

# Connecting Minds

## Season 1 Episode 3: The Work of USI and the Year in Review

### Useful links:

National Student Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Framework:

<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/10/HEA-NSMHS-Framework.pdf>

USI Mental Health Week campaign 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/usimh20>

USI World Mental Health Day campaign 2020: <https://usi.ie/campaigns/union-of-students-in-ireland-marks-world-mental-health-day-2020-with-day-of-action-and-letter-to-minister-simon-harris/>

USI Body Awareness Week Campaign:

[https://twitter.com/hashtag/Ceili%C3%BAirCorp%C3%A1ch?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Ceili%C3%BAirCorp%C3%A1ch?src=hashtag_click)

USI Vice President for Welfare Social Media: [https://twitter.com/USI\\_Welfare](https://twitter.com/USI_Welfare)

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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### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mental health, usi, students, support, welfare, student, campus, friends, year, campaigns, suppose, ensuring, adapting, clare, reach, vice president, framework, impacted, absolutely, suicide prevention

### SPEAKERS

Clare Austick, Sarah Hughes

### **Sarah Hughes** 00:06

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 Three of connecting minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. And I'm delighted to be introducing you today to Clare Austick, the current vice president for welfare for USI, and the incoming president for the next academic term. And Clare, thanks so much for joining us today. You're very welcome. Thank you very much for having me. So we might

just jump right in. And I know you came up through the Students Union movements in your time in NUI Galway. What got you interested in working in the the welfare side of things?

**Clare Austick** 00:45

Yeah, absolutely. And so I think, first of all, my introduction, or first involvement with the student movement as a whole was being a Class Rep, where I got to, I suppose, raise issues around timetable clashes, any issues that students had in the class around assessments and deadlines. And so I really enjoyed kind of helping students individually, which then made me run for the part time equality position. And with equality welfare often, you know, go hand in hand. And so I've really enjoyed the work I was able to do as a part time officer around protests or raising issues or lobbying even to an extent on a local level that I really saw myself for, for the role of vice president for welfare and equality. And it was, I suppose, what motivated me was thinking of all the vulnerable students on campus, or those who are marginalized, who will be having issues with accommodation, finances, well being, and meeting deadlines and all the pressures that college has. And so I really just wanted to help on an individual basis, but also for the wider campus community by staying on committees or boards representing their voices and ensuring that some kind of change can be made in the term that I was in it. And then I guess, from that I went on to President and, and still really enjoyed the work always kept welfare with me, which then obviously motivated me to run for VP for Welfare for USI, to bring all my experience to a national level and make sure that campaigns were ran around around well being and ensure that, there was like lobbying efforts to try and get more funding for services, and also just support welfare officers on a local level, because that's also important as well.

**Sarah Hughes** 02:34

And like you say, you know, welfare encompasses this really wide range of different areas. And mental health is a part of it. But it is so much more than that. How do you think the mental health side of things interplays with those other aspects?

**Clare Austick** 02:49

and yeah, and I say this every time, but I think mental health is so fundamental to wellbeing as a whole, anything that we do, it kind of falls back on our mental health, our overall well being the interactions that we have the things that we do on a daily basis, all comes down to our overall wellbeing. So I think mental health is fundamental. And that's why it needs to be a key priority for people, for friends, for the government. And I think just understanding the complexity of mental health, but also acknowledging that it's a key component of our well being, and if our mental health is affected tt's likely that our sexual health and physical health will also be affected and impacted. So yeah, it's fundamental and crucial.

**Sarah Hughes** 03:32

Absolutely. I completely agree with you. So it's been a hell of a year, as we all know, myself and yourself - we've only ever met in person one time despite working together for nearly a full year now. And so you came in at quite a kind of crucial time for for student well being given that we were, you know, in the depths of lockdown when you took over last July. And what do you think kind of in retrospect has been the biggest challenge for mental health or for students over the past year?

**Clare Austick** 04:02

Yeah, I think mental health and well being as a whole has been a huge challenge for students. I think the connection, the sense of belonging to their campus community, being able to talk to their friends, or check in with them, has definitely impacted on student mental health. I suppose that the whole change with COVID-19 and adapting to a new way of living, the environment that we're in all the kinds of news stories that we've been subject to, they haven't always been positive. And so all of the different things that COVID-19 has brought has definitely impacted on student mental health. So I think even the kind of basics of not being able to, to go to the gym or travel outside our two or five kilometers whenever the guidelines were in place. But I think a big thing was not being able to be connected with family members, friends, or the wider campus community and we know that, you know, the student experience is far greater than just the teaching and learning environment, it involves interactions and clubs, societies, meeting friends, and trying new things learning growing, which really makes the student experience but that wasn't able to happen this year as a result of the pandemic. So those are just a couple of things that would have impacted in mental health this year.

**Sarah Hughes** 05:18

And they're they're definitely things that I know you and I have worked hard to kind of have awareness campaigns and point towards places of support and help for people. And I think, as we're kind of, so as we're recording this, we're coming to the end of the current academic year. And I know, things might look a little different when we start in the new academic year, you know, there's a chance we might be back on campus, you know, we might be doing more face to face work. What do you think then, looking forward, some of the mental health challenges might be for students, as we kind of readjust to whatever this new normal might look like?

**Clare Austick** 05:53

Yeah, I think, again, it's that return to campus, and the stress pressure anxiety around that, students have now been, you know, working from home, they've been doing assessments, teaching all from home. So it's going to take time to get used to being in the business of an everyday going back on campus, seeing, you know, 10s 20s hundreds of people in a lecture room, if that's possible, but just the business of everyday life. So I think it'll take time to adapt back social anxiety, people being anxious around being back on campus, but there's also the, the fear around COVID-19. And what that will look like, and you know, is the safety of student protected being back on campus. And so having those guidelines from the government is so, so important. But I also think it has a lot to do with, I suppose managing the workload, again, maybe having a part time job again, and just adapting back to a normal way of life. But obviously, it's not the same as it would have been before because it's through a COVID-19 aftermath lens.

**Sarah Hughes** 07:01

And it's for students who are listening to this now, is there any kind of advice that you would give them as they're coming out of this, you know, really rough year? And there's still a lot of uncertainty ahead?

**Clare Austick** 07:14

Yeah, I think I'm taking it step by step. There's, there's no rush, I think, trying to ease yourself back into maybe if you want to meet a friend, or a family member, that if maybe one day you have like a kind of gathering, organized, that you're not feeling it, that to take your time as well and not rush yourself, or

put pressure on yourself to make sure that you take it on your own your own time. And so I think when it comes to doing the lectures in person, or learning and teaching in person or assessments in person, if you are a bit worried or concerned, you can always reach out to your lecturer to kind of mention it to them, they might be able to provide an alternative method of assessment in place, or help you with the kind of online blended learning if that's a thing. So just reaching out to the supports that are out there that can help you and I think something that we've pushed for as well is taking on the positive learnings and opportunities that we got out of this year. You know, in-person in teaching and learning doesn't suit everyone, for students who are carers for students who have children who are parents, who are working as well. And you know that the online learning suited them better. So just making sure that, you know, the college experience is as flexible and accommodating for students, and ensuring that students feel empowered to reach out to those lectures, support services, to try and help them in the kind of reintegration and adoption process.

**Sarah Hughes 08:45**

Yeah, that's something that I know, Scott Ahearn in our previous episode talked a lot about, you know, the earlier you can reach out for support and advice, the better it will be for the long term outcomes. And it's been a big year for lots of different reasons, not just because of COVID. So USI, were we were honored to be involved in the development and subsequent publication of the first ever national framework on student mental health and suicide prevention. It was launched in October of last year on world Mental Health Day. And can you talk to us a little bit about that, and USI's involvement, and we're kind of it's at now?

**Clare Austick 09:24**

Absolutely. And it's great that you're bringing it up. It's the first of its kind. And so we're obviously delighted that this happened, and that there is a framework in place for higher education institutions to follow and progress within their own structures. But it's also worth noting that it's taken an endless amount of time to get something like this in place. So it's the start of a broader conversation of starting initiatives and programs to ensure that student mental health is taken care of. But it doesn't just end here. And so the involvement that we would have had, we would have consulted with the group we would have had input to ensure that the student voice was heard and at the center of it, whether that was around language or the recommendations or even highlighting the areas that need immediate attention and addressing. So I suppose what's needed going forward now is that all the colleges follow the recommendations that they implement them. It's great having a document with all the different things that are needed, but they actually need to be followed. So what we need right now is just for the framework to be implemented, and built upon and reviewed over the next couple of years, that it doesn't just stop here, it's a it's more of a long term journey, in terms of ensuring that student mental health is supported.

**Sarah Hughes 10:37**

Absolutely, and we as an organization in USI, will continue to be involved in the working group as we move towards implementation of that, and we will include the full framework as a link in the show notes, if anybody wants to read further about it. We've had, we've had a lot of work that we've had to do this year, in often changing circumstances. You know, yourself and myself, we've collaborated on quite a lot of pieces. And I'd be interested to hear what do you think when you look back when you were your

overall involvement we USI is done, what do you think would be your kind of favorite or key piece of work or campaign that we would have worked on?

**Clare Austick 11:16**

And I think there's a couple. So I think that the first one is the the kind of awareness piece that we did on World Mental Health Day so involving all the local unions and shining the light on different mental health difficulties on showing that it's okay to not be okay. And we adapted it to the kind of COVID-19 and yeah, so I think definitely the the togetherness, the LeCheile campaign, but also are really enjoyed the body awareness. And we thought we did. And I'm always really, I've always been really passionate about body image. And suppose trying to raise awareness around eating disorders and ensuring that students know that there are supports out there if they are children. So yeah, I've really enjoyed those two campaigns.

**Sarah Hughes 11:59**

And I think as well, you know, we had of a struggle to try and find a way to develop those campaigns in a way that would be engaging for students when we couldn't go and meet students face to face. And I think, particularly around the world mental health day and Mental Health Week, you know, those campaigns were made mostly what they were by the engagement of students, and I think you and I both really feel grateful that students did come on board and engaged with with the campaigns, you know, there is no, there, there's no point in us doing what we do if students don't engage with us. And so looking forward, you're obviously moving up into the role of President for the coming year. How are your plans progressing for that, you know, how do you think you'll you'll bring your experience from your time as welfare vice president open to that role.

**Clare Austick 12:51**

And I think working closely with the incoming Vice President for Welfare, Somharile Brennan, who has lots of great ideas. And I think just having that understanding of being a vice president for Welfare for a national organization this year, and having seen the different challenges that students face, I mean, students were always struggling, and was always an issue, particularly with COVID, it just exacerbated everything. So even being able to see the different trends, or what areas are needed to be kind of focused on whether it comes when it's around accommodation, or exam pressure and stress. And so just having, having that understanding and expertise, so that when we're, you know, running campaigns or when we're sitting at the top boards representing the student voice, that all these issues can be brought forward. So that students are always listened to that they're heard, but that the requests and needs are acted upon.

**Sarah Hughes 13:48**

Yeah, absolutely. And I have to say, I'm looking forward to seeing what the next year brings, I think there will be challenges as we figure out what what the year is gonna look like in terms of COVID. But just I think, you know, having yourself moving up into into the role. And, you know, there's obviously big shoes to fill from the previous president. But I think there's a lot of positive work that that will be done in the next year. Just as we're getting to the the end of the episode, as you know, there's two questions we ask every guest that we have on the podcast. And the first one is for all students who are listening

to this episode. If there was one thing you could sit beside them, and make sure that they knew about mental health or the student experience or whatever it is, what do you think you would say to them,

**Clare Austick** 14:34

and I think, for understanding the overall role mental health plays in a person's well being and knowing that a mental health fluctuates, you know, on a weekly, monthly basis, and depending on you know, the different things that we do, how we're feeling our moods, stress, the pressure external environments that we're in. So knowing that mental health can change and fluctuate from many different reasons over any course of time. But if it does become a kind of prolonged time, where it's difficult to, you know, get up out of bed in the morning or do work, or it's becoming an increasing challenge that they know that there's support out there. And there's lots of different supports, whether it's NGOs that do awareness campaigns, and they help with like helplines or support groups, or it's the on campus counselling services, or your GP, or psychiatrist, if it's slightly more serious, there's all these support services and professionals out there who are willing and wanting to help. And I think if someone is struggling and but a bit uncomfortable reaching out, and even asking a friend to maybe go with them to the first appointment the first time just for that little bit of encouragement, but there are many supports out there that can help. And, you know, the journey to recovery or, you know, being able to, I suppose, deal with maybe the challenges that are bothering you. It isn't linear, but it definitely is possible. So knowing that mental health is a fundamental part of who we are. And if there are underlying struggles or difficulties, they absolutely can be supported and addressed through professional services. And just knowing that mental health or any of the difficulties that have happened today, they don't define a person for who they are.

**Sarah Hughes** 16:21

I think that's that overall message is just so key. And I think it sums up in a nutshell, why you and I do what we do and why the USI takes such, like put such emphasis on mental health. Like, there's, there's such stigma that still exists out there. And I know there, there are difficulties in the mental health services about accessing health. But I think it's really key that people still continue to try to reach out even if the first time they tried to reach out, it doesn't go as well as they expected. Or like you say if they're if they're uncomfortable or scared about it to still try and find a way to reach out. Because, you know, like you say everybody's got a mental health, everybody's gonna struggle at some point. And it shouldn't be that, you know, you go through that by yourself, whether it's informal supports, like you say, friends or family or whether it's more formalized mental health supports, some kind of support, is there at some level for everyone. And, and then, so your favorite or your main act of self care that you you tend to do for yourself?

**Clare Austick** 17:24

Yeah, and the main thing would usually be checking in with friends, I talk to friends, and just making sure all them are doing okay, and I love just having catch ups. But also when I'm back and Galway, I love just spending time with my cat. And so it would be my cat and talking to friends or going for walks.

**Sarah Hughes** 17:41

I think absolutely, there's a really important role for, you know, our non human companions to play in keeping our mental health going. And like you say, touching base with friends, you know, staying

connected, it's part of the message that we've we've been putting out all year like, despite the fact that you know, with restrictions, maybe you can't go physically see them, but still staying connected with people is so so important to our mental health. I'm so Clare thank you so much for coming on, and allowing me to record our chats rather than us just having them ourselves as usual. And yeah, thank you so much for coming on today. I really appreciate it.

**Clare Austick** 18:17

Thank you so much for having me.

**Sarah Hughes** 18:18

No problem at all. So 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 shownotes. Sources of support are also included in the show notes. please reach out for help if you are struggling in any way with your mental health. Take care for now.