

# Mentally Healthy Universities

A mental health and workplace wellbeing programme for students and staff

## Staff Mental Health Peer Supporters information pack

Nine universities are taking part in Mind's Mentally Healthy Universities Programme until August 2021. The pilot is testing a number of new interventions to help universities take a 'whole community' approach to mental health – in particular focusing on prevention and early intervention.

One of the programme's goals is to reduce stigma and improve peer support for university staff. As part of this universities are working with local Minds to recruit Staff Mental Health Peer Supporters. Now more than ever it is vital that staff feel supported with their mental health. Mental Health Peer Supporters play a crucial role in this.

### What is a Mental Health Peer Supporter?

There is no set definition of peer support but 'at its core, peer support is about the relationships that people build as they share their own experiences to help and support each other.' Peer support is mutually beneficial and, in this context, founded on shared experiences of poor mental health.

Mental Health Peer Supporters are university staff with personal experience of poor mental health or a mental health problem, who provide support to their colleagues.

Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria, and peer supporters are not expected to act as a counsellor. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through shared experiences. This role is not about replacing counselling/therapeutic interventions; it is one of many things the university is doing to keep workplace mental health on the agenda and improve support for staff.

Peer support can take the form of peer support groups, one-to-one peer support or online peer support.

### What are the benefits of peer support?

Research from Mind's Side by Side programme (the largest ever UK study of peer support in the community) found that as people engaged with more peer support, their wellbeing, hope for the future, connections to others, and self-efficacy (feeling like they can make positive changes to their own situation) improved.

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I think it's important because it eases loneliness so if you're in work and you're struggling with something and you don't feel you can go to your line manager... it's a really useful thing to be able talk to other colleagues... Relief that you're not the only one that feels like that...  
Suzanne, University of Worcester

## What is the difference between this role and other mental health roles at the university?

Although it is of course important to support students with their mental health, this role is specifically focussed on staff providing support to their colleagues.

- A **Mental Health Peer Supporter** is an employee with personal experience of poor mental health or a mental health problem, who provides peer support to their colleagues. The role is founded on shared experiences of poor mental health and mental health problems.
- A **Mental Health Champion** is any employee who takes action to raise awareness of mental health problems amongst staff and challenges mental health stigma. Champions are focused on changing attitudes. They create opportunities to start up conversations about mental health, dispel myths, and make it easier for people to seek support. They may or may not have their own experiences of mental health problems. This role is also part of Mind's Mentally Healthy Universities Programme. Staff can apply for this role as well as the Mental Health Peer Supporter role.
- A **Mental Health First Aider** steps in, reassures and supports a person in distress, reacting in a crisis. They may or may not have their own experiences of mental health problems.

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## Why do we need Peer Supporters?

We all have mental health just as we have physical health.

We know that 1 in 4 of us will experience a mental health problem in any given year. This includes university staff. The Education Support Partnership found that 32 per cent of higher education staff have experienced a mental health problem in the past academic year. Additionally, 55 per cent of staff described themselves as stressed.

Stigma is still an issue, including at our university. The Equality Challenge Unit found that 38 per cent of university staff surveyed said they had not told colleagues about their mental health problems due to a fear they would be treated differently or thought less of.

We hope that taking part in this programme will be just the beginning for staff who want to make a difference around mental health at work. We are looking for those who have the passion to create an environment where colleagues feel able to talk openly and receive support.

What is so great about this scheme as it allows people to get in contact with Mental Health Peer Supporters to get that support in work, whether it be just a friendly ear to off load to or someone who can advise a little on where that person can get additional help and support. Sometimes just having someone tell you it's ok to feel as you do and listen is enough. A little can make a big difference.

Clare, Research Assistant, University of Greenwich

## Who can become a Mental Health Peer Supporter?

We are looking for university staff at any level and any role from our pilot universities to join our network of Peer Supporters.

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## Support for the role

As part of the programme you will receive training from Mind which covers:

- what is peer support
- the peer supporter role: skills and qualities
- techniques for supporting your colleagues
- boundaries and challenges
- peer support in practice
- looking after your wellbeing.

A local Mind representative will be available throughout the academic year as Mental Health Peer Supporters become more familiar with the role.

Peer Supporters will also be provided with an information pack for their line manager to help them speak to them about the role.

Organisational Development/HR are also involved in the programme and provide safeguarding policies and support. They will also provide on-going support once Mind's involvement comes to an end in August.

## What is the time commitment?

This is an important role at the university. We want the opportunity to work for you, so there is no set time commitment but we ask that you reflect on the time you could give to this role before applying. In the training we will discuss how to set boundaries for yourself when supporting colleagues, as your wellbeing is a priority.

If you need to stop or pause your activities for any reason, you can until you're able to resume them.

## What could you gain from being a Peer Supporter?

There are many known benefits of giving and receiving peer support such as:

- feeling empowered in your own recovery journey
- more positive sense of identity
- feeling more valued

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- sharing learning – for example, you may find that you provide examples of coping strategies that benefit you, and colleagues share theirs.

Other benefits include:

- the satisfaction of supporting your colleagues with their mental health
- the opportunity to develop new skills
- the chance to attend Mind training and receive support from them to help you take forward this role
- the opportunity to be a part of a community of Peer Supporters from across the university, sharing knowledge and experience.

I find it so rewarding to help people just by listening and helping them find the support they need to get through difficult times...

Each "thank you" means everything to me. It's a great feeling to see someone who was on the brink of despair get back to being their old self again.

Amanda, a peer supporter in the ambulance service

Use your experiences of mental health to support others.