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# **Working with Student Minds**

**A Guide for Staff in Higher  
Education Institutions**

## Executive Summary

Student Minds is the UK's national Student Mental Health Charity. Our mission is to improve the state of student mental health and our vision is for all universities and health services to recognise positive mental health as a priority for student success. This document outlines the different options for how universities can work with Student Minds to support positive mental health for all students. Whether through setting up one of our flagship Peer Support Groups or attending one of our Train the Trainer workshops there are many opportunities to help support your institution.

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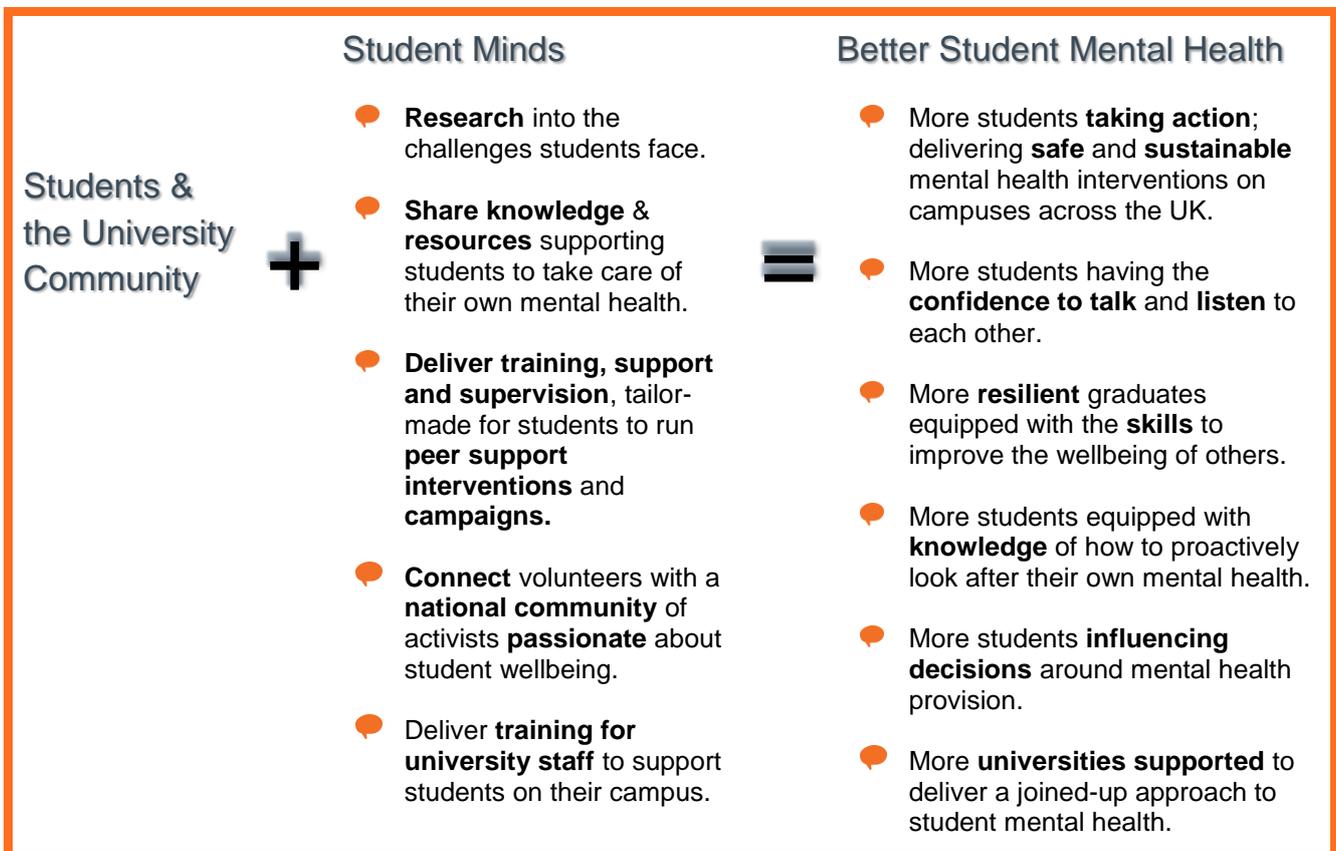
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## About Student Minds

Student Minds is a national charity supporting peer interventions for student mental health. We want to see students taking action to foster an environment where everyone has the confidence to talk and listen to each other, the skills to support one another and the knowledge to look after their own mental health.

We know that the mental health of students is a growing concern. With around 29% of students estimated to face some form of psychological distress whilst at university, it is increasingly important that we provide appropriate support for young people throughout their time at university. The rise in the prevalence of mental health problems among students has coincided with increasing problems in arranging referrals to suitable NHS services within a time-frame that is meaningful in the context of the academic year.

We believe that supporting students to support each other enables early intervention. This is fundamental to stop mental health problems from developing. We also know that students are often the first source of support for their peers. Many students are keen to be there, to help and to support peers in distress. This should be celebrated and supported, within a framework that ensures that students are not acting as a frontline crisis service. Student volunteers need the skills to deliver suitable and effective support with appropriate boundaries. Whether students are campaigning to break the stigma around mental health or organising peer support programmes, we believe that it is vital that they have suitable training and support.



## Student Minds' Peer Support Programmes

### What is a Peer Support Programme?

Peer Support Programmes support students to support each other. By creating a positive atmosphere for talking about mental health, we aim to give students the confidence to look after their own wellbeing.

All of our programmes focus on bringing students with shared experience together and follow the principles of motivational interviewing, with our trained student volunteers taking responsibility for facilitating discussion rather than providing advice or direct support. Our peer support programmes aim to give control to the students they support. Students often self-refer, but may be referred by other services. Groups are open to anyone who feels they may benefit. Our programmes always maintain a pro-recovery atmosphere. Attention to ground rules, boundaries and the confidentiality policy helps to ensure that groups offer a safe and supportive environment to talk. Peer programmes are not a suitable platform for providing support to individuals with acute or severe mental health problems. We provide training to enable our facilitators to signpost students to appropriate sources of support.

While these aspects are common to all of our programmes, we currently offer three main programmes:

- **Positive Minds Course** - a six week course for students with mild depression, covering topics such as building a support network, establishing healthy routines and exploring different relaxation techniques.
- **Eating Difficulty Groups** - these informal support groups are here to provide support and encouragement to any student who is experiencing difficulties around food or body image. After an initial pilot course in 2015-16 we also offer a more structured course 6 week for students experiencing eating difficulties, '**Motivate Me**'.
- **Supporting Supporters Two-Part Workshop** - for those supporting a friend or family member with an eating disorder.

### About Peer Support

Today nearly 50% of young people enter higher education<sup>1</sup>, and the prevalence of mental health difficulties among this cohort is worryingly high. It is estimated that 29% of students experience clinical levels of psychological distress<sup>2</sup>.

University student support services are under pressure, both from growing demand for their services and declining NHS support. Due to continuing funding problems within the NHS, there are challenges for students seeking support: 96% of health care professionals<sup>3</sup> do not feel they are able to refer students onto specialist NHS services as quickly as they would like. This is leading to an increasing reliance on university counselling services.

We believe that integrating peer-led interventions into existing service provision will increase service capacity to support students with low-level mental health difficulties, such as mild depression, and those who benefit from long term support to maintain motivation for change and recovery, such as individuals with eating disorders. As well as increasing capacity, peer-led services enable professionals to spend more time working with students with more complex needs.

**'What I like best about Student Minds is the community that comes with it; the day-to-day contact with the other group facilitators, regular supervision sessions, and larger conference events.'**

### The Benefits of Peer Support

We believe that supporting students to support each other facilitates early intervention, which is fundamental to preventing long-term mental health difficulties. Broadly, peer support can be defined as support provided by and for people with similar conditions, problems or experiences and is based on the belief that people who have faced and overcome adversity can offer support, encouragement and hope to others facing similar situations. Naturally occurring peer support takes place in the community on a daily basis with people sharing their lived experience and using it to support others in a similar situation. Modern, formal peer support for mental health difficulties has its roots in the creation of networks such as the Hearing Voices Network and The Bipolar Organisation (now Bipolar UK), both established in the 1980s.

**'The benefits of peer support are clear, with shared identity, increased self-confidence, developing and sharing skills, improved mental health and wellbeing, accompanied by less use of mental health and other services' Faulkner and Basset (2010).**

Peer support offers an effective opportunity to engage in early intervention. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 'tackling mental health problems early in life will improve educational attainment, employment opportunities and physical health, and reduce the levels of substance misuse, self-harm and suicide, as well as family conflict and social deprivation. Overall it will increase life expectancy, economic productivity, social functioning and quality of life and will have benefits across the generations'.

Peer support plays a role in empowering individuals to overcome the stigma and social isolation that reinforce cognitive deficits and social difficulties within mental health<sup>4</sup>. Engaging in peer support has also been shown to raise self-esteem and confidence<sup>5</sup>.

Mental health conditions commonly lead to social isolation, which poses a significant challenge to recovery. The nature of peer support itself tackles this challenge by enabling individuals to meet and interact with peers who have experienced similar challenges and circumstances. Mead et al (2001) show that engagement in peer support allows participants to create relationships in a safe and supportive environment<sup>6</sup>. Peer support therefore breaks down social isolation in two ways - by allowing people to meet and engage with others through the peer support sessions themselves, and through increasing confidence and empowerment, enabling people to widen their social circles.

**We encourage students to have the confidence to talk and to listen, to find inspiration and motivation in each other's stories.**

The sharing nature of the reciprocal peer support relationship also promotes empathy and acceptance<sup>7</sup> which can reduce the impact of stigma; participants involved in peer support are less likely to identify stigma as an obstacle in getting work and are more likely to be integrated in society<sup>8</sup>.

There are also identifiable benefits for the individuals facilitating peer support. Being a peer support facilitator has been found to have the same positive effects on self-esteem and empowerment as receiving peer support does<sup>9</sup>.

## Positive Minds

The Positive Minds course for mild depression is based around a series of 6 discussions about university life. The course focuses on building broader networks of social support, adopting self-care and engaging in more activity, following simple principles of behavioural activation. The course has been written by Dr. Denise Meyer, counselling psychotherapist and founder of the web based campaign, Students Against Depression. It follows and links in with self-help resources developed and available from Students Against Depression, following a structured workbook that allows volunteers to adopt the role of facilitator rather than course instructor.

The Positive Minds course focuses on students building broader networks of support and engaging in more activity. Discussions consider what self-care means and encourage students to share strategies that they use to relax and “de-stress”. The course introduces the idea of activity monitoring and uses this to facilitate discussions around the relationship between activity, sleep, food and mood.

The course focuses heavily on implementation intentions throughout. These are specific statements made about goal intentions, identifying *when*, *where* and *how* goals will be achieved. People generally have good intentions but often fail to act on them<sup>10</sup>. This is a common problem with self-help resources – they encourage individuals to set bold and positive intentions for change. Implementation intentions offer a practical strategy to turn intentions into action. While a goal intention may be stated as “I want to talk to more people on my course”, an implementation intention is more specific, seeking to connect a future opportunity for goal attainment with the specific goal. As such the goal intention may be rephrased as an implementation intention: “As we wait for the lecture on Thursday I will talk to one person”. Research in social and health psychology has demonstrated that implementation intentions are effective as a strategy to support behaviour change<sup>11-13</sup>.

In addition to implementation intentions, there is a strong focus within the course on setting small and realistic targets. Volunteers are trained to encourage students attending the course to set small and realistic goals. As explained in the course resources, this makes behaviour change easier to achieve.

**"I find it helpful to listen to others as I am able to hear another person's perspective on their issues and reactions to my own contributions to the group."**

## Eating Disorders Support Group

Recovery from an eating disorder takes time. It is hard work and there will often be setbacks and roadblocks. Maintaining motivation in the face of these can be tricky and yet this motivation is not something that can be given to someone: it needs to grow within each individual.

**"I leave group sessions feeling positive, not alone and motivated to fight to recover"**

Our eating disorders support groups follow the principles of motivational interviewing in an unstructured discussion group. Volunteer training focuses on both the principles of motivational interviewing and how to put these into practice. The essence of a motivational approach is for people to identify their own reasons to change, not for the facilitator to impose their reasons. Intrinsic motivation can be encouraged through the cognitive behaviourist idea of cognitive

dissonance introduced by Festinger (1957), who found that where people became aware that their behaviour conflicted with their values and beliefs, they were more likely to want to change their behaviour in order to reduce the discomfort.

The eating disorders support groups provide an open space for discussion, based around these principles.

## Motivate Me

In 2015/16 we created and piloted our new course 'Motivate Me'. This course has been designed in collaboration with Professor Janet Treasure to help students develop their strategies to manage challenges commonly observed in individuals experiencing eating distress. Through the six week course facilitators guide the group through a workbook and talk about building flexibility to manage the desire for an organised and "perfect" life. The course also encourages attendees to reflect on the challenges of self-criticism and discuss support networks and managing social relationships at University.

Motivate Me is a chance for Eating Difficulty Peer Support Groups to run more structured six-week sessions, following the Motivate Me course book.

## Supporting Supporters

Our Supporting Supporters course is aimed at students supporting a housemate, boyfriend, girlfriend, friend or relative with an eating disorder. The information in the Supporting Supporters workbooks draws on material from

'Skills-based learning for caring for a loved one with an eating disorder: the New Maudsley Method,' by Treasure, Smith and Crane (2007) and development of the course was supported by Professor Janet Treasure.

"It was really good to be able to discuss stories etc. without being judged. Thank you so much for all your time and help - it has been really helpful"

Running over two sessions and based on conversation guided by a workbook, the workshops aim to improve relations between supporters and their friend or relative, promoting a better understanding of eating disorders and helping supporters communicate with their friend or relative in a way that encourages change talk and does not perpetuate the eating disorder. This content follows the principles of collaborative caring.

The course includes discussion of the psychological traits that maintain eating disorders and teaches basic principles of motivational interviewing to help students provide informal support to friends with eating disorders.

In 2014 a pilot for this programme was evaluated at four universities, with all students attending the workshops completing pre and post workshop surveys. The pilot courses were attended by 35 students and the evaluation demonstrated a:

- 61% increase in knowledge of the causes of eating disorders,
- 54% increase in knowledge of the behavioural and psychological effects of eating disorders,
- 50% increase in self-reported communication skills to support a friend or family member with an eating disorder, and a

- 58% increase in confidence in ability to support a friend or family member with an eating disorder.

## Our Peer Support Package: what is included.

### Recruitment

Student Minds has a rigorous recruitment process to find volunteers to run effective group sessions. We then provide these students with extensive training so that they understand how to run a group session safely. More information on this is included in the 'Project Management' section.

### Time frames for setting up a Peer Support group

When setting up a group we work within the academic year to recruit and train individuals to ensure that we can advertise to as many students as possible. Here are the time frames that we work within:

#### First Recruitment Window

- **October-** Applications open and publicity starts
- **November/December-** Student Minds score applications and interviews are conducted for shortlisted successful candidates. Successful applicants are chosen.
- **Spring semester-** Volunteers recruited in the first window are trained

#### Second Recruitment Window

- **March-** Applications open and publicity starts
- **April-** Student Minds score applications and interviews are conducted for shortlisted successful candidates. Successful applicants are chosen.
- **September-** Volunteers recruited in the second window are trained.

**Please note that volunteers cannot run Student Minds peer support groups until they have been trained.**

### Facilitator Training

Our training has been developed specifically for students. We have worked with students, academics and clinicians to develop comprehensive training programmes focused on giving students the skills and confidence to deliver peer support programmes safely and effectively.

We have developed a two-day training programme to equip student volunteers with the skills necessary to facilitate peer support groups. Our training covers:

- Listening skills and motivational interviewing,
- Confidentiality, ground rules and the importance of boundaries,
- Structuring a group session with a beginning, middle and end,
- How to manage difficult situations, including talking about suicide and enforcing ground rules,
- The practicalities of running a student-led project.

Depending on the programme that volunteers are training to run, the training then also includes a focus on eating disorders and encouraging user-led conversation or on the traits of depression and the Positive Minds course book.

We run group peer-support training as a weekend residential programme in Oxford. These weekends run throughout the year and we will usually train between 14 and 18 students over a weekend. If you would prefer us to deliver training at your university, this can be arranged.

## Project Management

To enable peer support programmes to be sustainable there needs to be a continual process of volunteer recruitment, training and supervision. Each year we run a national recruitment process for member groups, which includes coordination and promotion of an online application process followed by interviews for short-listed applicants, which are conducted by the current volunteer team on campus. The recruitment process is tailored to the requirements of a peer support programme, taking account of the key skills for facilitating group sessions and giving applicants the opportunity to think about whether they are suited to the role of a group facilitator, how the volunteering will fit into their university timetable and any additional support they might need.

We also coordinate the training for new volunteers and ensure that newly trained volunteers are integrated into their project. Project management support can also be used to deliver follow up training and support if specific challenges arise for student volunteers.

As part of the project management support package, we provide:

- Access to a range of online e-learning resources
- 'How to' guides and webinars to help volunteers continue to develop their skills, as well as giving volunteers the opportunity to have their activities promoted across the network.
- Online resources that cover key aspects of running a support group, including 'how to' guides on publicity, events and building strong relationships on campus; group session hand-outs; template posters and publicity materials.
- Weekly volunteer updates, which include key reminders around the logistics of running a support group and ideas on linking in with a range of events and awareness days throughout the university calendar.
- Termly reports to staff on the progress of the group.
- Up to two site visits by a Student Minds staff member each year as part of our ongoing support for the group

**'After finishing my degree I am hoping to pursue a career as a Clinical Psychologist. I believe that my volunteering experience with Student Minds provides me with some of the necessary skills and insights for that path'.**

## Supervision

We believe that student volunteers should have sufficient support to feel confident in the activities that they run. It is important that students have the opportunity to reflect on how their volunteering is affecting them, and we ensure that all groups running peer support programmes within the Student Minds' network have access to suitable supervision and support.

There is tremendous value in supporting students to lead their own projects effectively. It not only means that they are supported in delivering successful initiatives, but ongoing support also enables students to develop their own personal skills and employability. Through the support and mentoring that we offer volunteers, we help them build the confidence and skills they need to manage projects and take on leadership roles in their community.

Every one of our groups for whom we are contracted to provide supervision is assigned a supervisor. Our supervisors are young university graduates who have previously run Student Minds peer support projects. This is a strong team of individuals with valuable experience. Supervisors catch up with their volunteers after every session that they run, helping them reflect on what is working and what could be improved.

Regular supervision allows problems to be identified early. Providing a framework for volunteers to attend supervision ensures that it is easy for volunteers to talk about problems and challenges, ensuring that these are discussed and addressed before the volunteer reaches a point where they are struggling to cope. Supervisors report back to the staff team regularly, alerting the Student Minds' Peer Support Manager of any problems that volunteers are facing. Where appropriate, the Student Minds staff team can follow up with further support and alert the group's local university contact of the challenges being faced.

Supervision is usually run one-on-one but at times volunteers find it helpful to attend supervision with the individuals they are working with. For groups that are part of the Student Minds' supervision system, we also recommend that the group has a local contact (for example a member of the counselling service) who they can meet with on a termly basis to ensure effective communication and integration with local services.

We are aware that some universities may prefer to provide supervision in house. We recommend that supervision is run after every group session and should be provided by someone with experience in a clinical or peer support environment. Please note that Student Minds can only take legal responsibility for groups that receive supervision from Student Minds; if we are not providing supervision for the group then this responsibility needs to be taken on by the university, Student Union or counselling service as appropriate. We would be happy to discuss supervision arrangements further on an individual basis – if you would like to find out more, please get in touch.

**'I'm a second year psychology student and have been volunteering for Student Minds for two years. It has been an extremely rewarding experience. I started volunteering because I had known several girls with eating disorders and I wanted to stop being a helpless observer but rather help those who wanted to be helped. As a team of group facilitators we offered the opportunity for girls as well as boys with eating disorders to talk about their daily experiences and emotions within a safe environment.'**

## Costs of a Peer Support Programme

The table below shows different costings for running a peer support programme, depending on whether you choose to run supervision in house, or contract Student Minds to do so. Costs may vary from year to year depending on the number of volunteers that need training. We always recommend taking on volunteers who are in their earlier university years to minimise volunteer turnover.

Costs per year	Training <sup>1</sup>	Project Management*	Supervision**	Total cost
A single peer support programme, training 6 group facilitators in Oxford (recommended number)	£960 (£160 per volunteer)	£700	£400	<b>£2,060</b>
Two peer support programmes (e.g. Positive Minds and Eating Disorders Support Group) training 12 volunteers in Oxford	£1,920	£700	£800	<b>£3,420</b>
One group, workshop at your institution	£1500	£700	£400	<b>£2,600</b>

\* We charge a flat rate for project management, no matter how many groups you establish at your university.

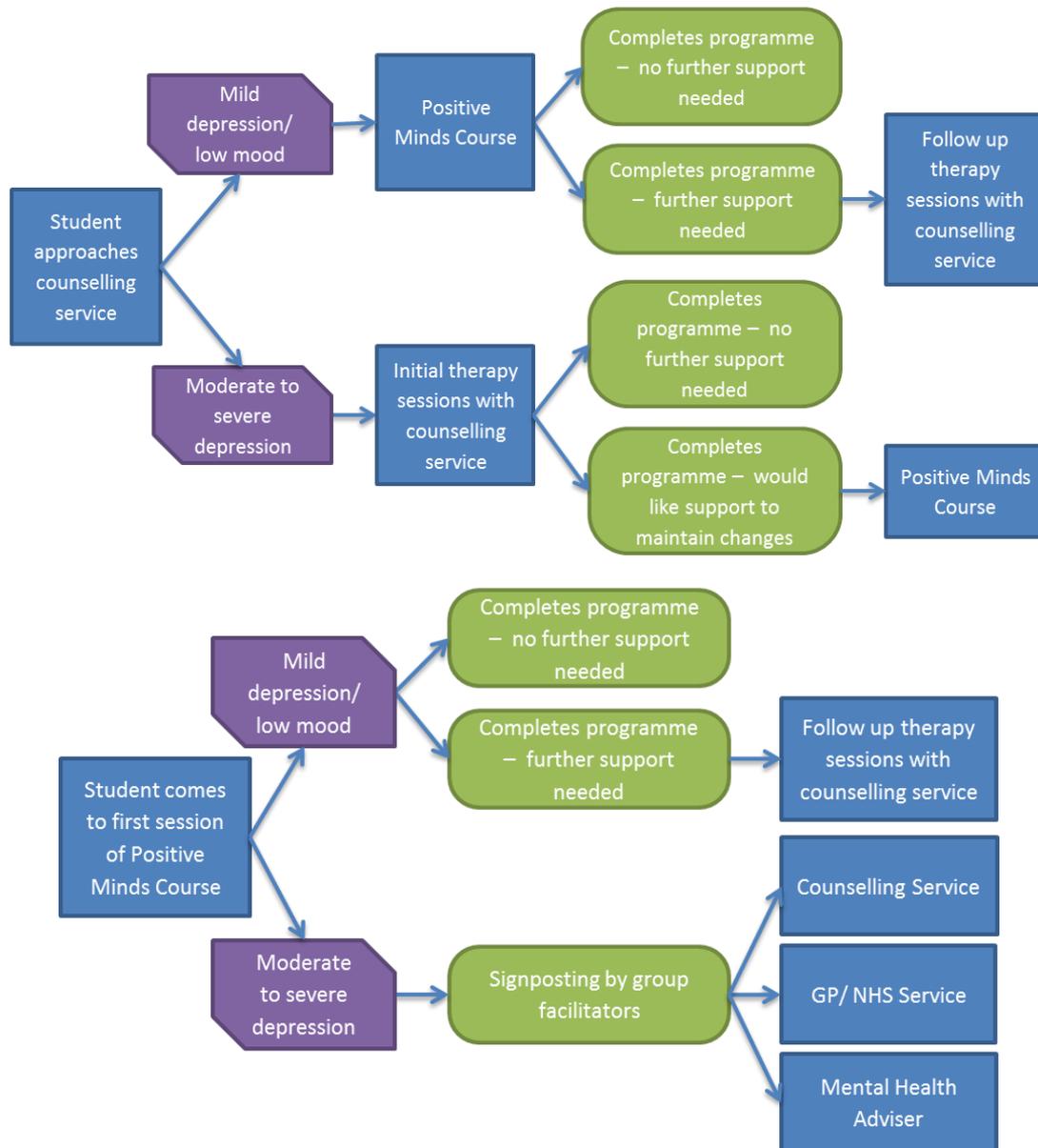
\*\* Please note that Student Minds can only take responsibility for groups that receive supervision from Student Minds; if we are not providing supervision for the group then this responsibility needs to be taken on by the university, Student Union or counselling service as appropriate. All other costs associated with the group are compulsory.

## Making Peer Support Work For Your Service

Peer support can be an effective addition to standard professional-led student support, enabling the service to efficiently broaden its reach. We recommend that peer support programmes are fully integrated with professional services as students seeking support are more likely to use peer interventions if they are a formal part of local support services. They are also more likely to engage with the support if it is recommended to them with conviction. One way to integrate peer support is to use it as part of a triage system; for example, students with mild depression might have an initial meeting with a counsellor who recommends, if appropriate, the Positive Minds course, with an open invitation to return to see that counsellor following the course. This opens several possibilities:

- 1) The student completes the course and decides that this has helped and they no longer need counselling.
- 2) The student completes the course and returns to counselling, recognising that they need further support. The student will then return to counselling having completed the basics of behavioural activation and having taken time to prepare for counselling.
- 3) The volunteer team facilitating the group feel that the student is not receiving sufficient support from the group and recommend that the student return to the counselling service.

<sup>1</sup> Student Minds do not usually reimburse volunteer travel costs – these should be factored into your budget.



This allows use of the Positive Minds course to catch more students with mild depression, allowing the counselling service to provide support for more students, and provide more (peer support followed by counselling) support for students who need it.

Integrating an eating disorders support group into your service would work somewhat differently; as this group provides the opportunity for ongoing support, integration would enable the counselling service to ensure that individuals with long-term mental health difficulties continue to have access to ongoing low-level support. Individuals may be directed to the group after a course of counselling sessions to help sustain motivation and continue on the path to recovery. The Supporting Supporters course provides skills-based training to students supporting friends. These individuals often receive little support and commonly find the sense of helplessness that they face in supporting their friends to be highly distressing.

## Train The Trainer Packages for Staff

### Look After Your Mate

Student Minds' Look After Your Mate 'Train the Trainer' programme equips university staff with the knowledge, confidence and skills to empower students to support friends experiencing mental health difficulties. For students navigating their way through university, life can be tricky at times and we know how important it is for an individual to reach out to their friends at times of need. We want students to feel confident in supporting their friends and feel comfortable confiding in each other.

Following the growing demand of our Look After Your Mate workshops in universities we launched a 'Train the Trainer' programme to enable staff to sign up to our one-day workshop to receive training enabling them to deliver the workshops on their own campuses.

#### This one-day Train the Trainer course will cover:

- **Module 1:** Understanding Peer Support in an HEI landscape (what student mental health is, the challenges students face and why peer support is important).
- **Module 2:** An overview of the workshop you will deliver.
- **Module 3:** How to run the workshop on your campus (your role, requirements and a chance to practice conversations that may arise whilst running the workshop).



#### After attending the training staff will be equipped with:

- An overview of student mental health and the challenges that students face; an understanding the student journey
- Practical tips for teaching students to look after a friend including; starting conversations, communication techniques, awareness of what support is out there, ways supporters can look after themselves
- Knowledge on boundaries and managing conversations with students
- Guidance on how to advertise your Look After Your Mate workshop on campus

**97 % of staff trained found the workshop 'useful or very useful'.**

**77 % of students found the workshop 'very useful'**

#### The cost of the training is £250, plus a £10 annual registration fee.

Staff members who may be interested in attending the training include University Counsellors, University Mental Health Advisors, Welfare Officers and Students' Union staff.

If you would like to attend Look After Your Mate training, please visit the [Look After Your Mate Training section on our website](#) for more information on training dates and how to sign up.

## Mental Health in Sports

Student Minds' two-day Mental Health and Sports training programme aims to increase the knowledge, confidence and skills of the HE sports community in the area of mental health and wellbeing. The programme has been developed in partnership with BUCS - British Universities & Colleges Sport (the governing body for university sport in the UK), following wide consultation with sports development staff and pilot workshops.

Over two days of interactive training, staff will receive Mental Health First Aid training; learn how to make sport at their university accessible to those experiencing mental health difficulties and learn how to run the Mental Health in Sport workshop for students at their university, which will enable students to recognise and support teammates experiencing mental health difficulties.

### What does the course cover?

Over the two day, interactive course, we cover the following;

- Accredited Mental Health First Aid training, with a focus on its application to Higher Education sport.
- Module 1: Understanding mental health within the Higher Education landscape.
- Module 2: Higher Education Sport and mental health best practice: setting up accessible programmes.
- Module 3: Training your own sports clubs and team in mental health awareness.

After training, you will be supported by the resources on the Trainer Hub and Student Minds staff to deliver the Mental Health in Sport workshop to students at your university. You will be licensed by Student Minds to deliver the workshop an unlimited number of times at your institution.

"This was a very enlightening course and I can see how I will directly apply the knowledge both in my professional capacity and on a personal level"

**The cost of training is £290, plus the first £10 annual registration fee.**

### Who should attend?

The programme is designed for **staff involved with supporting sports teams** within the university and/or Students' Union sports department. Current trainers include:

- Sports Participation staff
- Sports Development staff
- Club Development staff
- SU officers
- Varsity/BUCS managers

There is no limit on numbers of attendees from each institution. In the interests of sustaining the programme it is advised that priority is given to permanent staff members over sabbatical officers.

If you would like to attend Mental Health in Sport training, please go to the [Sports Training section of our website](#) for information on training dates and how to sign up.

## Campaign Groups

We believe that it is important for students to have the right training before they start engaging in volunteer activities around the area of mental health. Whether campaigning, running one-off events or facilitating support programmes, students need the skills and confidence to engage responsibly.

A recent survey we conducted highlights some of the key challenges for student mental health. Among students and university staff:

- Over 90% believe that the fear of being judged is a major challenge for student mental health.
- Over 80% believe that there is a general reluctance to disclose mental health problems and that mental health problems are seen as a weakness.
- Over 60% think that there is a lack of information about where to turn for support.

There is considerable work to be done in changing attitudes about mental health on the university campus and we believe students should be at the heart of these activities.

Student Minds supports student mental health campaigns group to operate effectively and safely. We provide a one-day introduction to mental health campaigning, preparing students to develop and deliver effective campaign messages capable of challenging current attitudes around mental health. To do this safely, students need a strong understanding of the importance of boundaries and they need to have considered how to talk about mental health sensitively without triggering vulnerable individuals.

Our mental health campaigns training covers:

- The importance of boundaries,
- A strong grounding in the challenges facing student mental health,
- Listening skills,
- How to find the right words when talking about mental health,
- Identifying your allies and developing relationships,
- The theory of change for campaigning,
- Planning and executing an effective event,
- Managing a student-led project and working as a team,
- Communicating your message.
- This one-day training can be complemented by Mental Health First Aid training. This combined programme runs over two and a half days, though the schedule can be adjusted to fit in around the student timetable.
- Both versions of the training can be attended by individual volunteers at national training events, or tailored for delivery on your campus.

Student groups affiliated to the Student Minds network are also able to access our Volunteer Hub, providing more resources, e-learning modules and guidance. Members of our network also receive weekly volunteer updates with ideas and suggestions for developing their projects.

As a national body we work to promote the events and activities of all our members across the network.

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[www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-rates-in-higher-education-2006-to-2012](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-rates-in-higher-education-2006-to-2012)
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