



# STUDENT WELLBEING

By Travis Maxwell

The wellbeing team consists of a wellbeing manager and currently seven wellbeing officers, meaning there's one for every school within the Met. The schools of Belfast Met include Academic and continuing education, Belfast business school, creative and digital industries, health, wellbeing, and inclusion, and lastly science, engineering, and construction. These schools are divided amongst five campuses, E3, Millfield, Titanic Quarter, Castlereagh and Girdwood.

#### **Who do the wellbeing team assist and How?**

According to wellbeing officer Paula Kane, they help those from many backgrounds. "Those with a criminal background, who are experiencing homelessness, or struggling with gender identity, students who're trans, or students who're young carers." There is no typical background as they tackle the issues which concern those of any race, ethnicity, nationality, or background.

The support they provide is one-to-one either online or face-to-face, exploring solutions, are confidential. They include preparing pupils to tell tutors of struggles or if you'd like or be referred to another place, such as Inspire.

#### **What is Mental Health?**

"I suppose mental health in a broad term is our emotional, psychological, social wellbeing, and with each person that would differ," Paula explained, "so everyone who experiences depression, anxiety, or stress will experience that in a different way, and I suppose as time goes on, at each time throughout our lives you might experience that at different intensities. "Times where maybe you experienced anxiety in a more intense level or at times where it doesn't have as much impact on your life but is still there." As for treatment, she'd recommend that one consults their GP to find which helps them best, as there many different methods to helping oneself, for example counsellors, medication and exercise all have their benefits.

#### **The Lockdown's Impact on Mental Health**

She stated personally that she enjoyed it, finding comfort in it, being able to spend more time alone with loved ones. However, on the impact of social media, she'd state:

"Being stuck at home, that could increase the negative coping mechanisms, a lot of people spend more time on social media, feeling isolated from friends, and family."

"I suppose the uncertainty, if you've suffered from anxiety before, you know that feeling... I suppose the lockdowns, changing



College Wellbeing Officer  
Paula Kane

guidelines, would've made anxiety worse, and similarly if you haven't experienced anxiety before, I am sure that would've been an anxiety provoking time."

#### **Exams, Essays, & Coping Mechanisms**

If exams and essay deadlines are on the horizon, Paula advises students to reach out, as they get an influx of referrals around this time, even if a student isn't experiencing mental health issues, the pressures can induce stress, and impact their wellbeing.

"The earlier we become involved, the quicker we can help you, and put support, and solutions in place for you," she said.

She also states the coping mechanisms which helps her are progressive muscle relaxation, this coping mechanism involves one tensing an area of their body, then releasing it, and in the process relieving tension. Another self-soothing method is box breathing, where one takes in a breath for four seconds - holds it for four seconds, then releases it for four seconds, and then hold for another four seconds, if you do that you can visualise a box, and regulate your breathing.

#### **The Stigmatisation of Mental Health**

When tackling the stigma, she'd reveal that even counsellors go to counselling, that she herself, along with the wellbeing team have a strong support system, and that sometimes you do carry what you hear home with you. In terms of tackling mental health on your own. "There's outdated and traditional ways of thinking, that you can sort things out yourself or willpower is enough alone, I hope that stigma is being broken down and people know that they're able to reach out." She also when prompted on the topic of suicide revealed that she had recently completed assist training, comparable to suicide intervention training, and told of rewording the language of suicide, rather than saying someone "committed suicide", a new way of talking about it, is stating that they "died by suicide" or "took their life by suicide."

On whether it's strong to take your life, she said: "Anyone can be strong, whether they choose to tell anyone or don't, they're strong for dealing with what they had to deal with, but it'd be great if more could access that support, and not feel it has to result in them taking their lives." There are indicators of poor mental health, such as: Poor hygiene, lack of attendance, change in eating, and sleeping habits. If someone appears withdrawn or hunched over, it may be signs that they're trying to invite a conversation.

"To remind students, the student wellbeing officers details are on canvas or the internet, there are referral forms, however, if that proves difficult to fill out for you, don't let that prove a barrier to reaching out."