

Recognising Exam Stress in Your Learners

Exam time puts increasing pressure on our young people to 'perform' and many find it impossibly challenging. Sadly, trends confirm that self-harm is becoming a favoured way for our youngsters to handle stress. It's commonly talked of, recognised and accepted.



At the very time when our young people should be having the time of their lives, some are noticeably anxious, withdrawn, and irritable.

Whilst many of these symptoms are to be expected, we need to be aware of our wider responsibilities. As Educators, we are responsible for caring for the young people in our care.

Here at HMP we watch for signs of self-harm and suicide threats on a daily basis. Exam stress as a trigger just doesn't figure in my considerations. Stress here is off the scale. It's a constant and continual.

I don't have to wait for examination days. My personal radar can be alerted at any time – in class, in the Office, on the landings, walking the corridors. I'm constantly alert to any obvious signs that someone's distress might lead to self-harm.

I apply my observation skills moment by moment.

We may have different triggers here but the risks are similar to the school and college community. Whilst the situation may be different, the signs are the same.

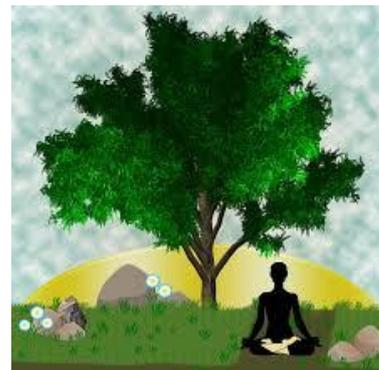
We do Suicide and Self-Harm training to keep us aware and alert. We've learnt to develop a gut instinct from years of observation.



Whilst you may have the most robust pastoral care team, you, as Exam Officer are at the coal face of these stressful periods. You may be the first to notice unusual, extreme or concerning behaviour. You need

to react to it with responsibility, and report it – as we do.

Whilst you'll find many recommendations as to 'Signs of Stress' online, personally, I use my own barometer. We've all developed instincts over time and yours won't fail you.



My personal guidelines may be similar to your own:

- Have they received any news from those close to them that's upsetting?
- What's going on in their personal lives?
- Do you know their circle of friends and associations? Are there any concerns in these areas?
- Have they been behaving irrationally in or around exam time? (often the confident are masking the opposite of how they really feel)
- What is their usual behaviour type? How does their present activity compare? What changes are you noticing?
- Do they look as if they are taking care of themselves – i.e. sleep, food, personal care?
- Are they erratic in their conversations or behaviours?
- Do you have a good line of communication with carers, guardians or parents through which to discuss concerns?
- Does your instinct tell you that something just isn't right here?
- Is your experience telling you to act on this feeling and take it up?

Our Team flag up individuals who seem less disengaged than usual, exhibiting unusual behaviour, being aggressive without apparent cause, difficult to engage, remote and hard to reach, withdrawn or disengaged. We've become adept at reacting and reporting. We monitor our flagged individuals regularly until they are deemed to be out of danger.



Your situation won't be as dramatic, but self-harm and suicide are on the increase in our Education System. Our young people are continuously fighting hormones, peer pressure and poor self-worth.

They need us to provide an observant eye, and a helping hand. Whilst we all rely on instinct, here at

HMP we're reminded to use Socratic Questioning techniques to get to the heart of the problem with those what, when, where, how, why and who questions. It's not Rocket Science.

It sometimes helps that we're not 'trained' psychologists – but merely caring individuals, seeking to offer the best we can to those who need us in that moment.



I constantly need to remind myself I am not just an Exams Officer. We all work with those we care about and we care enough to notice when learners are not working to their best. We need to appreciate our instincts and trust ourselves on when to make that call.

As a Department, we are always encouraged to 'pass it on' – to send it higher. It's no exaggeration to say that here, observation, if not followed through, can end in tragedy.

You know what to do – you don't need my list of risks or triggers. And your young people are fortunate to have you on their side.

Watch, observe and react with grace. And don't forget to do your own spot of Breath Exercises, Meditation or Tapping to help you handle what your working life throws at you.

You won't help your young people if you yourself are stressed beyond belief!

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