

## St John's College – Study Week for Teachers and Education Professionals

I am writing this at St John's College, Oxford, as one of the lucky few afforded a place to attend a **Teachers' Study Week** run by Katherine Fender in July 2017. The Study Week involved staying as a guest of the College in order to use the incomparable Oxford facilities to research a particular area of interest for a week.

I work with sixth-form students at a school in Surrey. The increase in mental health problems amongst the students has felt overwhelming, and so I was keen to look at the causes of this as well as at ways of delivering pre-emptive guidance and effective support. The figures are sobering - 10% of young people suffer from a diagnosable mental health problem, a figure that is rising and which doesn't convey the devastation in each individual life affected.

Intervening early has the potential to not only stop the condition deteriorating to crisis point, but can also have a transformative effect long-term. However, this support is shockingly underfunded and is, therefore, failing the young - "I was horrified by what I witnessed" wrote Norman Lamb, the Guardian's Health Editor whilst Minister for Care and Support:



Illustration by Ella Baron – the Guardian

- Nearly a quarter of young people referred to specialist CAMHS services are turned away, often because they fail to meet outrageous eligibility thresholds;
- The anorexic teenager is denied treatment until she becomes dangerously thin;
- The boy with OCD is told that there is no specialist support until he has experienced repeated suicidal thoughts;
- Those who do get treatment are often faced with excruciating waiting times.

Lamb experienced the system first hand when dealing with his son's mental illness – saying that he didn't get any preferential treatment: "We were treated like sh\*\* like everybody else".

The Study Week at St John's has given me the time and space to design structures of support in order to help students to avoid the critical states for which external support is so lacking. Using research on the stressors affecting the mental health of students, I am creating PSHE (personal, social and health education) lesson content to be delivered to sixth-form students as an integral part of their education. I am also working on support for parents as it is clear that, if we are going to make a difference, we need everyone to be involved. These sessions involve discussions of various mindsets which are unhelpful to the student's growth. Titles for these sessions include: 'The Approval Trap', 'The Perfectionist Anomaly', 'The Tyranny of Social Media', 'Unrealistic Thinking' and 'The Agency in You'.

Research into existing models of mental health support at Oxford convinced me of the efficacy of online support and also suggested an alternative to the stigmatised 'mental health' label. Stigma is a

powerful silencer, but the term 'Mental Wealth' flips this on its head, encouraging individuals to recognise the value of taking time to improve their state of mind and their outlook.

Of course, mental health doesn't recognise age limits and, whilst doing my research, I came across an insightful Guardian Article on undergraduate mental health which expresses, in images and words, the desolation that it visits on those

affected: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/gallery/2017/jun/27/eleven-sketches-university-mental-health-crisis>

I've also unexpectedly achieved a whole lot more than I set out to in my Study Week at St John's! I discovered from another teacher in the group, Mr Gavin Hatton, how to use the Doppler weather scanner to avoid the downpours that dogged our attempts to visit Christ Church Meadows (he was Welsh and, therefore, expert in adverse weather conditions), watched a jazz version of *Twelfth Night* in the Bodleian Quad, *Much Ado* in Wadham College gardens, and visited the Raphael exhibition at the Ashmolean. I talked with Oxford tutors like Dr Sandra Campbell, Supernumerary Fellow in Physiology, and worked in the breath-taking Duke Humphrey's Library as well as in the Rad. Cam. I also met the whole group attending the Study Week, who were investigating subjects as varied as Egypt, Wild Adventure in Education, Greek Art, Religion and Sexuality; as you can imagine, conversations in St John's dining hall and at the local pubs have been inspiring to say the least. But two clear highlights have been sitting alone in St John's chapel whilst the organist played a magnificent piece of music, and Mr Stewart Tiley, the College Librarian, allowing me a private viewing of Caxton's second edition of Chaucer's works. Being able to turn pages printed 600 years ago, and to read Chaucer's words, was priceless.

I would recommend anyone to take advantage of this truly amazing week if they get the chance.



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