

GREATER MANCHESTER MENTALLY HEALTHY COLLEGES

School to college transition

Supporting the transition of students who identified as having anxiety,
OCD and/or depression

AQUINAS SIXTH FORM COLLEGE
MARCH 2021



Aquinas College is a Roman Catholic sixth-form college situated in Stockport in south Manchester, under the trusteeship of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury.

It is one of the largest Catholic sixth-form colleges in the country.

Stockport is in Greater Manchester and has a population of 288,733 of whom 22,500 are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Stockport is one of the most diverse areas in England. Overall it is an area of prosperity, with low unemployment but there are pockets of high deprivation.

<http://www.aquinas.ac.uk/>

School to college transition

This is part of the Greater Manchester Mental Health in Further Education Colleges programme. Due to the concentration of student numbers in a relatively small number of education settings and the short timeframes involved we recognised that a more bespoke approach to further education colleges would be needed.

The aim of this programme is to:

- Develop the capacity of further education and sixth form colleges in Greater Manchester to collaborate in support of the mental health and wellbeing of their staff and students
- Identify good practice that can be shared across the system

There are 21 colleges in Greater Manchester (9 general further education colleges and 12 sixth form colleges) and approximately 90% of 16 to 18yr olds in Greater Manchester are in colleges. During an academic year approximately 51,000 out of 56,000 16-18-year olds will study at these further education and sixth-form colleges.

The Association of Colleges (North) has been awarded funding for Year Three of this programme to deliver a wide-ranging programme across Greater Manchester to raise awareness and support development of the mental health agenda within individual colleges.

<http://hub.gmhsc.org.uk/mental-health/fe/>

Aim of the programme

Our focus for this project was to support the transition of students who identified as having anxiety, OCD and/or depression with our learning support team. We set out to achieve this by enrolling these students onto a taught 'mental health and wellbeing course' that would include in its programme a range of evidence-based practice and psychological activities that would provide the students with a set of psychological tools to help them manage their anxiety. Upskilling the students in this way was also expected to improve student attendance, subject engagement and retention.

Methodology

Students who had identified mental health issues such as anxiety, OCD and depression with our learning support team when they enrolled were targeted for this course so that activities could be appropriately tailored to suit the needs of those specific students and their concerns.

A list of these students was generated and they were sent emails to inform them that they would be enrolled on this course as they had disclosed a mental health issue with the learning support team that we wanted to offer support for. They were given the opportunity to opt out of the programme rather than opt in to encourage engagement. Approximately 85 students were contacted: some of the students were unable to attend the classes because of timetable issues, but were given access to all the resources via google classroom; some students were already receiving support from other professionals so they were also removed from the course to avoid disrupting the progress they were making. At the end of this stream-lining there were 70 students across the four classes.

The college's blending learning model in response to the pandemic meant students alternated a week studying in college and a week learning from home, and the programme had to fit this model, therefore students would attend a class one week and access materials and activities on Google Classroom when studying from home. Classes would last approximately 90 minutes, the time being dependent on the engagement of the students. Typically, the teacher would be leading an hour's worth of content and activities and use the remaining time to see individual students.

It was decided that resources were best provided in booklet form, containing a mixture of information and activities. Online NHS self-help materials were chosen as they are accessible and used by therapists for low level mental health issues.

NHS resources

- web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/
- www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Overview

The resources were reviewed and adapted in a way that made them suitable for delivery in the programme, and are listed as follows:

- A GAD questionnaire (Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment) to be completed at the start and end of the course to identify any changes to the student's anxiety levels
- A wellbeing diary to focus the learner on the here and now using mindfulness
- What is anxiety and how to live with it

- Excessive worrying and letting go with mindfulness
- Self-esteem, how it develops and how to improve it
- Using positive affirmations to encourage a happier life
- What is assertiveness and how can we improve it?
- What is stress and how can we manage it better?
- Resilience, what it is and how to develop it further

Students were tracked on a weekly basis through attendance monitoring and their progress was assessed after each session, by checking how they were feeling and if they learned anything from the materials given in that lesson. Students were encouraged to contribute but their privacy was also respected.

Successes and challenges

For the majority of students who attended and engaged with the course content, their anxiety scores dropped from severe anxiety to moderate, and they reported that they feel better equipped to manage their anxiety in daily life. Comments in the course evaluation include many feeling more confident and able to talk more openly about how they are feeling. Students consistently commented that they found the practical elements of the course extremely helpful.

The member of staff has received positive feedback for making students feel welcome and her approachable nature, which has helped students realise that they are not alone in experiencing anxiety and there are ways to manage it. One student reported that the course has made them realise they need to speak to their GP to access further support. All students expressed confidence in the skills and techniques of the teacher and would recommend the course to others. We have reviewed the attendance, engagement, subject reviews and retention data for these students and attendance across all subjects for all students has been excellent, subject teachers have reported positive engagement and progress, and all students have remained in college.

Resources that have been a particular success include the well-being diary which has helped students gather their thoughts and focus on their goals. Assertiveness materials provided manageable techniques that could be easily incorporated into everyday situations which students found beneficial and all students have reported making small adjustments to their routines that have helped them cope with daily stressors.

The course inevitably experienced challenges due to the pandemic; some students reported in their evaluation that they would have preferred weekly lessons to maintain momentum with the psychological tools they were building, and there was a suggestion by some students that they would have liked to have been in friendship groups as sometimes they felt put on the spot and would feel more comfortable talking in front of students they know. As one of the aims of this programme was to help them cope in situations like this, this comment wasn't too concerning, but we would consider how to build positive relationships within the classroom to reduce such worries.

Some students reported that the material wasn't always appropriate for them, and it was a challenge to ensure that the content maintained its relevance for the variety of needs in the

room. For example, on reflection the anxiety materials need to be reconsidered as these students have a lot of experience in this regard.

A particularly interesting comment from a student was how they felt understood by the teacher of the course and their form tutor, but “the rest of my teachers don’t understand and have a go at me when I fall behind due to me being anxious about asking for help” so there is some work to be done on how we make staff aware of student involvement in the course and the importance of their support in helping students manage their anxiety.

Improvements/next steps

- Revisit the enrolment process so that the right students are targeted and they are provided with a sufficient explanation of the course in order to dispel any myths concerning the course.
- Discuss the possibility of a six-week rolling programme that could focus on certain themes related to pressures students feel at certain times in the academic year. For example, autumn term could focus on transition and the spring/summer terms could focus on resilience and exam stress. The programme could be designed in a way that allows a student to join at any point in the six weeks and complete all six sessions. The pastoral team could then refer students to the programme at any time and the course could act as interim support whilst students are waiting for counselling or other support.
- Review programme content to ensure its continuing relevance so that the students take ownership of their mental health.
- A commendation/acknowledgement/certificate at the end of the course that states they have taken part in a well-being programme.

Summary of Case Studies

Examples of student’s successes despite their challenges with mental health

- **Student A’s** attendance in her subjects has been 98%, she attended all the classes provided. From her subject reviews her teachers report that her overall academic progress is on target for her predicted grades which are all Bs. She is rated as exceeding expectations in her engagement with her courses.
- **Student B’s** attendance in his subjects is 100%. From his subject reviews his teachers have stated that he is exceeding expectations in his subjects and engagement. He is predicted all As in his A levels. He reports that this course has enabled him to engage in his education despite his severe anxiety and depression. This course has clearly benefited this student.
- **Student C’s** attendance is 98%, she did attend all the classes. In her subject reviews, her tutors have said she is making good progress and engagement in all her subjects, in her BTEC course she is predicted a D*. This was one of the expected outcomes of the course.

Feedback from the students that demonstrates the success of the course

- **Student A said**, “being able to speak to X and share with others what I go through” and “the positive affirmations” were useful. “I think the course was great”, “I have realised that it is good to talk about your feelings and I am going to seek more therapy”. Furthermore, she found the sessions helpful and “she would recommend the course to a friend.
- **Student B said**, “he was managing his depression and anxiety”. He believed that the wellbeing diary had helped him as he was religiously filling it in. This enabled him to not let his thoughts run away with him. It enabled him to focus on his goals, time management and making sure that he looked after his physical wellbeing. He went on to say, “The booklets and online links to other resources have been really useful and particularly the wellbeing diary”. “It’s made me think more positively now and has given me techniques that I can use in my life.” The response this student has given supports the outcomes of the course as I wanted the students to be able to use the psychological tools in their everyday life to enable them to manage their mental health.
- **Student C said** “I have developed ways to deal with how I am feeling or what I am struggling with” this illustrates that the course materials supported this student. She liked the assertiveness material as she believed that she was not very assertive but after looking at how to be more assertive, she tested it out and it worked for her. I was really pleased that she had developed the confidence to assert herself in some situations, but she said she knew she would keep practicing it to get better at it. In addition, she said ““I have started making changes in my own life” This supports the outcomes of this course as this student had started making changes in her own life which was fantastic.

General comments from students on the course

- “It helped me with my anxiety, it allowed me to be very open about the different ways to help with my anxiety, rather than just learning about it.”
- “I am becoming more confident in lessons and with other people.”
- “It’s made me think more positively now and has given me techniques that I can use in my life.”
- “I have become more confident in myself”
- “The coping techniques that I have learned in the class.”
- “I need to make sure that I practise it more often as I have realised if I do not then I am back to square one”.
- “I have learned how to cope better.”
- “ Ways to deal with how I am feeling or what I am struggling with”
- “I am using the wellbeing diary on a daily basis which is helping me stay in the present”
- “I would like to have been in the class every week.”
- “I am trying to use the materials in my everyday life.”
- “ I am sending myself more positive messages than negative ones, this is helping me.”
- “ It has helped me with my anxiety.”
- “ It helped me look at myself and I think it has given me confidence.”
- “ I feel that the course has had an impact on my life, especially the assertiveness materials.”
- “I would like to use some of the strategies that I have been given, which I plan to do”“

- “The chance to speak and hear from others who have similar everyday experiences.”
- “ It helped me understand that anxiety impacts many areas of our lives and many students also feel anxious about college and exams. Therefore, providing understanding in my life”.
- “ I did not attend all the workshops but those I did attend I enjoyed, especially the positive affirmations and assertiveness.”

These comments are all very positive and it demonstrates that the course had an impact on the student’s lives which shows the success of the course.

Case study: Student A

Student A joined the course as she had declared that she suffered with anxiety on the college system when she enrolled, she said this really impacted her everyday life. At the beginning of the course, Student A was given GAD questionnaire (Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment), she answered the questions honestly and gained a score of 18. This worked out as suffering with severe anxiety.

Students on the course were then given classes on different topics such as assertiveness building and then encouraged to complete the booklets that were provided. There were several topics taught, self-esteem the importance of developing a positive self-esteem and confidence, excessive worrying and why this impacts anxiety levels, what is anxiety and how it can be managed, positive affirmations and using them in everyday life, students were encouraged to monitor their own negative thoughts and change them to more positive thoughts. Resilience building, what it is, how it impacts the person and how to develop it.

Student A’s attendance in her subjects has been 98%, she attended all the classes provided. From her subject reviews by her teachers is that her overall academic progress is that she is on target for her predicted grades which are all Bs. She is rated as exceeding expectations in her.

In response to the evaluation of the course Student A was very positive she said, “being able to talk Ruth and share with others what I go through” and “the positive affirmations” were useful. In addition, she said, “I think the course was great” and “I have realised that it is good to talk about your feelings and I am going to seek more therapy”. She wrote “that she sometimes feels better at understanding her difficulties. She found the sessions useful, and information has allowed her to make positive changes in her life. And she would recommend the classes to a friend and she felt confident in the teacher’s skills and techniques.” This shows that the course has benefitted the student

At the end of the course, Student A completed the same GAD questionnaire to give it reliability and her score had decreased to 13 which was now moderate. Therefore, the course had had an impact on her anxiety. Although she still had anxiety, she was managing it with the psychological tools that she had developed on the course.

Case study: Student B

Student B joined the course as he had declared that he suffered with anxiety in the College system. He completed the GAD questionnaire (Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment) and his score was quite high, it was 20 which indicated that he was suffering from severe anxiety and depression.

Students were then given classes on different topics such as assertiveness building and then encouraged to complete the booklets that were provided. There were several topics taught, self-esteem the importance of developing a positive self-esteem and confidence, excessive worrying and why this impacts anxiety levels, what is anxiety and how it can be managed, Positive affirmations and using them in everyday life, students were encouraged to monitor their own negative thoughts and change them to more positive thoughts. Resilience building, what it is, how it impacts the person and how to develop it.

Student B's attendance in his subjects is 100%. From his subject reviews his teachers have stated that he is exceeding expectations in his subjects and engagement. He is predicted all As in his A levels. Thus, this course has enabled him to engage in his education despite his severe anxiety and depression. This course has clearly benefited this student.

In response to the evaluation questionnaire he said, "The booklets and online links to other resources have been really useful" and "the wellbeing diary". He said, "It's made me think more positively now and has given me techniques that I can use in my life." And he said, "most of the time" the course was helpful. He agreed that he has been able to make positive changes in his life and that he would recommend the course to a friend. He strongly agreed that the teacher had the skills and techniques on the course. This response the student has given supports the outcomes of the course as I wanted the students to be able to use the psychological tools in their everyday life to enable them to manage their mental health.

At the end of the course he repeated the GAD questionnaire and his score had decreased to 14 which was now moderate. He informed me that he was managing his depression. He informed me that he was managing his depression. He had clearly benefited from the course. He believed that the wellbeing diary had helped him as he was religiously filling it in daily. This enabled him to not let his thoughts run away with him. It enabled him to focus on his goals, time management and making sure that he looked after his physical wellbeing.

Case Study: Student C

Student C had joined the course as she had declared that she suffered with bad anxiety., she completed the GAD questionnaire and she gained a score of 13, this worked out as suffering with moderate anxiety. She completed the GAD questionnaire (Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment) and she gained a score of 13, this worked out as suffering with moderate anxiety.

Students were then given classes on different topics such as assertiveness building and then encouraged to complete the booklets that were provided. There were several topics taught, self-esteem the importance of developing a positive self-esteem and confidence, excessive worrying and why this impacts anxiety levels, what is anxiety and how it can be managed, Positive affirmations and using them in everyday life, students were encouraged to monitor their own negative thoughts and change them to more positive thoughts. Resilience building, what it is, how it impacts the person and how to develop it.

Student C's attendance is 98%, she did attend all the classes. Her tutors have said she is making good progress and engagement in all her subjects, in her BTEC course she is predicted a D*.

In response to the questions she said, "I have developed ways to deal with how I am feeling or what I am struggling with". She liked the assertiveness material as she believed that she was not very assertive but after looking at how to be more assertive, she tested it out and it worked for her. She has developed the confidence to assert herself in some situations, but she said she knew she would keep practicing it to get better at it. In addition, she said "It would be good to have friendship groups" This may prove difficult. She said, "I have started making changes in my own life"

In response to the quantitative questions, she said, "the course helped her understand herself most of the time". and she agreed that "the sessions were helpful". She was able to make changes in her own life as a result of the course. She would recommend the course to her friends. She agreed that the teacher had the skills to teach the course.

At the end of the course, she completed the GAD questionnaire again and her score remained the same at 13, this is still moderate anxiety. Although she still had moderate anxiety her response to the evaluation questions was very positive and this course had benefited her.

Reflection by Ruth Hewitt, teacher of the mental health and wellbeing classes.

From the experience of running this course, I believe that there are many successes that can be taken from it. I would do things differently in the way the course is advertised and promoted to the students to dispel any myths concerning the course. I would replace the anxiety materials as the audience knows what anxiety is and therefore, "I am preaching to the converted" as they already know what it is.

The course could be run every half-term that would involve a 6-week programme that students can access voluntary, be referred to or be part of a targeted cohort. The sessions would cover assertiveness, self-esteem building, resilience building, positive affirmations, the use of mindfulness with the use of a daily diary, the impact of excessive worrying, and materials that can allow the student to have a set of tools/self-help to help manage low level/mild anxiety and depression.

To allow for students to access the course throughout the year, students could join at any time and just complete the 6 weeks. They could re-join later if they felt they needed to. They could receive a certificate at the end of the course that states they have taken part in a well-being programme.

At the beginning of this course, students were given an anxiety/depression questionnaire that gave us a score. They were given the same questionnaire at the end of the course. I have given the students confidentiality within the report and I refer to them as student A and so on. I have provided a qualitative analysis with the student responses to the questions. I have just written the answers to the quantitative questions.

In a nutshell, the results of the analysis are very positive, and the workshops have been positively received. Most students would recommend the course to others, and most students were using the tools that they had learned in their daily lives. However, a couple of students would prefer to complete the workshops in friendship groups. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, relationships were hard to establish as the lessons were one week in and one week online. On reflection, when students are in every week after the pandemic, and I believe this will be more beneficial.

GET IN TOUCH

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