

Community Intervention Script

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Importance of mental health and wellness for students (Podcast 1)

Intro: Today we are getting real guys, as we highlight on the importance of mental health and wellness for all students, and to kick this off my name is Millicent, I am not alone, with me, I have Kelsy and we are both M1 student psychologists. We are so grateful to be joined by Tobias, our representative from student counselling and development here at UFS.

If you can just think about it for a second, learning how to support each other through hard times is one of the most important things we can do as human beings. The role of university partnerships have been extremely crucial in South Africa for addressing issues such as social inequality, overcoming the past injustices, and promoting health & well-being for students, and communities at large (Eloff & Graham ,2020). And as higher education has become more mainstream, so have the concerns about the increased need for mental health and well-being of students and questions about universities' ability to provide students with top-notch support. Ultimately, students' mental health may suffer, and this may affect all aspects of their well-being. What are we saying here exactly?

Research done by the World Health Organization in 21 countries to examine mental health disorders in students, has found that only a small proportion of such students receive even minimally adequate treatment, 'let that sink in". (Eloff & Graham ,2020). To top it all, the Covid-19 pandemic also brought about unique changes in higher education, which called for coming back to the drawing board and reflecting on the way forward for the wellbeing of students. Things as we knew them, may never be the same in the higher education system. Students' lives have been impacted at different levels by COVID-19, including forcing them to leave their homes and campuses, struggling financially, losing their internships, and being expected to learn new technologies (Govindarajan and Srivastava, 2020). So, what needs to happen? We need to encourage and enable a culture of nurturing students' mental well-being, as in the future, the

very students will be potential employers, the very students will be making strategic decisions about how to prioritise the well-being of their own employees. So, the work must start here, must start now.

This brings us to the very essence of the necessity of this discussion on the importance of our very own students' mental health and wellbeing on campus. And to help us with that, on the hot seat we welcome back Tobias, to answer some burning questions:

Questions:

1. Are students open to the culture of help seeking on their mental health and wellbeing or do students still suffer in silence?

Response: It depends on who you talk to, some students are open and more informed about mental health matters, and they use various services that promote their mental health and development; however, many students may find seeking professional psychological help unfamiliar or even frightening. Factors that influence help seeking behaviour include lack of knowledge regarding mental illness, traditional cultural beliefs, stigma & discrimination. In one South African study, for instance, conducted in Limpopo, researchers reported that mental illness was often ascribed to witchcraft or ubuloyi, help for mental illnesses was mainly sought from traditional & religious leaders as the first steps of help-seeking, with western forms of care as considered as the last resort, thus the community and students must educate themselves regarding mental health and illness and follow a holistic approach to their health.

2. With regards to mental health stigmatization, what are your thoughts?

Response: Stigmatization is born from ignorance although much work is done to reduce mental illness stigma, it remains a significant impediment to individuals seeking help or reporting an existing common mental disorder. In addition, it may be especially difficult for males to acknowledge mental health challenges and seek help. Cultural beliefs often perpetuate the false narratives that you are weak or deficient if you admit to having mental health challenges, however, knowledge, awareness and mental health literacy are the natural enemy of ignorance. So, if communities and societies can create mental health learning

opportunities and safe spaces to share mental health and illness experiences openly, it will go a long way in reducing stigma.

3. What words of encouragement would you like to share with our students on campus to encourage them to make use of student counselling services?

Response: Well, knowledge is power, so my message is take responsibility for your mental health education and learn and most importantly apply science backed approaches to well-being and mental health daily. Get up before you give up, nobody's going to do it for us. Get up and exercise, get up and meditate, get up and organise your room, get up and reach out for help when you need it, get up and do some self-care, get up and work on your mind, don't wait until the house is on fire because prevention is better than cure and always remember that you are not alone, and you matter.

Thank you so much for such valuable insight and advice to our students.

And to our most valuable humans on campus, we certainly hope that all of you listening will take up the opportunity and visit student counselling more frequently in the future. Always remember that your mental health is a priority, your happiness is an essential and looking after yourself is a necessity. And next up Kelsy will let you in on practical aspects of how you can access these mental health services: over to you Kelsy:

Practical Aspects: Accessing Mental Health Services at UFS

Thanks for the introduction, Milly. As Milly just mentioned, I'm Kelsy and I'll be discussing some of the practical aspects of accessing mental health services at UFS. But before we get into that, what does research say about mental health amongst university students? Mental health problems are common among university students globally and South Africa is no exception. Research consistently shows low treatment rates among university students with mental health problems. This may be due to difficulties accessing mental health services, stigma surrounding mental health and students preferring instead to access support from family and friends (Banties

et al., 2020). However, students are in need of mental health services and support and this section of the podcast aims to create awareness of where students can access these available resources.

So where can you find support services at the University of the Free State and specifically mental health resources on campus if you are struggling? The answer is simple: Student Counselling and Development (SCD). To access this online visit the UFS website at www.ufs.ac.za. On the home page click the drop-down menu and click on the Students tab. Scroll down until you see Student Counselling and Development and click on “read more”. This will take you to the Student Counselling and Development home page.

They offer several services for students such as individual, confidential counselling for various psychological, emotional, and developmental challenges. This includes adjustment, anger-management, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, grief, relationships, self-esteem, sexual assault, stress-management, and trauma.

If you're not completely comfortable attending an individual session, there are a variety of developmental workshops and programmes that are presented; ranging from Coping with Stress, Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Self-Esteem, Self-Discovery and Relaxation Sessions.

There is also a student counselling toolkit titled “Surviving or Thriving?” which can be downloaded. This toolkit provides practical suggestions to real-life struggles that students may face. It covers a wide range of the most common problems that students experience including academic and personal challenges ranging from test and exam anxiety to dealing with grief.

If you wish to visit the SCD, you can find them in the Health and Counselling Building on the 1st floor on main campus or if you're situated on Qwaqwa campus, in the Instika building on the 1st floor.

The SCD contact details are listed on their homepage should you wish to contact them. There is also a list of emergency numbers that students can contact in crisis situations. The SCD can also be contacted via email at scd@ufs.ac.za for Bloemfontein campus, scdqg@ufs.ac.za for Qwaqwa scdsouth@ufs.ac.za for South campus.

So, if you feel like you may be in need of therapy, or just someone to talk to about certain aspects of your life, feel free to contact the SCD to receive professional advice. Lastly, in the words of Michelle Obama – “It’s time to tell everyone who is dealing with a mental health issue that they’re not alone, and that getting support isn’t a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of strength.”