university counselling service: staff counselling report

report
2006-07
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Appendix 1  Any other comments

Staff of the University Counselling Service

2006-07

Director of Counselling  :  Dr Judy Moore
Student Counsellor  :  Richard Baughan
Educational Counsellor  :  Ruth Kavanagh
Staff Counsellor  :  Eamonn O'Mahony
Sessional Counsellors  :
  Jean Ashby
  Catherine Atkinson
  Michael Corey
  Miriam Crasnow
  Ian Draper
  Campbell Purton
  Antonia Riviere
  Sally Russell
  Tony Weston

Service Co-ordinator  :  Jane Ramsbottom
Secretary/Receptionists  :  Rosemary Bradbrook
                         Sue Hitchcock
Temporary Receptionist  :  Catherine Atkinson
2006-2007 has seen a very significant rise in the total number of clients accessing the Staff Counselling Service. There has been a 26% rise in numbers - 87 clients were seen in 2005-06 rising to 110 this year. This is the highest number of clients ever seen in one year.

In this report I will review the statistics of the past year, focusing particularly on increasing numbers and presenting issues. In last year’s report I included a case study of an academic client so this year I will present a case study on a staff member from the Secretarial and Clerical category. Finally, I present a review of 30 feedback questionnaires.

Numbers of Clients/Staff Categories

There has been a particularly significant increase in the numbers of Secretarial and Clerical staff seeking counselling. Their numbers have been rising steadily over the past three years, whilst those of the other staff categories remained more or less at the same level. The rise in the Secretarial and Clerical grade could be due to a number of factors. Whilst restructuring took place a number of years ago, it is perhaps only now that clients are accessing the Service with problems resulting from these changes. At a time of change people often respond by going into ‘coping’ mode and later discover that they are in need of support. Staff in the S&C category tend to be a close knit group and so often staff will recommend counselling to a colleague. Some staff are very open about accessing the Service and this can encourage others to ask for counselling support. Line managers who either have accessed the Service themselves or have observed members of their team benefit from counselling are also often willing to refer clients to the Service.

The rise in Secretarial and Clerical staff clients explain the significant rise in female clients this year- an increase of 27 over the previous year.

Presenting Issues

Using the Association for University and College Counselling (AUCC) categorisation, it is clear that the main themes presented tallied very much with the previous year, with ‘self and identity’, ‘relationships’, ‘loss’, ‘anxiety’, and ‘work concerns’. There was however a significant increase in clients reporting ‘depression/mood swings’.

Work Related Themes

Amongst academic staff an emerging theme was the pressure to succeed for female academics with young children. Some women found that there was an expectation, generally from male colleagues, that for them to succeed in terms of research and publications, raising a family had to be sacrificed. They found the system not very flexible in accommodating a path to career excellence with raising a young family. Added to this pressure is also the increasing emphasis on research and publication within the Higher Educational environment. The effect of this pressure on female academics is quite intense: clients experience high levels of stress, exhaustion and overload. What clients also struggle with is the internal pressure they put themselves under in order to
succeed and be ‘as good as the rest’. Counselling can be very helpful in enabling clients to let go of some of these expectations and find a better balance and acceptance of their situation.

Another issue related to academic staff, though not exclusive to them, is difficulty in creating a healthy work life balance. Some academic staff put a huge amount of time and effort into their work and over time neglect their home lives. The consequences of this are often neglected relationships, higher levels of stress and anxiety and physical problems. Clients who suffer from a lack of self confidence and low self esteem can compensate for this by putting a lot of their ‘self’ into their academic/work. This need not necessarily be problematic but over time clients become heavily dependent on work for achieving a good sense of themselves. This strategy can work as long as work is going well. However, when work problems arise due to stress or institutional changes, clients can be thrown off balance and have no other support systems in place. For clients in the latter stage of their careers it is particularly painful when they realised that without work they do not know who they are and have no sense of themselves apart from the academic ‘self’. Counselling can play a vital role in enabling the client confront such issues and help them develop a more balanced sense of self.

Another theme emerged quite strongly – that of staff new to the University experiencing difficulties with the transition. This theme is generally present each year but it was especially noticeable this year. There were staff who had moved from other places in the United Kingdom who were experiencing difficulties in settling into their work and the new locality. The move could have been recent – a few months or as long as a number of years. Some staff had come from other English speaking countries and were finding settling in harder than they thought. There was an element of ‘culture’ shock and an understanding that, whilst they may share a common language, communication could at times be very difficult. Staff for whom English was not a first language were faced with other difficulties – culture, language and processes and systems that were hard to adjust to. Inevitably these situations caused clients much stress and anxiety. Whilst it is not unusual to find transition sometimes unsettling and stressful, it can also trigger or exacerbate underlying personal issues. It is important to provide support at various levels for such clients. On a departmental level job-specific induction would be helpful, followed by regular review meetings over a period of time in order to facilitate the settling-in process. At University level perhaps a more flexible induction process could be provided that enables staff to attend soon after taking up post.

Other specific work issues that clients brought include: issues around working in a team, difficult relationships with colleagues, bullying by a manager/colleague, the length of time taken to resolve an issue using the University Disciplinary Procedures, return to work after sick leave, low self esteem at work, crisis approaching retirement, and difficulty managing job restructuring.

**Group work**

The group for managers ‘Dealing with issues in the Workplace’ ran this year with 4 members. It was a very committed group and managers found the interactive nature of the group very helpful for them in looking at new ways of managing their work situation. I also continued this year with termly discussion and support sessions for Careers Advisers.
Conclusion

It has been a very busy and intense year in the Staff Counselling Service due to increase in numbers. I am very grateful to the members of staff who helped to accommodate this rise and so managed to avoid any significant increase in waiting time for clients. This would not have been possible without the contribution other counsellors who are employed primarily to see students and without a significant amount of staff counselling being undertaken by some of our counsellors-in-training. It is clear from the rise in numbers that there is a need within the university community for increased provision of staff counselling at UEA.

Staff need a safe place to be listened to, a need clearly stated in the client feedback forms. Staff respond best to being given time, support and encouragement, but unfortunately in a system which is increasingly under pressure, it is not always possible for colleagues to find such support in their immediate working context. This has very negative consequences for the university in terms of work related stress and absence. The Counselling Service has a vital part to play in providing counselling support and also in training colleagues from other sectors in how they might create a more supportive space for those they are working with.

Since the inception of staff counselling at UEA in 1996 the Staff Counsellor’s post has risen 10%, from half time to 60%, whilst demand on the Service has risen more significantly, including a rise of 26% in the past year. At the time of writing the demand is even higher with 120 clients having already accessed the Service in the current academic year. Given the increase in client numbers it feels an appropriate time to reassess Staff Counselling provision and to consider a further appointment of a second part time Staff Counsellor to meet these needs.
### Staff Counselling Statistics 2004-2007

#### 2006-07

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% based on 2,498 staff for 06-07

#### Gender

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#### Clients by Staff Group

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![Graph showing clients by staff group]
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### Full Session Main Themes

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Sessions by Month

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Full Staff Sessions By Month

- 2006-07
- 2005-06
- 2004-05
Case Study

(This case study is illustrative of the work undertaken, but not based on any one client)

Marie is an administrator in her mid 50s and has worked at the university for 20 years. She works full-time. Marie approached the Service in a very agitated state, saying she was finding it hard to cope. Since restructuring three years ago she had struggled in her work. Prior to restructuring she had been in her role for 6 years. She had developed a good working relationship with her colleagues and with those in her line management. She understood the various processes and procedures very well and was known for being an efficient and hard working colleague.

However, following restructuring she was required to move office in order to accommodate the changes. Whereas before she had been line managing 6 colleagues, it became evident she would now be managing a larger team. She also found out her closest colleague who worked alongside her at the same grade was leaving and was not being replaced. The colleague’s workload was being divided up amongst the other managers. This created a lot of resentment in the office. Marie also found herself line managing a colleague who was a close friend and that began to create tension in the friendship.

When Marie came to the Service she was feeling very overwhelmed. Her workload seemed unmanageable. There was never enough time to complete the tasks, even though she regularly stayed at work till 7pm. She found herself not taking time out for lunch, but would quickly eat a sandwich at her desk. There was also a culture in the office that people were so busy that they worked through their lunch hour and Marie felt taking time out for lunch would be seen in a negative light. Added to all this stress was that Marie felt bullied by a colleague who sometimes would erupt unpredictably at her in anger and swear at her in front of others. This led to her feeling helpless and often frightened and she would feel physically sick coming into work. All of this, combined with the pressure of work overload, eventually led her to taking sickness leave. She was having palpitations, constantly finding herself anxious and dissolving into tears whenever anyone asked how she was. She was lacking in motivation and losing concentration at work. She had gone to her GP who had prescribed anti-depressants. Marie didn’t want to take them as she wanted to try counselling first.

The first sessions were occupied with Marie telling her story and it became apparent that things had been worsening for some time before she came to counselling. This is a very common occurrence. Generally the difficulties have been building for some time and clients often come at crisis point rather than earlier in the process. This can be for a number of reasons. They feel they should be able to cope and that if they can’t they are weak and a failure. Asking for help in this situation can be very difficult. Sometimes clients are not aware of the support systems available and may not have considered counselling to be an option. Whatever the reason, accessing the Counselling Service is usually difficult for an individual, but also a turning point in terms of asking for help and support to sort out their difficulties.

During the counselling Marie identified how hard she had found the restructuring process. At the time she just coped but she found the transition very stressful. There
was the loss of a supportive team and familiarity with her immediate working environment. Alongside this she felt the process had been very rushed and communication was poor both in relation to her exact job role and location. She had felt just thrown into the new role. Because of her experience it was assumed she would cope and could be depended upon. Once in the new role, apart from a few meetings with her line manager in the first month, Marie found herself snowed under and follow-up review meetings didn’t take place. Marie realised that, in fact, she found change very frightening and in the sessions explored where this came from. As a child she witnessed violence in the home and had to be fostered with various families. As an adult she sought out secure places in her work and relationships, so when the changes occurred it brought back a lot of earlier feelings of fear, helplessness and distress. As time went on Marie was able to separate out her feelings about restructuring and what had happened earlier in her life. She also realised her need for security had left her always wanting to please and not rock the boat. She realised this had left her unable to be assertive with her bullying colleague.

As the counselling progressed into its middle phase Marie began to grow in confidence and feel more in control. She began to identify ways of managing her situation more effectively. She explored ways of challenging the inappropriate behaviour of her colleague. She sought support from the bullying and harassment advisers, and decided to approach her colleague in the first instance to say how she felt. She asked another colleague to come along with her for support. Marie also realised that not giving herself some space for lunch was counter-productive in her work and so ensured that she was away from her desk each lunchtime. She became aware of lunchtime sessions offered by CSED and found these a helpful way to restore some balance.

This theme of creating some boundaries and space is a familiar one within workplace counselling. By accessing counselling and giving themselves a weekly space to be supported, clients slowly begin to regain their balance and move away from less helpful practices. Marie also realised her lack of confidence made her withdraw and she acknowledged she hadn’t also been able to provide as much support as she would have liked for her team. She decided to institute regular fortnightly meeting with her team and requested a monthly meeting with her line manager. She also requested an appraisal as one had not been completed for 3 years.

By the end of the counselling process Marie had moved from feeling overwhelmed and out of control to a place where she felt more in charge of her emotions and of the situation. She was less anxious, her sleeping patterns were returning to normal, although there were still periods of insomnia. She was able to get her work life in more perspective and was considering the possibility of asking to go part-time. Having taken steps to address the bullying had helped her to feel more in control and she was open to pursuing further action if the situation reoccurred.

At the end of the counselling process, the client’s problems aren’t necessarily resolved but what usually changes is their ability to cope with them. For some clients this means gaining an understanding and acceptance of their situation and for others it can mean taking various levels of action. Marie came for a total of 12 sessions: 8 of these were weekly and when Marie felt her balance was beginning to be regained the counsellor and she agreed to go fortnightly for the final 4 sessions.
Feedback from Staff Clients

The Counselling Service provides a questionnaire for clients at the end of their counselling in order to get feedback on various aspects of the counselling process. The aim is to provide the feedback form to all clients though this is not always possible. In order to get a sense of the feedback I reviewed 30 feedback forms received between 21/9/05 and 18/12/07. It needs to be kept in mind that this is a small sample of the overall clients that approached the service during this period so only tentative generalisations are made. It does however give a snapshot of the Counselling Service and some indication of how clients experience attending the Service and their counselling work.

1. How did you learn about the Counselling Service?

- 12 through the website
- 3 by the leaflet
- 9 by word of mouth
- 6 by other means

2. Did anyone suggest you come for counselling? Who?

- 12 – Yes
- 18 – No

GP x 2, Husband, Sister, Colleague x 2, Friend x 3, PhD Supervisor, and Neighbour

3. How did you make your first appointment?

- 18 by e-mail
- 7 by telephone
- 5 in person

4. How would you rate the way you were dealt with when you first contacted the Counselling Service?

- 18 - excellent
- 10 – very good
- 1 – good
- 1 – not good

Staff are very conscious of being seen approaching the service; using the phone or e-mail helps protect their confidentiality. Various comments included ‘very clear and informative’, ‘very fast response’ and ‘very efficient, straightforward with no fuss’. One client reported difficulty finding the contact e-mail on the Website whilst another client was sent to the wrong place.

5. Why did you originally go for counselling?

A third of clients (10) cited relationship difficulties as the reason they came for counselling. The majority of these (8) were concerned with personal relationships and...
with work relationships. Two reported concern with career difficulties. Thirteen clients reported emotional difficulties as the reason for attending. Ten clients cited more than one issue they needed to deal with. Two clients came because they had previous positive experiences of counselling. Other issues cited were related to culture, gender, and settling in to post.

6. How long did you have to wait between your initial appointment and your first regular appointment?

- 9 - up to 2 weeks
- 10 - up to 4 weeks
- 7 - up to 8 weeks
- 3 - up to 14 weeks

7. Was this wait unacceptable/ acceptable/highly acceptable?

- 17 – highly acceptable
- 14 – acceptable
- 2 – unacceptable

One client reported her wait was due to her very limited availability. For some staff availability is very limited as they do not wish a colleague to know they are coming for counselling and so request a specific time slot. Clients are mainly accepting of the waiting time. This could be for a number of reasons. When clients first contact the Service they are usually offered an appointment within a week, sometimes within a few days. At the initial session the client gets the opportunity to talk about what brings them to counselling. Generally clients are extremely vulnerable in this first session and the counsellor provides a ‘holding’ space for the client’s problems. An effective initial session can reassure the client and has a positive effect on their ability to cope whilst on the waiting list. Another reason for the high levels of acceptability for a wait is perhaps that waiting lists are often the norm in support services.

8. In what ways do you think counselling helped you?

All 30 clients had felt helped by coming to counselling. For some it provided a space to talk through problems and share their thought processes. They were thus able to get a clearer perspective on their problems.

Clients used the following phrases: ‘got to talk through problems and regain some sense/order’, ‘I got a new perspective on things’, ‘clarify and make sense of life, myself and others’ and ‘helped me see things in context’. Clients also used the words ‘safe’, ‘non-judgemental’, ‘supportive’, ‘nurturing’ and ‘compassion’ to describe the counselling environment. It seems for many clients this safety is a very important aspect of their recovery process. One client wrote ‘simply being able to talk in a safe, non-judgemental environment is helpful in itself’.

The results of having sought counselling support affected clients in various ways. Clients reported feeling more confident and self accepting, more in control of their lives. Clients reported feeling less anxious and stressed. Some clients reported how helpful exploring the reasons for their problems were as this helped to identify patterns of behaviour that
were often unhelpful and to make changes. This points to a central aspect of counselling- enabling client self awareness so that they can feel more in control of a situation. Again in the clients' words -‘I’m getting to know myself better, observe repetitive patterns and learn to control them’, and ‘I learned a lot about myself- how and why I deal with things in a particular way and how that has not been helpful. I know myself better and I have a greater sense of worth and place in the world’.

9. Are there things that could have been different?

- 18 – nothing
- 3 - more sessions
- 2 – more proactive counsellor
- 7 - no response

10. Do you think counselling helped you stay employed at UEA, improve your work, in your life as a whole?

- 29 said it helped in their life as a whole
- 13 said it helped in their work
- 7 said it helped them stay at UEA
- 1 client did not respond.

11. Why did your counselling come to an end?

- 16 reported the ending being mutually agreed with their counsellor
- 9 ended because they ran out of sessions
- 6 ended the sessions themselves
- 2 clients ended because they were leaving UEA.

12. Further comments.

These are presented in appendix 1.
Appendix 1

Question 12

Any other comments?

Thanks for your support. I think the University Counselling Service is doing a great job.

I cannot praise this counselling too highly. I have had some other forms of counselling but do not feel I benefited as much as I have now. I’m sad that it has come to an end, but I have been helped to identify further support agencies who will help me to build on the foundations laid.

Very good work and a friendly staff.

I just wish I could do it all over again and have more time! It was nice to have a counsellor that engaged with me and really seemed to care. She often went out of her way to accommodate my needs and see me at short notice.

Only that I’m very grateful for the help I have received and I hope the university continues to provide the service.

I am really grateful to [ ] for his help, support and patience.

Not sure staff members at UEA know enough about COUNS. It’s still a taboo matter, and not sure everyone knows it’s available and for free!

I would like to acknowledge my counsellor’s professionalism and consistent service.

From the beginning [ ] has helped me to feel accepted, justified, entitled to be me and to be ok with myself. I am grateful to her for her work with me, The progress we made has been significant.

[ ] was an excellent support and gave me space to explore everything in depth. Thank you.

Very happy with my counselling. Could perhaps do with more but appreciate why this was not possible.

My counsellor was very easy to talk to from my first session. I was able to tell her things I’d never addressed before. She was great. I’m grateful to her.

I felt ready to end my counselling and aware that it was in heavy demand. The office and building connected with counselling need to be more visible and easily accessed. Thank you for having this Service available—where would I be now without it.

It has raised issues as well as help me face others and I think further counselling in the future may help.

[ ] was very professional and empathic.
I am 100% happy with my decision for counselling. It was the best way to address my situation. I had a very good wavelength with my counsellor who was very engaged and committed and who sensibly addressed my problems.

Counselling was of huge benefit to me. [ ] listened with compassion, sensitivity and acceptance all of which helped me to accept myself and move forward.

I would like to thank [ ] especially. I have benefited so much from my sessions.

[ ] was great. I was really upset at the start but through our sessions has helped me understand what was going on. I’m no longer upset.

Having a fixed number of sessions it felt like having to cram in stuff. I thought that my counsellor was very helpful and perceptive.
The University Counselling Service website provides the UEA community with information about the Counselling Service, together with links to other websites providing helpful information that may be of interest to clients, non-clients and counselling professionals. The current sections are:

- About us
- Enquiries and Appointments (including opening times)
- Helpful Resources
- Workshops/Lectures
- Training and Professional Issues

The Helpful Resources section includes a link to the ‘Student Counselling in UK Universities’ (http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/index.htm), a site set up by various heads of university counselling services to provide information and advice for students, families, parents and friends.

Any comments on the Service website can be sent to: csr@uea.ac.uk