
Stephen Ward, Bath Spa University
Email: s.ward@bathspa.ac.uk

Link to review

This is not strictly an Education Studies publication. However, the mental health of young people is now an urgent priority for all education professions. High-profile cases of suicide among undergraduate students have seen severe criticisms of universities in the media. University staff are no longer in loco parentis, as they were until 1969 when age of majority was lowered from 21 to 18. However, universities are now seen as sharing responsibility for the mental health of their students, and there are calls for universities to have ‘a statutory duty of care’. The House of Commons Petitions Committee (2023) carried out a survey of current and former HE students and parents with disturbing results.

Students who had experienced poor mental health at university said that they received varying degrees of support from their institutions:

- 86% of current students said they had suffered with poor mental health at university.
- 1% said their university was ‘very supportive’ of their mental health.
- 26% said their university was ‘supportive’ of their mental health.
- 40% said that their university was ‘unsupportive’ or ‘very unsupportive’ of their mental health.
- 67% said they would feel ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘very uncomfortable’ discussing their mental health with their academic supervisor or tutor.
A quote in the report from a parent goes:

Robert Abrahart, whose daughter Natasha killed herself in 2018 while a student at Bristol University, described the current system as a lawless wild west. “And, given no relevant legal responsibility, there can be no accountability when things go badly wrong.”

There is resistance to the proposal of a statutory duty of care. Reporting on the survey in The Guardian, Sally Weale (2023) interviewed Steve West, vice-chancellor of the University of the West of England and president of Universities UK. He declared that, ‘although universities are investing in student support and developing partnerships with NHS services, their primary role is as settings for adult learning not health care’. So while there is a debate about the extent of universities’ responsibilities, it is evident that mental health is to be added to the priorities, not just of the higher education institutions, but of the individual staff who come into contact with students. We are going to have to be aware of individual students in a broader context than simply their academic achievement. This is no small burden, considering the ways in which HE staff are continually asked to do more with less!

This book by consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, Meinou Simmons, is timely in offering guidance to all those who engage with children and young people. The first thing to say about the book is that it is comprehensive. The first section covers all aspects of mental health and illness with chapters explaining biological processes, lifestyle factors, relationships, stressors, vulnerable groups, and the promotion of mental health and resilience. The third section offers guidance in what to look for in young people having difficulties with mood, depression and bipolar disorder, anxiety, self-harm and suicide, trauma and post-traumatic stress, anger and behaviour, autism, attachment, bereavement and parental separation, attention and activity levels, alcohol and drugs, eating, body-image, perfectionism, obsession and OCD, and losing touch with reality (psychosis). The guidance is clear and authoritative, offering practical suggestions for supporting the mental health of young people with recommended resources. The pages on Covid are particularly helpful.

The central section of the book is probably more relevant to parents and carers than to teachers and lecturers who function within an institutional context. But it is probably
unique in this type of publication, giving guidance on how the individual adult should protect their own health and mental health, build their own resilience, carry out good parenting and try to form supportive networks.

Simmons succeeds in explaining psychiatric features, the kind of material which has been the guarded province of medical professionals and which she offers in simple and straightforward terms. At 425 pages it is a substantial volume, but reading and accessing relevant information is enhanced by the bold highlighting of key sentences. The book is to be recommended in the current context of any commitment to student wellbeing.

References

Petitions Committee (2023) *A statutory duty of care for students in higher education.* London: House of Commons.