Connecting Minds

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**Season 3 Episode 1: Treasa Fox, PCHEI & TUS Midlands**

**Useful links:**

PCHEI: <https://www.pchei.ie/>

National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/10/HEA-NSMHS-Framework.pdf>

3SET project: <https://www.tcd.ie/Student_Counselling/3set/>

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**

Treasa Fox, Sarah Hughes

**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 three, episode one of connecting minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. I'm delighted to be introducing you today to Treasa Fox, head of the Student Counseling Service in TUS Midlands and spokesperson for the Psychological Counselors of Higher Education in Ireland or PCHEI for short, as well as being the lead author on the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework. Welcome, Treasa. Thanks very much for for joining us today.

**Treasa Fox** 00:30

Hi, Sarah, thanks very much for the invitation to chat to you.

**Sarah Hughes** 00:33

No bother at all. So as I mentioned there, you're the lead author on the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework, which was launched into the public realm in October 2020. Em, I think it's a really key piece of documentation for student mental health in the third level sector. Can you tell us a little bit about what what what it's all about and how it came to be?

**Treasa Fox** 01:01

Yes, you were sorry. So, in 2018, the Higher Education Authority formed a group called the Connecting for Life Group in order to advance its commitments under the Connecting for Life Suicide Reduction Strategy for Ireland. So in 2019, then I joined with two other fantastic colleagues in joining the 3SET work pack, 3SET research project led by Deirdre Flynn in TCD, so Work Package One is led by Barbara Dooley in UCD, looking at a national data set for Student Counseling Services. Work Package Two is led by myself, and within that, what we stated we would do was assist the HEA in meeting some of their commitments in Connecting for Life, and the primary one was about scoping out practices in higher education settings in Ireland, to see, to identify good practices, and then identify where there were gaps and how those gaps could be addressed. And then you're familiar with Work Package Three with Ralph Armstrong, in TCD, who's leading out on designing a peer-led transition program for students. So that's how we became involved, I suppose we were we were attending those meetings. And we had, I suppose, at that stage six months into the project, done a considerable amount of research into what was happening internationally, where was the guidance or sectoral level guidance, internationally, and we discovered that, you know, there was some quite quite good guidance in the UK, for instance, and in the US, but that, you know, Australia, were only beginning to look at, and Canada, were only beginning to look at sectoral level, national level, coordinated guidance for how student mental health and suicide prevention should be addressed in higher education. So at that point, we were asked if we would draft and start working with the group, the Connecting for Life group, in developing that guidance. There was a subgroup within that group, which involved Sarah Woods from NOSP and USI Welfare at the time, and ourselves, in terms of really, you know, really, I suppose, bringing it home, you know, bringing it to a really fine point, and what was the guidance that we were giving within that? So, yeah, what we landed on, I suppose, was were nine key themes for student mental health and suicide prevention. And can I just say, at that point, Sarah, the reason that we became not just focused on suicide prevention is that, you know, we're aware that an awful lot of the interventions can happen or should happen, a lot more upstream for people. So really, that there should be, you know, possibilities for support intervention, you know, care for mental health, you know, at much more upstream levels than just getting to the point of suicide, suicidal risk. So that's why it became broadened from suicidal risk to mental health generally. So the nine themes, the first one is Lead, that is, speaks directly to I suppose leadership, at a sectoral level, in a big way at a sectoral level. And, and thankfully, we have that with that Connecting for Life Working Group and that its work continues, I suppose, in terms of monitoring, implementation of the framework and monitoring how it's funded, etc, etc, and evaluating things. And also leadership on a campus level, so that there has to be very strong champions at senior management level within the campuses to drive the student mental health and suicide prevention agenda. Collaboration is key; collaboration across campus. It's a whole campus approach. It's everybody's got a role to play here. And the collaborations are, again, with external partners, so it could be your local mental health providers, em, local HSE services, as well as collaboration across campus. And then Educate is about you know, making sure that your your total campus community have knowledge and working knowledge and applied knowledge in terms of what mental health is, what mental health, what mental ill health looks like, and how to recognize symptoms of distress and signs of distress, etc. Engagement; student engagement is critical, isn't it, in a student's journey. If they don't feel connected to their campus, if they don't, they're connected to that community, they do tend to have poorer mental health and so to provide, I suppose, all of the opportunities possible for students to feel connected and engaged with their campus and their college. And then after that, it's Identify; making sure all of your campus community as wide as possible, em, are skilled and trained in identifying and then signposting and directing students to where they can get the appropriate level of care and support. And part of that Identify would be, I suppose, with the Student Union Officers, you know, the Student Union Officers are, are a key part of that, that point there identifying the next one, Support. Their role is very, very clear in terms of having to do that identification and signposting, but also offering a layer of support there to students in relation to their mental health. Em, Respond; responding, I suppose to incidents that happen on campus and responding to, you know, sudden deaths, etc, etc, that there needs to be clear policies and clear modes of responding to different events that may happen on campus that can cause issues like trauma, and like depression, anxiety. And then we move into, you know, being aware of the transitions and the transitions are not just entry to college, the transitions are also second first year to second year, and then second year into third year, but transitions out of college can be quite challenging for people. You've been four years at an in a university, and then you're thinking about life, beyond it and outside of it, and I'm thinking about all the stresses on young people now, and students, you know, in terms of accommodation, where am I going to live? You know, am I limited in where I can get work, because of where I'm going to live or been able to finance that - all of those stresses and strains that become very real issues for students in their final years. And, Transition and Improve are the final, sorry, Improve is the final one, which is, you know, gathering data, baseline data, and then looking at, you know, in a year's time, what have we done, what have we improved in terms of provision of student mental health and suicide prevention interventions?

**Sarah Hughes** 07:48

Yeah, I think one thing that has struck me all along is how how comprehensive this document is, I think, you know, you and I have discussed it up many times, you know, that idea of the whole campus approach. And so it's not just through the mental health services within the campus, it's not just through the professional services within the campus. And I think from a USI perspective, it was really heartening that from the get go, the student voice was really important in developing this document, we were consulted and involved at every single level. And, and I think, yeah, the kind of revision that we made early on for it to go from suicide prevention to mental health and suicide prevention, em, is what will make this a success, I think, in the long term. And, and I will say, just for for anybody listening, we will link to the overall document, if you want to have a deeper read through it. And I think just to talk a little bit about the Connecting for Life Working Group, that is something that is still ongoing, and we haven't, you know, we haven't wrapped up now that we've published the document. And we are focusing on kind of overseeing the the rollout of, and implemented, implementation of this on campuses. Wouldn't I be right in saying that?

**Treasa Fox** 09:01

Absolutely. I you know, what, I'm 27 years in Student Counseling. And I have to say, I suppose my experience is so much it has happened in the last three or four years in the student mental health space, and and I think, to credit the HEA and HSE and NOSP for for for that happening. There's, you know, I think bringing all those people into a room, Sarah, physically when we were allowed do that back in 2019, and hopefully we'll do that again. But the meetings that went on and happened over zoom over the pandemic, it, it got us away from this ball hop because there used to be a ball hop around student mental health between health and education. You know, the ball hop is like with mental health, that's that's a health issue. That's a health responsibility that should be with the HSE. And maybe Health was hopping it back and saying, well no, it's happening within education. So that's an education issue. And actually the most amazing thing I think for me, is that in that room and that HEA Connecting for Life Working Group, in that Zoom or room, it's everybody, it's together, it's education and health. It's no longer this binary thing of either or. And I think there's been an acceptance of that. And you know what, some really excellent stuff has flown flown from that when those collaborations. And, you know, the key people involved, I suppose they're really interested in collaborating, they're really interested in, in, in connecting services and connecting charities together. And, you know, from that, another example is one of the implementations of from like, the framework was in terms of support was was a sectoral keyword partnership with the text support service, 50808 that came from that group that was, you know, again, Sarah, connecting the dots and saying, well, this would be a really good person for you to talk to. And we were able to action that and roll that out. So, so the institutions encouraged their students and staff, to use the keyword, to begin a conversation with a volunteer to text 50808. So in our case, would be text TUS to 50808. And then the really useful thing for us then is at the end of the year, we can get high level data back to the counseling service to say, these were the references that, you know, the mentions that students made, or that people made using your keywords, you know, and you know, we can see that, okay, academic life is featured in there, but suicide and suicidal risk features in there quite, quite frequently. So it's that sort of connecting people, it really is a connecting group. Actually, if you look at the title and look at, and I've seen just so much positive stuff happening in that space in the last couple of years. I don't know if we're talking about when you started. And how, how much has happened, I think from 2019, let's say, you would have witnessed an awful lot of those changes.

**Sarah Hughes** 11:53

Yeah, absolutely. I think for me as well. I mean, there are connections at all levels within this Connecting for Life Group and within the framework, like for me, connecting what was already being done out there in the world. So we didn't reinvent the wheel, we looked at what was working. But then we also didn't take that and kind of try and fit that circular stuff into the square hole of the Irish context. And one thing that I really love about how how the document is set out as well is it lets each each university or each campus adapt it to how it fits. So if they've already got stuff going on, that's working. We're not saying stop what you're doing and do things this way. It's really very flexible and very adaptable. And I think those are the things that are the kind of the key elements that have come out of this, the adaptability, the flexibility, the breaking down of silos, forming connections, and what it's done really, overall is put the student and the student mental health needs at the very center. That's been the core focus of everybody from day one, I think.

**Treasa Fox** 12:54

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you mentioned the student voice, you know, it would have been a pointless exercise if we hadn't had USI and the student voice really centrally in there, because, you know, after all, who is this for? And who is it? Who is it about? So I suppose that was a no brainer that that you were going to be central in it. And you're absolutely correct in saying that it was, it was written in a way that it allowed for local contexts, to be considered because you know, no two universities are the same in Ireland, you know, it's a very small country, but but, you know, there's so so many differences in relation to the universities and how they operate and how their services are and how they're interlinked, etc, etc. So we had to leave it broad enough, that it that everybody could see themselves in it somewhere under those themes. And we had to make sure not to be terribly prescriptive, because what works in one large university in an urban area, em, is absolutely not what might work in a more rural Institute of Technology in a more rural area. So we had to stay, we had to keep it focused enough that it made sense but em adaptable enough that it could be across settings.

**Sarah Hughes** 14:10

Yeah, absolutely. And so we the document has been around for a while, obviously, things have been a bit slower to kind of be to take effect because of the effects of the pandemic and moving back to from online to in person and all that goes with that. But in terms of what are the next steps in terms of rolling that out in colleges do you reckon?

**Treasa Fox** 14:31

Em, well, I suppose one thing I suppose to speak to is, I'm really pleased to see the commitment at at a sectoral level, at HEA level. There have been they've been supporting some national rollouts of things, you know, and what we have discovered, I suppose through through a couple of different implementations is there's economies of scale that we can do in Ireland because we're small. For instance, we had the collaborative assessment and training, collaborative assessment and management management of suicidality training for counselling staff. So we have 239, counseling service staff across the institutions take that very specialized training. And the reason that was selected as a recommendation is because it was developed, it was born and evolved in a in a University Counseling Service context in the US. So it was a nice fit, it's something that fit on top of and could sit on top of you, no matter what your theoretical orientation was, it could sit on top of that, so so that roll out nationally, you know, when we saw that that was possible, I suppose the HEA supported us. And we've been able to roll out some other things at a sectoral level, so that leadership has been there. That's been really, really helpful. And, yeah, the bloody pandemic, I suppose it has slowed things down, you know, okay, certain things are great, certain things are more accessible by being on Zoom. But also, I was at an in-person, PCHEI exec meeting planning meeting there about two weeks, three weeks ago. And there's no doubt about it, it was the first in person meeting of the PCHEI executive for two years, but you get so much done, and you get so much from each other's energy. I think when you're in a room together and making doing these plans, I think that may be one of the reasons that things have slowed down in terms of developing mental health and suicide prevention strategies, for instance, on campuses, I think, you know, getting resources, the resources, like, this can't be on top of somebody's already busy job, there has to be somebody who will lead out on these things on campuses, it's the same as the consent framework, we can't land it on top of somebody else, then say, right, this is your task on top of your day to day work. And so, you know, at times it has been very slow trying to identify those resources and trying to get those resources in place. And sometimes if the funding is short term funding, it's very hard to attract, qualified, interested and retain qualified people in those roles. So, you know, progress is slow in ways, but also we've been able to drive ahead and in certain ways, and certainly the sectoral level stuff we've been able to, to move along with that.

**Sarah Hughes** 17:11

And I think particularly with regards to funding, one of the things that this strategy enables, you know, at a wider level, but also at local level, is to have sort of a blueprint as to what things funding might be needed for our might go towards, in a more clear way than we've ever had before.

**Treasa Fox** 17:30

Absolutely. And you're absolutely right, it's public money. So we have to be accountable for it. So one of the things that it has lent itself to is, with additional funding mental health funding over the last couple of years that we've got, under each of those themes, we have to account for how that money was spent. Now, again, as we said, what what's going on in one university might be different than what's going on in a small IoT over here. Nevertheless, you know, what did you spend the money on under, let's say, support? Did you look at, you know, online digital interventions? Or did you bring in more counselors? And what did that mean, in real terms? Were you able to reduce waiting times, you know, tell us where it went to, or whatever. And that also speaks to the Improve theme, that, you know, we are looking at collecting data and being able to demonstrate what extras were done with the funding?

**Sarah Hughes** 18:21

Absolutely. And so, this might be a bit of an abstract question that I appreciate, there might not be an answer to in a clear way yet. But for students on the ground, would you have any advice in terms of how they can engage with this as it's rolling out on their campuses?

**Treasa Fox** 18:39

I think absolutely, I think you know, what's great to hear is I do think that there's quite a number of kind of, you know, mental health groups within on campuses that are student-led and I think the first stop shop is your welfare officer, go to your USI or your su welfare officer, and start talking, having conversations about well, you know, what's happening on our campus in relation to this, you know, we want this to be kind of a coordinated with the student voice central to it. And is there a way that we can start mobilizing this, you know, what needs to happen? Does it need that resource that we mentioned a few minutes ago to really drive this and drive the implementation. And it's really, really effective if it comes from from students themselves, when it comes from bottom up as something that so I know that there's a lot of kind of activist groups around student mental health across campuses. And that will be the place to start - go to your SU and start talking about, how can we kick this off? How can we get it happening?

**Sarah Hughes** 19:38

Absolutely, because I think the key the key thing that we've we've discussed at every iteration of this is that it needs to involve students throughout it not just in the developmentation or the development of a document, but in the rollout and making sure that it you know, reaches the students it needs to reach in and benefits everybody on campus.

**Treasa Fox** 19:58

I think the other thing is em, really critical part of the conversation is, you know, and and when you're doing implementation, and you know that students need to be consulted on various different things like if you're, if you're bringing in a particular digital technology that you think will support students, you know, you need to bring the students into the room, you need them to view it, you need them to test it and say, right, this is acceptable to me, or it's not acceptable to me, or, you know, I'd like something different, you're going the wrong path entirely from me, or I get more use out of a different sort of technology and the one I have is already fine. So I think that the priority areas, because we won't be able to do all of the actions that we want to do under each of the themes. I think at the last meeting, we were discussing, picking maybe one or two that you focus in on in a particular year, and that might be all the resources you have. But you know, pick those one or two, and have your students sit in the room stand beside you in terms of delivering out on those. And let's hear from the students what you want. Here's an array of five things. What do you want us to focus on?

**Sarah Hughes** 21:04

Yeah, I think that would be a really fantastic idea. And, and that leads me nicely to my final two questions that I ask all of the guests that come on to our podcast. And because the first one is, if there was one, one thing that you wish, or anybody any student listening would know about mental health or would take away from this episode, what would it be?

**Treasa Fox** 21:24

Oh, yeah. So filter it all down to one. And I think when we are talking about I suppose we've been talking about suicide risk and suicide prevention. The one key thing I would like all students to know is, this too shall pass this this moment that you're in, or this period that you're in, Nothing stays the same, nothing lasts forever. So this period that you might be that's really, really difficult right now, just know it will pass if it doesn't stay static, and it doesn't stay the same. So yeah, that will be it - this too shall pass.

**Sarah Hughes** 22:02

I think that's a really good good tidbit of information, I think, especially because when you're in that space, I know it can definitely feel like it's never ending. And there is no end in sight. But yeah, all things are ever changing good things and bad things.

**Treasa Fox** 22:17

Yep. So leave transients. Yeah,

**Sarah Hughes** 22:20

absolutely. And then, our second, the second question I ask all of our guests is for yourself, what would be your kind of your favorite or your main act of self care that you would tend to engage in?

**Treasa Fox** 22:32

Yeah. God Almighty, with the COVID, and kids with COVID, and all that sort of thing. There hasn;t been a lot of that going on. And I'm coming into my, my, my favorite time of the year, which is springtime, I do a lot of pottering around the garden. I do a lot of pottering with clay and clay in my hands. And yeah, the outdoors. And you know, just watching things grow and getting the kids involved with growing things and pottering around the garden. And then in winter. What do I do I do online shopping? And then don't click the button to check out?

**Sarah Hughes** 23:11

Absolutely a bit of online window shopping. But I think I think what you kind of briefly touched on there at the start is really good that you know, self care is situational. It depends on what else was going on in your life. Like, yeah, it would be lovely if we could all have like spa days and bubble baths and long, you know, slow walks for hours on end. And sometimes that's not always realistic. So whatever you can do in the situation that you're in is kind of key, I think.

**Treasa Fox** 23:37

Absolutely, absolutely. And you know, COVID has made things more and more challenging and more difficult and more complicated. And, you know, I think you know, self care can be something as simple as, you know, a cup of coffee and stand in the sun. I'm just feeling the sun in my head there. It can be moment it is in the moment, and maybe not something that's scheduled, but just something where you acknowledge a kindness to yourself. And it might only be for two or three minutes. That's self care.

**Sarah Hughes** 24:04

I like that.Yeah, I like that. That is, you know, short and sweet. But it still counts.

**Treasa Fox** 24:09

Yeah.

**Sarah Hughes** 24:11

Well, listen Treasa Thanks very much again, for coming on to chat to us. I really enjoyed our chat as I do all our chats.

**Treasa Fox** 24:18

Sarah, thanks so much for having me. And same as you know, we do speak quite a quite frequently and it's great. And we always kind of, I think energize each other too, which is, which is lovely. Certainly I feel it after chatting with you. So thanks so much for having me today.

**Sarah Hughes** 24:33

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