

Be PREPARED

The Headmaster of Emanuel School highlights the importance of mental health provision in schools, particularly for pupils transferring into higher education



ROBERT MILNE

Every August sees another cohort of talented Emanuel pupils gain their A-Level offers for Russell Group universities or to much-coveted places at prestigious drama schools, art schools and music colleges. They are always excited by what the future holds. I suspect however, that some are also slightly anxious about leaving home, having to make new friends and missing the routines, happiness and confidence that school life has given them. A number of our leavers will stay in touch with colleagues and keep them up to date on their experience of higher education. Undoubtedly they will enjoy themselves

50% of mental health issues will start by the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 24.

and their courses, but there may also be a sense that on-going study, away from home, as well as edging ever closer to the world of work, presents some new-found worries from time to time. Occasionally we have found that a young person has really struggled to settle into their new institution, despite our best efforts to help them prepare for life after school.

The nationwide challenge for young people transferring to university has seen a flurry of cross party and university publications in response to some stark and unsettling realities about mental health and well-being for undergraduates. Whilst there remains so much to enjoy about pursuing academic ambitions, living independently, making new friends and laying foundations for a chosen career, the daunting facts surrounding mental health in young people are urging universities and professional health networks to review their shared approaches to looking after those in their care.

The government's green paper 'Transforming children and young people's mental health provision' last December was an optimistic sign of intent, but much of the actions within this paper fall short in timescale and breadth of intervention to make a truly meaningful change for school leavers heading to university in the next few years. The statistics for mental health in our school-age generation show that 50% of mental health issues will start by the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 24. The significance of this age range is further compounded by the fact that for many this coincides with

taking a series of public exams and studying away from home; all within the context of adolescence.

Sadly, universities and local health networks have not always been well prepared for these cumulative challenges. Statistics across recent years bear this out. The number of young people dropping out of university courses has trebled and 94% of universities have experienced a rise in students accessing 'support services'. Currently there is an average of 10 years between a young person's initial symptoms of a mental health concern and them receiving formal help.

UK universities have thankfully sought to systematically address the situation but they do not operate in isolation. All good schools, therefore should continue to ensure their pupils leave them with the capacity to cope with this post-sixth form transfer point - providing them with the self-knowledge, empathy, attitude and skills to thrive in the important years ahead. ¹²

ROBERT MILNE

*Headmaster Emanuel School
emanuel.org.uk*

SCHOOL LEAVER / OPINION

Tips

MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH AT SCHOOL

The following 12 steps are approaches that our school and many others have adopted to help those in their care.

- 1 Put on-going mental health lessons for pupils and their peers in the weekly timetable and make it part of assemblies.
- 2 Ensure that every child has a form tutor or a trusted adult to take care of their holistic development. This ought to be a teacher that establishes a long-term relationship with the pupil and their parents.
- 3 Find time for physical exercise through games, clubs and activities.
- 4 Ensure there are private spaces in schools- having a moment of calm away from the bustling theatre of school life is vital to a young person's sense of wellbeing.
- 5 Make sure that we look after the mental health of teachers, just as much as those in their charge. Being able to teach in a calm and enjoyable manner is vital for pupil wellbeing.
- 6 Ensure that the school has an in-house counsellor and that the pupils can access them easily. It is also beneficial to have a leading pastoral colleague with access to an external network of mental health professionals.
- 7 Don't be scared of technology. For many pupils an app on their phone or iPad, like one on mindfulness or anxiety can be a superb way to independently overcome a difficult moment.
- 8 Establish regular parent and pupil workshops on topics of pastoral concern.
- 9 Teachers should be encouraged to think about how language can be used for better mental health, e.g using a child's name when marking.
- 10 Set up a peer-to-peer mentoring or buddy scheme.
- 11 Have fun! Humour in schools and moments of amusement in conversation, in assemblies, in lessons and daily dialogue helps everyone run along and enjoy their day all the more.
- 12 Young people's mental health is a growing concern, but we should be optimistic as we become more knowledgeable about it. Schools and universities can harness this knowledge, work in partnership with each other, growing a network of expert support and sustaining closer links with families.



ABOVE
Emanuel School pupils
LEFT
Headmaster Robert Milne