The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust

Depression – let's get talking

How to write a Mental Health and Wellbeing policy for Schools & Colleges

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Introduction

In an average classroom, three children will be suffering from a diagnosable mental health condition. By developing and implementing practical, relevant and effective mental health policies and procedures we can promote a safe and stable environment for the many students affected both directly and indirectly by mental ill health.

The school has an important role to play, acting as a source of support and information for both students and parents. However, many school and college staff feel out of their depth when faced with issues related to mental health. This guidance is designed to help schools develop policies and procedures which will empower staff to spot and support students in need of help and to follow appropriate referral pathways and procedures. A well-developed and implemented policy can prevent students from falling through the gaps.

> *"A boy in year 10 was suffering badly from anorexia and ended up in A&E – when staff were debriefed several of us realised that although we were very concerned about him, we had all assumed someone else was dealing with it – but nobody was. We now have a policy with a named member of staff who all these concerns are passed to."*

First we will talk about how you can go about writing policies and procedures that truly meet the needs of your school and college population. Then we go on to share example documents which can either be used as inspiration or a starting point. Finally, we provide appendices with additional information which staff may find helpful as well as a digest of websites and books where you can find further information about the mental health issues you are more likely to come across within your student body.

Guidance and advice documents, including advice from the Department for Education and Public Health are included in Appendix B.

Acknowledgements

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This policy forms part of the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust's ongoing work to improve recognition of and support for mental health issues. The Trust provides funded training to schools on a variety of topics related to mental health including twilight, half day and full day INSET sessions. For further information, visit www.cwmt.org.uk

Writing an effective policy for your school or college

Even if you're planning on using example policies and procedures, you should always view these as a starting point and consider how they can be adapted to make them the best fit for your school or college. In writing your policy, you're looking to develop something that works for your school and your community – you may find that ideas that worked well elsewhere translate well into your environment, but you may find that the unique culture of your school means that ideas need tweaking or completely revisiting. Never be afraid to use your own skills, knowledge and experience to develop a policy that feels like a good fit for you and your school – and be prepared to be flexible; things may change.

Below we've outlined some advice to bear in mind whilst developing your policy. Following this advice should help you to ensure that you develop a policy that is truly in line with the needs of your community.

Keep it practical

You may spend a long time researching your policies and procedures and have a huge amount of information to impart, but a lengthy policy is off-putting to potential readers and a longer policy is far less likely to be read, digested and implemented than a shorter policy. One of the key ways to cut down on the length of a bloated policy is to make it a 'doing' document. You may develop separate sources of information which can be attached as appendices or on your school's virtual learning environment, but the policy itself should be a straightforward document outlining what staff need to do in order to promote positive mental health amongst your students. Each page should outline clear actions for staff – if there are pages that do not outline specific actions, consider whether they'd be better as appendices or simply cut altogether.

Ideally your policy should be a 'go to' document to which staff regularly refer when they're in need of guidance as to what to do next. Don't bloat it with an excess of information.

A good policy should be clear and simple to use

Think carefully about the formatting of the final document. Can you make use of diagrams, subheadings, bullet points or boxes to ensure that salient information is highlighted in a digestible way? Don't use overly complicated diagrams unnecessarily, but consider whether for example, a simple flowchart showing the school's referral pathway would be instructive for colleagues.

Try to avoid the use of overly complicated language and technical terms or jargon. Write your policy in language that can be understood by every member of staff from the most experienced to the least.

Learn from past experience

A good starting point for writing your policy is to reflect on what has worked well and less well in the past. Consider specific students who've faced mental ill health and think critically but constructively about ways in which the school supported them well and ways in which things could be improved. When put into the context of a real student, your policy and procedures will make more sense and you'll quickly see their shortcomings, which can then be addressed.

Draw on student and parent voices

The best policy is one which actively addresses the concerns of those it is designed to support and protect. Asking for guidance from your student council, holding a focus group or sending out an anonymous questionnaire can be a good way to understand students' experiences and opinions about the school's ability to provide a safe, stable and supportive environment to young people with mental health issues. It can help too, to draw on the experiences of parents, especially those whose children have faced or are facing mental ill health. They will be able to give you a good steer on how the school can best support young people and their families.

Students and parents can provide valuable input both in the early stages of policy development and also later on when you have a draft policy to share that they might feedback on.

Outline warning signs

One of the key things that all staff can do is to keep an eye out for warning signs that might indicate a student is suffering with a mental health issue. Highlighting some key warning signs within the context of the school or college setting can be very helpful to staff and ensure that alarm bells ring at the right time.

Make it clear what to do next

As well as ensuring that all staff are aware of the most common warning signs of mental ill health, we need to ensure that our policy tells all staff what they should do with such concerns. All concerns, however minor, should be followed up in line with school policies and procedures.

Name key members of staff

It's absolutely vital that you name names in your policy. Colleagues need to know exactly who is responsible for what and how they should communicate concerns or queries with key members of staff.

As a minimum you will want to name:

- Your designated child protection / safeguarding officer
- Your mental health lead
- Your lead first aider
- Your pastoral lead
- Your CPD lead in case people need training

There is likely to be some overlap here, but never assume that colleagues know who to turn to with their queries and concerns unless you have clearly outlined it in your policy. It is important to keep the policy up to date with any staff changes and to clearly communicate these changes to all staff.

Have a plan for disseminating your policy

You can write the best policy and procedures in the world, but if their destiny is to sit on the office shelf for the next five years then you might as well not have bothered. Think carefully about how to share the policy with colleagues, governors, students and parents and whether there is any supplementary training that will need to come alongside it.

Some ideas that might work well include:

- Introduce the policy as part of a twilight session; leave plenty of time for questions
- Print off copies of the policy for staff to browse in the staff room
- Email a copy or direct link to the policy to all staff; do not expect them to find it online
- Share salient points from the policy with students via PSHE or tutor periods
- Add the policy as an agenda item for discussion at your next governing body meeting
- Put the policy on your public facing school website
- Highlight the new policy as a news item or blog post on your website
- Share your new policy in a newsletter with parents
- Include information about the policy as part of all new staff induction

Another benefit of disseminating your policy well is that it can be a good way to bring the topic of mental health to the fore and get students, staff and parents talking about it. In many schools, mental health can feel like a bit of a taboo topic so this can be a really healthy change.

Consider including guidelines which keep expectations realistic

Mental health issues can be ongoing for a long time. They can highly impact on a student's ability to access school. We need to ensure that all members of staff are realistic in their expectations of affected students in order to ensure those students are not placed under undue stress which may exacerbate their mental health issues.

You might choose to include acknowledgement or guidance with regards to expectations around students suffering with mental ill health. Our expectations should always be led by what is appropriate for a specific student at a specific point in their recovery journey rather than by what has worked well for others, so we always need some degree of flexibility.

Expectations we might want to consider addressing include:

- Academic achievement
- Absence and lateness
- Access to extra-curricular activities including sport
- Duration and pace of recovery
- Ability to interact and engage within lessons

Signpost support

Our policy can be a key place to signpost relevant sources of support. We should consider first what support is available at school and ensure that we have been

completely clear in communicating what support is available, who it is available for, how to go about accessing it and what will happen if they do.

Next we should consider what sources of local support are available. Often there is a range of charities and other local services that can be accessed freely or at very low cost. There are likely to be pockets of knowledge on such topics amongst staff and parents. It is well worth going to the effort of trying to gather this information in your policy so that it is easy to access centrally when most needed.

Finally, we should highlight the many national charities and organisations which can provide support and information on a range of issues. We have included some in our model policy but you may be aware of more – and new ones are being developed all the time.

Give clear guidance about confidentiality
No doubt should be left about when disclosures should and should not be kept confidential. Different schools and colleges have different guidelines on this and there is often particular confusion with regard to young people aged 16 and over. Have a clear policy and share it in straightforward language and ensure this is communicated not only to staff but to students and parents too.

Review and update your policy regularly
Ensure that you have a schedule for reviewing and updating your policy and procedures regularly just as you would your child protection policy. As an absolute minimum, you should revisit the policy every three years. Ideally, your policy should be an evolving document which reflects the developing best practice in your school or college. The policy should always be instantly updated when named people change.

Be prepared to take feedback on board and, especially when you first develop your policy, be flexible about making changes to ensure it is as usable as possible by colleagues.

Create different versions of your policy for different audiences
You may choose to share the information contained in your school policy in student and parent friendly versions. These may be much abridged and simplified, highlighting only the most salient information. Effective communication of policies and procedures increases staff, student and parent confidence and often results in good collaborative working.

Share best practice with other schools
Working with colleagues in similar schools can be hugely helpful – we can bounce ideas off each other and share our experiences. It makes little sense to work in isolation when there is so much to learn from each other. It can often be very helpful to invite relevant colleagues from neighbouring schools to attend any training sessions you have planned as having ideas which come from outside your school's four walls can often be refreshing and help you to be more innovative in your outlook.