Connecting Minds

**Season 2 Episode 1 – Mental Health Chat with USI VP for Welfare**

# Useful links:

List of counselling services available through PCHEI: <https://www.pchei.ie/index.php/students1/student-counselling>

USI Mental Health Website: [https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/](https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/%20)

USI Mental Health Social Media: [https://twitter.com/MentalHealthUSI](https://twitter.com/MentalHealthUSI%20)

Sources of Help & Support for your mental health: [https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/i-need-help/help-in-a-mental-health-emergency/](https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/i-need-help/help-in-a-mental-health-emergency/%20)

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

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**SPEAKERS**

Sarah Hughes, Somhairle Brennan

**Sarah Hughes** 00:00

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 two episode one of Connecting Minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. I'm delighted today to be introducing you to Somhairle Brennan USI's Vice President for Welfare for the 21 to 22 academic year. Welcome, Somhairle. Thanks very much for joining us today.

**Somhairle Brennan** 00:20

Thanks for having me.

**Sarah Hughes** 00:21

So you've come on board as the USI's Vice President for Welfare, how did you get to be in that role?

**Somhairle Brennan** 00:28

Um, so I am originally from IADT, Dun Laoghaire, I was an applied psychology student, and I started in 2016. And then from there, I became the SU president in IADT for academic year of 2021. And then from there, just from being involved with USI last year, and interacting with like various projects and stuff, really kind of fell in love with the welfare role, like I'd always had a real interest in working in welfare and like, becoming welfare officer, I became president, because being such a small union, if there was going to be easier to do more work if I was president, I could work in some other areas as well. Em, but I just felt that this was a really cool opportunity, and a really good place to do the things that I really wanted to work on.

**Sarah Hughes** 01:21

And really interesting to hear that you came from, you know, such a small union up in to the main national executive officer board. And in terms of the platform that you ran on, were there particular elements of mental health that you wanted to focus on, were you to get elected?

**Somhairle Brennan** 01:40

Yeah, absolutely. I suppose the main, the main work I've always done regarding mental health, and this is work that I would have done previous to even ever being involved with student unions, I would have been involved in doing this in second level and stuff like that. Em, the main kind of goal, and the main kind of priority that I would have around mental health is really having quite frank and almost blunt conversations about mental health. I think we as a society, we reached a really, really healthy and interesting stage of destigmatization of discussions in mental health around the early 2010s, particularly with the work that like the likes of Brezzie and stuff was doing of just normalizing these conversations. But unfortunately, I think that's really as far as we've got, we really, we hit this conversation of destigmatization and, and then didn't really know what to do with ourselves once we got there. And so I think my main goal would be providing supports to students, particularly living with mental health difficulties, and specifically supporting those students, rather than just focusing on the destigmatization of the conversation, actually taking that to the next stage. And like destigmatizing, and then supporting directly through whatever specific supports would be required, rather than focusing on just a general positive mental health conversation without specifying like, particular areas, be it like, self harm in the student population, one of my plans that I really want to focus on is doing a piece for borderline awareness or Borderline Personality Disorder Awareness month of May, and really pinpointing specific sectors of the student body that haven't really been talked about that are in this kind of cycle of change of destigmatization, then stigmatization, etc and instead going beyond that, and just really supporting students directly.

**Sarah Hughes** 03:40

Yeah, I think that's a really important point that you touched on particularly referencing borderline personality disorder, because I think, oftentimes, the discussion can really center around, you know, stress, depression, anxiety, which are really important topics. But as you say, there's a need to go deeper than that, for sure.

**Somhairle Brennan** 03:56

Absolutely.

**Sarah Hughes** 03:58

An interms,

**Somhairle Brennan** 03:58

I think, Oh, apologies

**Sarah Hughes** 03:59

No, go on ahead

**Somhairle Brennan** 04:00

I think Well, I think the main thing would be that, like, when we focus on those kind of big three, like your stress, your anxiety your depression, it can be quite exclusionary for people who may be kind of living with something maybe a little more serious or a little bit more long term. And that population can feel that they're nearly not included in those conversations. They're like, Oh, but we're beyond that point. This isn't for us. And no one should ever feel excluded from the conversation about mental health, like it should be open to everyone not exclusionary in general.

**Sarah Hughes** 04:38

Absolutely. And from your work so far, what would be kind of the main issues around mental health that students are dealing with at the moment? I know we're in this kind of weird phase where we're mostly back on campus, but the numbers are still rising, and there's a lot of uncertainty around how things are going to go for the rest of the year.

**Somhairle Brennan** 04:58

This year is a real weird one. And the primary reason it's a weird one is that we're coming off the back of an equally strange year of last year, having the entire student population online and extremely disconnected had its own issues that we saw with depression rates and anxiety rates. And a lot of people were kind of struggling with mental health difficulties for the first time. This year is a little bit different from kind of what I've heard, and from speaking to students and stuff, in that there is this really weird dynamic of on one hand, you still have the exact same issues we had last year of people are still trying to adapt to this hybrid learning model. Students are incredibly, incredibly anxious, students like are adapting to this kind of societal changes. But then on the other hand, we have this nearly brand new cohort of students who are entering the social side, like the social side of college for the first time in their lives. They're experiencing assessment and stuff, face to face, rather than just online. They're actually meeting people, they're sitting in lecture halls and stuff. And this is had a really strange impact in which on one hand loads, and loads of people are extremely happy to be back in this in person dynamic. But at the same time, the likes of social anxiety and stuff is through the roof. If anything, the depression rates are the exact same, except it's just different circumstances, and there's different factors to be contributing to it. And I think one thing we're gonna see as well is we're gonna see real issues with the likes of addiction and stuff, where people are going to be, like I said, entering the social system for the first time, and being offered a lot of new experiences. And there's this attitude of making up for lost time that goes alongside with the reopening. And there's a real risk that people will start using, particularly the student cohort will start using substances as a crutch to get by on, the likes of alcohol or any other substances like students have been identified as a vulnerable population for like substance abuse in multiple, multiple studies. And I really think we as a society are at risk of seeing our student population really falling through the gap on this one. And, and like Ireland doesn't have the best addiction support services, Ireland doesn't really know how to talk about substances in a particularly healthy way. Our culture surrounding substances is, honestly detrimental to health. And, but I really think that between the mental health piece, and then this post COVID, potential substance abuse piece, we're gonna see a really strange dichotomy of anxiety, addiction, depression, but also people who are flourishing, if that makes sense.

**Sarah Hughes** 07:53

Absolutely. I think, you know, when we were still in lockdown, there was a lot of talk around this idea of getting back to normal or the new normal. And I think, particularly for the for this particular cohort of students, there's no previous to compare it to, there's no going back per se, because they've moved into this whole new space in their lives. And so that necessitates kind of finding their way on a whole new level that I don't think anybody had anticipated. And when you're engaging with students, or when you're working with people who are engaging with students, what kind of advice and that are you giving to students, when they're, they're saying these kinds of things, to you?

**Somhairle Brennan** 08:33

It's kind of a couple of levels to this. There's a number of directions students can go if they are thinking they're at risk or struggling or something. And the first kind of area that I would focus on would be the kind of self care piece. And in which just kind of like, the really basic stuff that everyone kind of knows is just reinforcing those pieces. Like being aware of the amount of caffeine you're consuming, trying to sleep right. And don't push yourself too hard, being aware of burnout and stuff. And it's very easy to dismiss all that advice as 'oh, sure, we know that, it's common sense'. But if anything, because they're such common sense advice, they're incredibly easily dismissed. So they are kind of things that do have to be constantly reinforced. Then above that you have the kind of going externally for help and I would always advise for the likes of going to your SU, speaking to your own welfare officer because they'll be able to advise you specifically on what supports may be accessible to you; researching online, what you might think you might need or kind of the areas you think you could go. And then the final stage really is the the kind of bigger external supports. And that's your likes of counseling services, GP, reaching out to external charities and stuff, there's a huge amount of resources and supports available, they're just incredibly hard to access and identifying what supports are going to be right for you is also incredibly difficult. That's where the SU piece kind of ties back in, of your welfare officer will be able to advise you on a one to one basis of what they think will be best for you. And it's really a case of destigmatizing asking for help, like societally. Irish culture is terrible at accepting help and reaching out for help. And that is reflected in the student community and how people interact with services and stuff. At the end of the day, your college mental health services and your SU and all of these people are there to support you and you have access to them. There's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't use that. And you'll even hear stories of people who believe that oh, I'm, it's grand, someone else's going to be worse than me, oh, it's grand, I already have experience with a counselor or something. There's no point in me going to this. And that's like, that's a really worrying attitude that I hear. Because, like, no, you are a student, those services are there to support you, regardless of what you're going through. Never, ever compare yourself to somebody else. Never have that mindset of oh, but what if someone else needs it more - if someone else needs it, I would never say someone else would need it more. But if someone else needs it, that space will also be there for them. It's the coun-, it's the service's job to balance it not yours. It's your job to get the support at the end of the day.

**Sarah Hughes** 11:44

I think that's absolutely the most key message. I think, as you referred to earlier, when there was that phrase, doing the rounds for a long time, it's still kicking about, it's okay to be not okay. And it's okay to ask for help. We've gotten there with the first part of that sentence, but not so much with the second part. And I do think it's something our research would have shown from before COVID, that students either would have felt that their problems weren't bad enough to seek counseling, or that they felt that either somebody else's problems were worse, or sure everybody's got the same problem, so you know, you just got to get on with it, which I think is a real one now post COVID, like, oh, well, everybody's anxious. We've all been in lockdown. We're all trying to readjust. And I think as well, I know, a lot of services are reporting that they have waiting lists at the moment, which I know is discouraging some people. But I think, you know, if I could change that sentence, it's okay to ask for help. I think it's, it's important to ask for help, and to keep asking until you get the help that you need.

**Somhairle Brennan** 12:50

Absolutely. And like, it is unfortunate that we are in these circumstances. But I think one of the most important things that you can do, when you are reaching out for help is self advocation, there is a certain level of you are your own best advocate. And if you think you need more support, or if the support isn't what you think it should be, say it, like, don't be afraid to speak up and be like, this isn't okay, this isn't what I need. This is what I'm looking for. Ultimately, you're it's your head, you know it best. And of course, there is a degree of some services should be aware to an extent of what they should be providing. But in the event that that isn't happening, never, ever be afraid to speak up and be like, No, this isn't for me. And don't ever let one bad service discourage you either. I know so many people who reached out for help through various services, had a poor experience with a service and kind of were put off ever seeking help again. And they were people that really, really needed it and really wanted the help but they had one bad experience. And we're like, oh, this obviously isn't for me. The issue is never you the issue is just not clicking with the service. It can take a few goes to find the right person. And just don't lose faith after one bad experience. Keep fighting for what you need.

**Sarah Hughes** 14:22

Absolutely, I think, you know, every student is as deserving of help as the next person and their issues are as important because they're important to that individual as anybody else's are to anybody else. So in terms of the work that USI and you and I in particular have planned for the year. I think it's important to note that what where there is a lack of services and a lack of availability that is something that you know, we at USI are constantly working in the background to try and improve for students. And what is do you want to talk a little bit more about what our plans are for the coming year?

**Somhairle Brennan** 15:01

Yeah, of course. So I mean, our biggest plan at the moment will be the campaign that we'll be launching before Christmas, which is the Open Up campaign. It was originally, it originally came as part of World Mental Health day this year. And where I kind of wanted to tie in this idea of the country reopening; World Mental Health Day, I think landed 10 days before or after that October 22 freedom day I think it was being called. And I wanted to kind of blend the two ideas of the country's reopening. But also to be opening up about your own mental health and your own experiences, and like normalizing that conversation, but normalizing it beyond the, it's okay not to be okay, like normalizing to a sense of like, Oh, if you're going to counselling, it's perfectly okay to say that, like it's your own business, you're allowed to say whatever you want to say about it. And so the plan is currently that we are pushing this forward as the national welfare campaign for the year as Open Up, and to continue that messaging of because like, we are in this very strange, weird, like, dynamic of flux of lockdown, not lockdown restrictions, no restrictions, that realistically, unfortunately, will continue for next little while. And so just to continue pushing that forward, as open up about your mental health, opening up the country. And this will be primarily social media for the first little while, and then we want to integrate the likes of a roadshow, we'll be visiting campuses to speak with students directly. I'm getting input from like our wonderful, wonderful local welfare officers, it's going to be it's going to be nice like it like the primary goal is to be empowering, and to empower students to to really speak about their mental health and to have those conversations to have those conversations with their friends. And it's, it's exciting, and I'm really looking forward to it.

**Sarah Hughes** 17:11

Yeah, I think it's gonna be a really fantastic campaign. And I think it's very relevant, particularly, as you say, to empower students, I think the message that has been delivered throughout the last year to two years has been like, go home, shut down, you know, stay, stay in your little box, don't don't, you know, interact and that kind of thing. And we're really trying to counter that a lot.

**Somhairle Brennan** 17:32

Yeah, absolutely.

**Sarah Hughes** 17:33

And if there are students who would like to, you know, feed into that. And, you know, I think we were going to have some student consultation days in the second semester as well, I think you and I are both on the same page that there's there's no point in in running campaigns or doing work if it's not in alignment with what students are telling us that they need.

**Somhairle Brennan** 17:55

Absolutely. I think the core thing, for honestly, any work that the USI does any work that I do, is that it's reflective of the student population. And it would be very, very easy for me to just plow ahead with an idea. But at the end of the day, and it's something I'm so keenly aware of, I haven't been a student for two years, I've been involved in the student movement for longer, but like I graduated in 2020. Unfortunately, the reality is there is a level of disconnect that comes alongside that with working with the student movement. And getting that feedback from like officers on the ground and from students and stuff to really ensure that their voices are being heard is really a key priority in that.

**Sarah Hughes** 18:42

Absolutely. So before we finish up, there's two questions that I try to ask all of our all of our podcast guests. And the first thing is, if you could have one thing related to mental health that you wish all students knew, what would it be?

**Somhairle Brennan** 19:00

I think if students were to take away one thing, I think, really, that it is okay to reach out for help. Yes, it's fantastic to acknowledge that you might be struggling with your mental health. But taking that one step further, is really what's actually going to be beneficial for you. And I would really, really love to see more students reaching out to those kinds of things, services and stuff. Like from a personal perspective, I firmly believe that no matter what kind of person you are, you should at least attempt counseling once in your life. Like even if you are the happiest person on the planet, you think you've no problems, it will still be beneficial in some way even just to have your voice heard and to speak about your life. It will always benefit you in some form or another regardless of what your expectations may be. So I think that would be my main, my main thing.

**Sarah Hughes** 20:00

Absolutely, I think yeah, there's a lot to be said for just being able to take the things that you're going through in life outside of your own head and examine them with somebody who has the ability to be a bit more objective about it.

**Somhairle Brennan** 20:14

That's exactly it.

**Sarah Hughes** 20:16

And in terms then of, we've referenced it a couple of times, self care, what would be your favorite act, or main actor self care that you engage in?

**Somhairle Brennan** 20:28

My favorite act of self care. And it's unfortunately, one that I'm not amazing at. But when I do do it, I always find it beneficial is probably sleep. I think sleep is one of the most important things you can do, particularly when you're a student, it's so easy to not have a healthy sleep pattern. Like I can open admit when I was a student, I was terrible. Like, I would stay up late just for the sake of it, because I was like, Oh, I moved out of home. I'm cool now. And I suffered for it, like, there was no reason for you to be saying up to two o'clock in the morning, like, getting a good night's sleep, the impact that has on your overall well being can never be discounted. And it sounds like such common sense. But like, even taking it beyond the try get a good night's sleep like like, my, my perspective is like, Okay, if I can get at least six hours, I'm at least functioning that's better than me getting less. And looking at it that way is nearly easier to fulfill. Because if you go in with this attitude of like, oh, I need to get eight hours sleep, you're setting yourself a challenge. It can actually induce stress, it can be nearly detrimental to that but if you're going in with the attitude of Oh, I'm getting as much as I can. I'll aim for at least this. It takes a pressure off yourself because there's a huge amount in terms of internalized pressure that goes alongside self care. And it's just it's all about framing.

**Sarah Hughes** 21:55

Absolutely. I think there's there's a kind of self kindness almost in letting yourself sleep.

**Somhairle Brennan** 22:01

Yes.

**Sarah Hughes** 22:01

And in terms of like, the way you mentioned it before, like some of this stuff is so very sort of common sense and everyday. But there's, there's a reason for that, you know, if you can kind of get a good routine with the basics of sleeping and eating and exercising. It's not going to cure a mental illness, but it can sort of help you have that stable baseline. And you're not fighting against yourself then.

**Somhairle Brennan** 22:25

it's exactly it like it's it's there's a level of self destructiveness that goes hand in hand with it. And even if you can recognize that you're engaging in self destructive behaviors, that's half the battle.

**Sarah Hughes** 22:40

Absolutely. Well, listen, thanks very much for joining us today, Somhairle,

**Somhairle Brennan** 22:44

Thank you

**Sarah Hughes** 22:44

I think you and I could probably chat for hours and hours about all this stuff given the chance.

**Somhairle Brennan** 22:50

Definitely!

**Sarah Hughes** 22:50

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 that 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 show notes. Please reach out for help if you are struggling in any way with your mental health. Take care for now.