Connecting Minds

**Season 2 Episode 3 – chat with Moninne Griffith from BeLonG To**

# 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/>

BeLonG To website: [https://www.BeLonG To.org/](https://www.belongto.org/)

BeLonG To social media: <https://twitter.com/BeLonG_To/>; [https://www.facebook.com/BeLonG Toyouthservices/](https://www.facebook.com/belongtoyouthservices/); [https://www.instagram.com/BeLonG Toyouthservices/](https://www.instagram.com/belongtoyouthservices/)

LGBT Ireland report: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/connecting-for-life/publications/lgbt-ireland-report.html>

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**SPEAKERS**

Sarah Hughes, Moninne Griffith

**Sarah Hughes** 00:02

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 three of Connecting Minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. I'm delighted to be introducing you today to Moninne Griffith, CEO of BeLonG To the Irish LGBT youth organization for people aged 14 to 23. Welcome Moninne. You're very welcome. Thanks very much for joining us today.

**Moninne Griffith** 00:26

Delighted to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

**Sarah Hughes** 00:30

So as I mentioned in the introduction there, you're the CEO of BeLonG To, which is an Irish LGBT youth organization. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that the organization does?

**Moninne Griffith** 00:40

Sure, well, I joined BeLonG To six years ago now. But we've actually been around for 18 years. And when we started as a, as a youth group, the founder, Michael Barron had been working in the city center, and had noticed that there were a lot of LGBT young people coming into the service that he was working in, who were experiencing homelessness. So he got a group of activists and advocates together and they started BeLonG To they got some funding together, and they they opened the doors at BeLonG To so it started very much as a as a peer support group for, at the time LGB young people in Dublin. And we've grown since then. So now we have five groups that meet pre COVID met face to face. And now online, we have our new young persons group, we've an under 18s, an over 18s, a trans and non binary group and an LBT women's group as well. So at the heart of what we do is provide a safe space for young people aged 14 to 23, to meet other young people who've had, who are having or have had similar experiences to them in terms of coming out. I mean, it's very, the LGBT community is very diverse, you know, and everybody's journey is different. But the one thing we have in common is that coming out, because mostly people are read as as being heterosexual and being cisgender, which is having you know, that your gender matches the sex, you know, that you were assigned at birth. And so coming out can be really stressful. And that's the thing that I suppose connects, so many people within the LGBT community is supporting each other with that coming out part. So as well as the peer support groups, we provide a lot of direct support as well to young people via telephone, text, email, and Teams. And that can be about again, coming out to family and friends, issues at school, issues in your sports club, and mental health issues, sexual health issues, issues around drugs and alcohol, lots of things, we've got four youth workers now who work full time and do amazing work supporting young people. We also support a network of LGBT groups across the country that are hosted by national big organizations, national organizations, like Youth Work Ireland, Foroige, Cross Care, and they have in different parts of the country, they may have an LGBT specific group. So we we support the youth workers in in those groups. You know, we, you know, we help share policy and best practice. And the idea is that no matter where you are as a young person in the country, that you have access to the same quality of, of youth work and can feel welcome and supported. And so we do that. And then we do a lot of work, as well in the kind of policy and then legislative side of things. We work with government and departments and government departments. And we lobby for policy change and improvements. And we try and change the systems and the structures, I suppose that continue to harm and cause problems for LGBT young people. So that's kind of what we do. And you might ask, why do we need BeLonG To now sure haven't we got marriage equality and gender recognition? And the truth is, I wish that was true. But unfortunately, you know, we have got really great constitutional and even legal protections for LGBT people in Ireland, but it takes time it takes time to unpick and undo a lot of those deeply held prejudice and, and ideas about gender identity and sexual orientation and even LGBT people go around with unconscious bias, you know, it's deeply deeply ingrained in us, so we have to check ourselves. And we have to remind each other and, and, you know, and that's what campaigns like Stand Up in schools is all about, it's about empowering young people to, you know, be upstanders instead of bystanders, when they hear homophobic or transphobic language being used or behavior used to say, hey, look, that's it's not cool to use that kind of language, you know, those words harm, and you just shouldn't do it, you know. So yeah, lots of work to be done still in terms of, you know, changing attitudes, changing behavior, reducing the isolation and the sometimes exclusion that surround LGBT people. And that fear of rejection, really, on the journey of coming out, but that many young people feel or experience, you know, can cause all sorts of problems, which we'll probably talk about later on in the program.

**Sarah Hughes** 06:02

Absolutely, I think you're right there, you know, there's there, there can be this sort of assumption that, you know, we're very progressive in Ireland, you know, we have marriage equality, and, you know, it's it's not illegal anymore to be non cisgender, non hetero, heterosexual. But in reality, that's that they're very recent developments for us as a country, like, you know, most most young people, you know, they lived through one or both of the of those becoming reality.

**Moninne Griffith** 06:31

Yeah. And you know, what's happened is it weirdly is, because those amazing steps forward happened with with gender recognition and marriage equality. Young people got the message, it's okay to come out, you know, and it is, and it should be. And that's why we've seen increasing numbers of young people coming out. But the thing is that society kind of hasn't up, you know, and our systems haven't and our structures like schools and healthcare systems haven't really caught up yet. So that's unfortunately, where some young people really run into difficulties is in spaces like that health care spaces and school spaces, sometimes in their communities, and even sometimes still in their homes. You know, we still unfortunately, you know, support young people who are experiencing homelessness, and their sexual orientation or gender identity may be a contributing factor to that. Maybe, you know, it's not home isn't a safe place for them. They're not accepted it and it just, you know, they can be sometimes subjected to homophobic or transphobic abuse, whether that's emotional, or even sometimes physical. So thankfully, that's less and less, but that that still, that still happens, you know?

**Sarah Hughes** 08:03

Absolutely. I know, in the research we conducted in USI in 2019, and we did ask people about their their gender and sexual identities. And we did notice, while there was a much smaller proportion of our respondents self identified in those categories, their levels of distress across different measures were disproportionately higher. I know, that it was something that he would have mentioned through lockdown in, in several other calls that we've been on, that, you know, lockdown had a really big impact on many members of this community in lots of different ways.

**Moninne Griffith** 08:36

Yeah, you're right. I mean, you know, even before COVID, LGBT young people are at a much increased risk of mental health problems. And, again, not because they're LGBT, but because of prejudice and stigma and you know, deeply held biases. And then the resulting exclusion that they may feel or fear of rejection, and them have feeling that they have to hide who they are, and live closeted life. You know, be careful of using, you know, when they're talking about friends, being constantly self policing in front of family members or friends, until they feel safe to come out. And that's a lot of stress. That's a lot of stress in a young person's life. And, and, you know, the the LGBT Ireland report, which was published back in 2016 now, but we're hoping to reroll it again next year, and that LGBT people were twice as likely to experience self harm, three times as likely to experience suicide ideation and four times as likely to experience stress or anxiety, or depression than their non-LGBT friends and family members. So that's why, you know, we work on both sides, we work to try and make mental health to provide mental health services or to work with the existing mental health services, to make sure that they are welcoming and supportive and safe for LGBT young people to access them. But we also try and change the systems and structures, so to reduce prejudice and homophobia and transphobia in society, and in our schools and in our healthcare systems and in our laws and our policies. So that harm doesn't just continue generation after generation, but we, we can stop it somewhere so that this and future generations don't have to experience what, you know, my generation experienced growing up in Ireland, you know, and that's the hope that's what what we continue to work on.

**Sarah Hughes** 10:54

Absolutely. And, you know, within local students unions, we would have specific officers that students can go to if they're LGBT and they're, you know, they're struggling in any way, whether it be with mental health, or their studies, or anything, we have, equality officers, diversity officers, welfare officers, and obviously, there'd be the general college supports such as counseling services, but are there other, like, what would be your advice to students listening to this, who is kind of feeling that level of distress and is a member of LGBT community?

11:30

**Monnine**

So the first thing I'd say is that you're not alone, and you're not, you know, weird or anything like that, you know, are, you know, probably between six and 10% of the population are LGBT, in Ireland. So if you even look at the, what that means, in terms of the numbers of people in your college, you know, there's probably a lot of young people in your college who are LGBT. So it's really good to find somebody that you can open up to, you know, we run a campaign every year called Better Out Than In, where we try and encourage young people to open up to somebody else, whether that's a trusted friend or family member, or a counselor, or, you know, you know, you're talking about, you know, welfare officers, anybody really, who has a bit of experience, who can be a listening ear, and maybe signpost you if you need more clinical support. So if it is clinical depression or anxiety that you're experiencing, you know, it's really good to get support, you know, to go to counseling, and sometimes go to your GP, sometimes medication can play a role in all of that. But I think really finding your tribe, finding your peers is such an important part because it builds your resilience, it takes away that feeling of isolation and exclusion, you know, a lot of the things that are going on in your head, you'll, you'll find out that you're not the first person to be thinking those things or wondering those things. So, you know, finding an LGBT society on campus, or, you know, finding a an LGBT youth group, maybe in the town nearest, so you can jump onto BeLonG To.org, and we've got list of LGBT groups up there. So you know, whether you're in college in Dublin, or Cork, or Galway, or wherever you are, and hopefully, there'll be an LGBT youth group near you. And nowadays, anyway, because a lot of them are online, you know, you know, once you've access to the internet, you could maybe join one virtually, and I think I know from young people that they find that a huge resource, a huge help. You know, when you're, when you're struggling, maybe when you haven't really worked out for yourself, maybe that you know, who you are. And, you know, do I? Do I fancy is it boys or is it girls, you know? Or am I, you know, male or female, that all those kinds of questions, find a safe space for you to explore. And that's what you know, youth services are about, it's not about, we don't tell you when you come in, Oh, yep, you're gay, or yet you're trans. You find that out for yourself. And it's about providing you with a safe space where you can chat with other people who've had similar experiences to you and work that out for yourself. The main thing is to know that you're safe, you're normal, you're fabulous, whoever you are, whatever your gender identity or sexual orientation. And the other thing is to remember that everyone has those as well. You know, the issue is that if you're heterosexual, you'd never have to think about your sexual orientation because people just presume your sexual so you never really it's not something that you think about is likely likewise, if you're cisgender if you're if your gender assigned to at birth matches how you feel about yourself, and you never really think about your gender identity That's just the privilege of being part of the 90%, I suppose. But you know that it's also completely normal and appropriate, as, as adolescents as young adults to explore these sides of you, it's part of the fun of being, you know, young, and being able to do all that kind of stuff, explore that, you know, whether you're, you know, gay, queer pan, whatever, you know. And just because you come out as one thing one day doesn't mean, that's you for the rest of your life as well. There's no laws around this stuff, you are you and your sexual orientation and your gender identity are personal to you. And whether you want to put a label on that, or you don't want to put a label on that, that's fine, too. But the big thing, I think, is just not to kind of ruminate on things by yourself for too long, you know, yeah, it's good to kind of self reflect and do that kind of thinking sometimes by yourself. But it's also really great to do it in a group setting or, or with somebody else. Like I said, whether that's in a youth group or in a in a society or with a counselor or welfare officer, just despite finding that safe space for you to, to do some of our thinking.

**Sarah Hughes** 16:23

Absolutely. I think what you mentioned about finding your tribe is really key. I remember attending an event pre-COVID and the discussion was around technology generally. And this young person that spoke, they were from a rural area, they were the only person in their area that, you know, they there was nobody who kind of felt similar to this person. And so they went online, and they found their tribe online and they reflected how it didn't, it didn't make them feel better in terms of finding answers to how they were feeling, but just to find a community that had the same kind of questions as them. And it was a really big difference for them. And you mentioned, the 90% that are cisgender heterosexual people, for those students who would fall into that category and would like to help or support if they know people, or maybe if they don't but they would like to be an ally and help, what would be your advice to them?

**Moninne Griffith** 17:22

Oh, I mean, the list is long, about how to be a good ally, you know, you know, you can doing everything from donating to your, you know, the LGBT sock on campus, or volunteering or whatever you can do right to just making sure that your friends and family members know that you're an ally, supporting LGBT events, and promoting them online. Using your pronouns online, on your social media handles or in your signature in your email, or, you know, just little small nods that that show that I know, you exist, and I support you, I'm an ally. Sometimes speaking up, when you call things out, when it's not right, when you hear language, or you see behavior, that is homophobic or transphobic, it's having the confidence and the conviction to stand up. Because it shouldn't always come down to LGBT people to have to do that, you know, it's being an ally, an LGBT ally is like, you know, being an ally with Black Lives Matter. You don't have to be black to stand up and show your support in Black Lives Matter. Neither do you have to be LGBT to support your LGBT friends and family. It's about calling out behavior and attitudes and language that's, that's, that's harmful. And asking people to use language that heals that heal instead of hurt, so things like that, you know, trans awareness Week, showing your support online pride. I mean, there's so many days or weeks during the year that you can do is just every day. I think it's important. One little trick that you know, some people like to do is just wearing little rainbow badges or or little pins or something like that. And it shows you that you're an ally. You know, just just endless ways you can show it's kind of like you can do it visually or, or by participating in, in events and just showing solidarity.

**Sarah Hughes** 19:40

Absolutely and i think it's really impressive what you said , that there's a whole spectrum of actions, there are the big ones that you maybe have to feel the courage to stand up to speak out against your friends and things like that and then smaller, everyday actions that really everybody can take, and it's a small action but it could make a big difference in the life of somebody else.

**Moninne Griffith** 20:03

Yeah, you never know, in your circle of friends or on your followers on social media who's out there who might be struggling. So even small, little, little steps that that you think is no hassle, is nothing, could really brighten somebody's day out there and make them feel you know good about themselves and it costs you nothing to do that. Isn't that wonderful that you can do that, you know. So it's just being mindful of things like that. Like I said, you just don't know when your circle of friends who, who may be in the process of coming out. So it's always just making sure that wherever you are, that spaces are, whether they're in person or online, are safe, and inclusive and welcoming.

**Sarah Hughes** 20:56

Absolutely, I think as well the BeLonG To website has a wealth of really good resources and we will link to the website in show notes as well. Well, listen Moninne, thank you so much for coming on, I really appreciate it and I think that any students that listen to this will get a lot of benefit from our chat today, so thank you so much.

**Moninne Griffith** 21:14

it's been my absolute pleasure, Sarah, as you said, we've loads of information and resources, we work with amazing organizations like Pieta and MyMind, and lots of other organizations SpunOut who have their 24/7 text line, so many places out there that you can find support. So you know, as we as we say in BeLonG To is always better, better out than in so get in touch and get the help wherever you need it.

**Sarah Hughes** 21:44

Absolutely. So then 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 shownotes. 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.