. I think that can be really helpful, especially when times are a bit tougher.

Scott Ahearn 23:03

Yeah, no, absolutely. And I think it's really important that sometimes, you know, self care doesn't have to be this complex, impressive thing that we need to do what other people are doing, you know, others have gone to the gym, I need to go to the gym that mightn't suit for you. That might not be your self care, or maybe going for walks or engaging with people or cooking, you know, or doing particular tasks or hobbies and stuff like that they also have a valuable place as well in terms of self care.

Sarah Hughes 23:31

Absolutely. Well, listen, Scott, thank you so much for coming on and chatting with us today. It's been an absolute pleasure. And I think you've given some really good insights for people as to what the counseling process is like, as well as some good hints and tips for managing the whole exam process as well. So thank you so much for joining us.

Scott Ahearn 23:46

Brilliant. Thanks so much for having me, and the best of luck everyone with our exams as well.

Sarah Hughes 23:50

Absolutely. Thank you for listening to today's episode. Connecting minds is made possible thanks to funding from the National Office for suicide prevention. If you have any comments or questions about today's episode, the podcast or the work USI are doing on student mental health, please feel free to contact us. details of how to do so are available in the show notes. sources of support are also included in the shownotes. please reach out for help if you are struggling in any way with your mental health. Take care for now.