

Men Talking About Mental Health_mixdown.mp3

Voice Over [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah [00:00:10] So hello and welcome to a special episode of our BeWell podcasts. Today's episode will be co-hosted by Nick Edwards, Acting Deputy Director of People and Head of Student Support here at the University of Aberdeen. He's going to lead us through our discussion today with the panel to talk about men's mental health. So without further ado, Nick, I will hand over to you to introduce yourself and our guests to our listeners.

Nick [00:00:34] Thank you, Bekah. It's great to be here today and it's really important for us to have this chance to speak openly about the experiences of men's mental health. I'm delighted to be joined by two members of the university community, both of whom identify as male, to discuss our own views and experiences on mental health. Now I really want to get cracking with the conversation, so I'm going to initially hand over to our guests, to introduce themselves and tell us a little bit more about what they do at the university. So, Malcolm, do you want to kick us off?

Malcolm [00:01:04] Yes, I will. Thank you very much for having me Nick on this podcast. My name is Malcolm Harvey. I'm a lecturer in politics at the University of Aberdeen, and I have written a couple of articles about my own experiences with mental health, with depression, and I'm very keen to discuss these in this podcast.

Nick [00:01:24] Thank you for that, Malcolm. Sam, do you want to introduce yourself?

Sam [00:01:29] Hi. My name's Sam Johnson. I'm a fourth-year psychology student at the University of Aberdeen and I also think this is a very important subject. It's one that I've covered, not specifically in kind of blog pieces and articles, but it's just something that seems to come up a lot. So maybe when doing a description of 'Life Over Lockdown' or 'Changes to Life', just making sure to mention mental health as well. It's definitely something that I've had struggles with in the past. So I think it is very important to make sure that it's talked about and that people feel comfortable to speak about it themselves and to ask for the support that they need.

Nick [00:02:06] Thank you for that, Sam. And as Bekah said at the start, my day-to-day job, I work within our Directorate of People so looking over both students and staff wellbeing. And I think personally having had experience with my own mental health not being great, I think the importance that I see in my day to day job of encouraging others to speak and seek support regardless of what stage their mental health is at, is something that I'm really, really keen to ensure that we're able to talk about today. Now, I guess one of the key areas that I wanted to start off exploring is the kind of traditional view that men don't talk about mental health. And, you know, one in four people in the UK are said to experience a mental health issue at some point in the coming year. And it's something that doesn't discriminate based on gender but traditionally men struggle more to talk about it and be open about their mental health. Malcolm, I might come to you first, really just for your thoughts on why that might be. And if you have any experience yourself of maybe holding back seeking support or speaking about your own mental health in the past.

Malcolm [00:03:13] I think it is really important to note that, I mean, obviously, it is not just a male problem. You know, mental health affects all of us in many different ways. I think partly it's not just about mental health either. You know, men are very reluctant to go to the doctor, regardless of the reason. And, you know, that's something as a society that we

generally are just pretty bad at. And so I think this is part of a larger issue in terms of mens health and men, you know, not wanting to admit a weakness. And I think that probably goes to the heart of this conversation in the sense that, you know, going to the doctor is to admit that there is something that's not quite right with how you are feeling and whether that is physical or mental it is an acknowledgement of a weakness in your male appearance, if you like. And I think historically, you know, we can talk sociologically, we can talk about anthropologically, but this idea of the male figure as the provider, as the defender of the family, as a figurehead, all of those kinds of things are bound up in this idea. And so if you are not strong in that context, then you are somehow lessened as a male figure. And I think in 2022, we've gotten to a point where a lot of the baggage that comes with that is starting to kind of fall away a little bit. And we have, of course, a huge number of different types of family unit. There is not this traditional male breadwinner type figure that there has historically been. So we are as a society moving away from that. And I think as we move away from that, that pressure to always be that strong male figure is starting to kind of fall away a little bit as well. But I think the fact that we still have a lot of people, a lot of views that kind of fall into that category, that there's still a lot of pressure on men to demonstrate that strength and to not acknowledge or recognise weakness. And I think that for me is the major issue here that we need to address as a society, is it's actually a strength to recognise weakness. And I think mental health is such a huge part of that. We don't want to admit that there's something, you know, not going right in our heads and so we kind of carry on as if nothing's going on, whereas, you know, emotionally, mentally, we could well be falling apart but we don't want to demonstrate or we don't want to show that outside of this, outside of ourselves. So, there's been a huge amount of progress, I think, in this area, but I think we've still got a long way to go.

Nick [00:06:19] It's really interesting. I'm joining you now from our Qatar campus. And actually on the flight on the way over here, I overheard a couple behind me when their young son started to cry and it was the very traditional response of "don't be crying, boys, don't cry." And I guess I was reflecting on that quite a bit before we did this sort of filming just now, and Malcolm, with all due respect to you and I, Sam's probably at a slightly closer age to the education system in secondary school than we are. But Sam, do you have any thoughts on that? As our younger member of the panel and what boys and men are brought up to think around mental health and about being tough and about keeping these things, as Malcolm says, hidden and to ourselves.

Sam [00:07:01] Yeah, I definitely think Malcolm is right about there being a strong generational aspect to it, where you look at kind of older families, again, the traditional nuclear family, the traditional masculine role that has been taken on and in that there is not that room for vulnerability and there's these kind of very gendered roles. I know a lot of people as well who have older male role models, fathers, grandparents and their way of dealing with mental health is through things like, you know, alcohol or through anger because those are masculine emotions, you're allowed to be angry, you're allowed to, you know, have addiction or something. But you're not allowed to cry and talk openly and show that vulnerability, because vulnerability is anathema to the concept of masculinity. I think it has certainly gotten a little bit easier depending what social environment you're in, but it's definitely still there. So there's still a lot of parents who will tell their kids something like, "boys don't cry, man up", deal with it in all these kinds of ways, "boys will be boys" when they act out aggressively, but if they cry and try and talk about it, that that's almost penalised more. Despite that being the more honest, the more vulnerable, the less socially harmful expression of pain or mental health. So there's still a stigma that is being taught and that people are picking up but I think as society progressed a little bit and becomes more accepting and as you break down those very traditional gender roles, there's

becoming a change where more people can be themselves and be a bit honest. But it definitely does depend on your setting. So I know some people who are very fortunate and have very accepting families and environments, and other people who are still very much in those kind of old, classic environments where that's how they were brought up, that's how their friends see them and they still very much have that strong, masculine image.

Nick [00:08:57] Do you have any views, you know, any of us I guess, on how we can help further break some of those things down. I don't think there's obviously going to be a really simple solution that we're going to come up with on this podcast. But, I guess for me, I've always been quite keen, having younger nephews myself to try and just be slightly less traditional in the way that I refer to them and we refer to other people and, you know, trying to correct if they say something that is a little bit stereotypical, just trying to give them the other side of that coin. But that does take you being very actively aware of what's being said and acknowledging that actually, should you be saying that? Should they be saying, you know, "Don't be a girl. Don't be X"? You know, don't play with that? It's that sort of ingrained thing. I mean, Malcolm, that's going to be a big thing for society to shift, but I do think that we are making some progress in the way that social media is having a potentially positive impact in some areas, albeit not all areas of mental health.

Malcolm [00:09:54] I think that's right. I think it is very much incumbent on us all, when we spot these kinds of gendered expectations to react to them in those ways. I've got an eight-year-old-year old daughter and I remember, you know, when she was in nursery. I took her over to nursery one morning, her mum was away at a work event early that morning and so I had pleated her hair, which is a skill that most dads can at least do a little bit of. It's not always the tidiest, but at least you know, and especially when you have no hair, it's something that it's quite good fun to try and do so, you know, it was a passable attempt at a pleat. And so we got into the nursery, I'm handing her over to the nursery, and the nursery teacher says, "Oh, look, your mum's done your hair" and my daughter, very quickly and unprompted by me, said, "No, no, it was my dad. He's very good at that. He can do it, too." And I thought, look, that's what we're up against, you know, because it's not just that early stage that's at nursery level. And there's an ingrained, you know, expectation that some tasks are male and some tasks are female and, you know, that extends outwards into medical ideas and mental health ideas as well. And the expectations and the boys don't cry and the girls should wear dresses and all these kinds of, you know, gendered ideas. And so being a university lecturer, I guess, and working in this kind of environment, I'm very aware of those, those attitudes and very aware in our parenting about trying to tackle those kinds of things head on. And so I think, you know, we very much make an effort to try and make sure that we're not, you know, using gendered language and those kinds of things in order to try and combat some of these potential difficulties down the line in terms of mental health but, you know, I can imagine if there are not, those deliberate attempts. I think Sam's absolutely right when you talked about intergenerational issues as well. Occasionally, not very often, but occasionally we've had to say to grandparents or great uncles, you know, might want to think about how you're framing that or girls can do that as well kind of idea. So it's about learning with each other and trying to kind of change those things, but it's not an overnight thing, I think it's it's very much an evolution rather than the big bang.

Nick [00:12:24] Sam, what are your thoughts?

Sam [00:12:27] Yeah. So one thing that really struck me from what Malcolm is saying is this stereotype that we all have very much ingrained in us. There is still a strong difference between what we see as masculine and what we see as feminine. And I was thinking of a

couple actually studies that have come up in my psychology course, and it's things like when you're going to a zoo, all the animals that are, you know, dangerous and heavy are referred to with masculine pronouns, are referred to as male and any animal that's delicate or good to look at is referred to with female pronouns. And the same thing, like kids learning just from toys, that if you learn that something is for girls, you also learn that therefore it's not for boys. So there's like this logical association that if you associate something with a different group, therefore you're saying, "Oh, so that's not me. I'm not allowed to be or express." And the, those stereotypes are still surrounding us, they're in our media, they're in the world and most of us still have them ingrained in our heads. And you do need to take a real active role cognitively and be very careful just to not follow along with them, because that's so natural. And I think a lot of people are going to do that either because it's the easy thing or because they generally have internalised that and think that's the right way to do things and you have to actually be active in countering those narratives.

Nick [00:13:45] I'm definitely going to be championing for the boy flamingos out there going forward. Malcolm?

Malcolm [00:13:52] Yeah, I just wanted to say that I know we've kind of ended up talking more about the male side of this, perhaps, than the mental health side of things in the last couple of minutes. But I think it's really important to point out that, that's part of that idea of why men don't talk about mental health and why they think of talking about mental health as a weakness, because in some ways, and again, this is, you know, historic gendered language, there's almost a sense of, you know, weakness being associated with female and strength being associated with male. We are kind of focussing on the gender side of things as well, and I suppose the kind of early years education but I think that's a real key part of this conversation because that's how we've gotten to where we are today with this issue. So it's about addressing it at that level as well as further along that as well.

Nick [00:14:51] So obviously making that first step and kind of opening up about how you feel can be really daunting, especially when we consider all of the things that we've just discussed about how we're brought up to think when we come to thinking of actually reaching out for help. What advice would you both give to someone who's struggling with their mental health and wants to start that conversation but doesn't quite know how to do it? Do you have any personal experience or sort of ideas on how that conversation could start and making that first step to get support?

Sam [00:15:24] Yeah. So from my perspective, it's always been a real mental barrier to actually open up about those things. And one thing that I'd say again, is definitely having the right people is difficult. Sometimes it can be family, but also just having the right kind of friends because I think, again, to come back to that, that idea of like male presenting as very strong and independent, it means that there's a lot of quite shallow masculine friendships where all of it is kind of portraying this kind of image of yourself as kind of strong, and it's maybe like more of a kind of teasing or activity-based friendship. And actually, that's one thing that I'm always really jealous of is like female friendships are fantastic because there's so much honesty and openness and kind of closeness there that I think is missing in a lot of male friendships. And so to find those close friends who you can trust and open up to is a big part of it because I think a lot of people are still acting, putting on a face, acting strong even around their, their close like friends and family. And so just to really sit down and have that honest talk with someone, it's a big step and it's a scary step, but if they're the right people who you are close to, then they will absolutely understand and support you as best they can.

Nick [00:16:46] Yeah and I think in my day-to-day job, I think I've become even more aware of that importance of, of reaching out. And I think historically I just was not the person who would speak about how you were feeling. I kind of always put myself in the role of I help other people and that's what I do, and I'll just manage everything that I'm feeling and my anxiety and depression I'll just deal with that myself. And I think actually it's only recently since I've hit 30, in the last few years, that I've probably started to admit that actually you've not been okay for a while or there's been points when you really needed to speak to someone. And actually getting to find those connections with individuals who you can have that conversation with and will often reciprocate and have that conversation back. But actually just opening the door to it is often that, that big step forward. But I haven't really ever heard of someone who has done that and regretted it, but I've certainly heard a lot of people who regret not having done it sooner. Malcolm, I don't know what you think about that sort of starting conversation?

Malcolm [00:17:47] I think it's interesting listening to both your experiences there because for me, when I recognised and acknowledged that things weren't going particularly well for me, I was still in that kind of I can't possibly talk to anyone about this. But, for me, that made the problem worse because I had this horrible secret that I was trying to shield from the world as well. And so you're almost spending as much energy trying to hide the fact that you are unwell as you are and trying to fight the fact that you're unwell. So my issue with that was very quickly I realised that was not a sustainable position and so I started to write about it, write down how I felt about these things. And maybe about three or four months after I was first diagnosed, I think I kind of I published just an 800-word/900-word blog post on where I was at. And, you know, obviously what you then get back from the friends and allies that you have is the massive amount of support, "I had no idea that you were going through this. Let's, you know, pick up the phone. Let's have a chat about it." Incredible support, but not knowing how people would react to it is part of that, you know, fear as well. And so for me, because I'm an academic, writing was quite a natural way of being able to deal with it. And I felt that was a quite helpful, and then gradually afterwards, having those conversations with people because what happened in kind of, for want of a better word, outing myself as having depression, I got so many messages from people saying, "Oh, me too I recognise these things. I struggle with this a lot, let's have this conversation." And so, you know, strangers on Twitter would come back to me and we'd start having conversations and that was incredibly helpful, just knowing that other people were experiencing the same things as well. So that first step is very difficult. And even if you don't have that circle of trusted friends, you might end up developing it in places that you perhaps would least expect to find. So, it's a hugely difficult first step to take, but once you take it, there's so much support that's available when you do.

Nick [00:20:12] It's interesting Sam, I think you used the word earlier, 'acting' with friends and family, almost putting on a brave face. And Malcolm, you've just mentioned outing yourself and actually, you know, I'm gay, and I spent 18 years of my life pretending that I was not. And I guess I've kind of taken that, what I like to think of as skill in lying and hiding things into my adult life and I did that with my mental health as well. And actually, other than a few maybe general conversations and I'd say in the last six months to a year, the first time people will learn that I've suffered with anxiety and depression is listening to this podcast. But I think it was so important for me that we actually took this step to come and do that, that it'll be interesting to see how that can then go forward, and I guess for me, there isn't a one size fits all. It isn't that you have to go to your best friend and tell them this is how you're feeling and they should react in a certain way. It could be Twitter, it could be writing it down, it could just be taking a step to go to a GP. There's no real, I guess, right or

wrong way in terms of getting support. So we've spoken about reaching out to others, but it's also really important to discuss allies and how you can react well to someone who comes to you for support. Do either of you have any thoughts on how someone can respond to that conversation if someone says, "I have depression, I'm going through a tough time"?

Sam [00:21:36] My first thought is just to listen. I think that's something that's very simple, but it's also just very important. Again, we've mentioned about the barrier that it takes to talk about something like this. So if someone is coming to you with that. Be careful that you don't cut them off immediately. Don't like immediately kind of suggest a quick fix or something. Actually take the time to just sit there with them and listen. You know, you might be the person they've chosen after wrecking themselves over, "can I talk to someone about this? Is this something I can share?", and that they've come to you and are sharing it. So, take that moment and just kind of listen to them and sit there with them for a while. I think that alone is a massive help and a massive first step. And then you can think about how to support them or help them. But I think a lot of people try and head it off. And again, we were mentioning previously the ideas of kind of manning up, oh, just, you know, smile and deal with it and push on through. I think a lot of the more negative experiences that people have when they open up is that they feel immediately kind of invalidated, "Oh, no, I shouldn't have opened up. I should just be getting on with this." And so to actually just, first of all, sit there, listen to them, and try and make sure that they understand that their expression is valid and that you were there for them and that you care for them genuinely, is, I think, one of the most important first steps.

Nick [00:23:02] Yeah, I couldn't agree more with that Sam. I think listening without judgement is key and I think not necessarily feeling you have to have a magical solution as I think so many times we want to jump to - "How do we fix you? How do we fix this problem?" Well, the answer is that might not be something that you can do, but being able to listen. And I guess for me also someone said earlier on that, you know, you'll build up, what will the reaction be to this? And actually having someone that can listen but then potentially also follow up, you know, whether it's with a text or a couple of days just saying "Hey just checking in, how are you doing?", to make it, you know, you haven't ended our friendship. I'm not now just not going to talk to you because you've mentioned this thing that you're dealing with that I don't want to talk about. It can have a massive impact beyond what you can measure in the 2 seconds it takes you to send it. Malcolm, do you have any thoughts on that?

Malcolm [00:23:50] I think Sam's advice is absolutely spot on. Just listen, you know, as much as you can, as best as you can, just sit and listen. It's an incredible position of privilege that that person is placing you in, you know, trusting you with this news that they have that they're, you know, potentially scared to tell other people. The thought to jump in with advice is so great. But genuinely, just sit and listening is incredibly helpful. Just letting someone, you know, have the words tumble out and organise their thoughts in your presence, I think can be extraordinarily beneficial. One of the things, just from a personal anecdote here. You know, as a personal tutor at the university, there was a bit of me when I was kind of talking about my own experiences of mental health wondered how students would react to having a lecturer or a personal tutor who had kind of admitted to this in inverted commas "weakness" of mental health. And actually, one of the first, I think six months after I'd read a couple of articles about it, I had a student come talk to me and say, "Look, I'm struggling with some of these things that you've mentioned. Can you give me any advice?" And really, I think all they wanted to do was just talk and get the thing off their chest and, you know, know that someone had similar experiences that might be able to

kind of bounce some ideas back. And of course, you know, I sent them on to student support and tried to help them, you know, find avenues for proper support that I couldn't give. But as the initial step, you know, again, enormous privilege for me just to be sitting in that place with that level of trust that the student had placed in me. So that for me, in some ways massively just validated the fact that I had been quite public about my own battle. And, you know, my thought on that as well was always that, you know, if it helps someone else to be a little bit more comfortable with what they are going through, then, you know, it's so much the better, because it helped me to write about and to kind of talk about it in that way so if it helps someone else, that was hugely gratifying as well. So, I think that, you know, Sam's absolutely right is listen, just as best you can and be non-judging and let the person tell you about their experiences.

Nick [00:26:20] I think one of the mistakes I have made in the past, I think certainly when I, you know, started supporting people and individuals, largely because I'm an inherently selfish individual who wants to insert myself into every conversation, is that I would be really keen to try and tell someone, I know how you feel, I know this, and here's my example. And then you start to switch that conversation and it becomes more about you and it becomes less about them and you can almost see in hindsight people then closing up and it might be you sat there in silence for an hour, but it's clearly that's what that individual needs. And as you said Sam, this might be the first time that individual has ever spoken about this to someone. And Malcolm, you said, you know, it's a position of privilege that someone trusts you with that, but they almost will never expect you to have a solution to magically solve it. Now, Malcolm, you started to speak about some of the more practical support services which we'll cover off and maybe towards the end of the discussion. But I wonder, thinking in a slightly more positive light, if we've got any tips that we could share with listeners as to how over time we've managed to take steps to take care of our mental health? So are there any things in your daily routine that you do in order to keep on top of it? Or when you notice that some things may be going in the wrong direction, how you can kind of correct yourself? Malcolm anything from you initially?

Malcolm [00:27:38] Yeah. I think first of all, making time for something that you particularly enjoy. I think that's hugely important because there is a tendency when you are at your lowest to just think that everything is terrible and you don't enjoy anything about life. And in actual fact, of course, that's not true. There are things that you really do enjoy, and it's just about taking out time from your day to make sure that you are doing those things. And I suppose the thing for me that's part of that is exercise. I really like to go running or cycling. I'm struggling a little bit at the moment because I had COVID a couple of weeks ago and my chest is still really quite tight from it. So I'm really missing that and I can feel that kind of stress and anxiety building up a little bit because I'm missing that. The other one obviously, as an academic, I do quite a lot of reading and that actually when I was at my worst was one of the really difficult things to do because my concentration was so bad. So it was a case of trying to read a chapter or page or something like that and you know, constantly going over the same sentence about eight or ten times before it went in. So I think to try and get around that, I was kind of getting up and walking up and down the stairs a couple of times and just kind of, you know, trying to get a little bit of physical activity. I think those kind of things really help. So things that you like doing and I guess physical exercise as well, they're not going to cure everything, but they do kind of help, you know, get the serotonin going, get a little bit of activity to go in and and it kind of helps you just to switch off from things that are going on in your head at the time. So those would be my kind of, I suppose, quick fixes or little things that you can do yourself in order to kind of help keep the beast from the door, as it were.

Nick [00:29:29] Sam, what about you?

Sam [00:29:32] Yeah. So for me, a lot of it is about balance and self-care and taking that time. The first thing that I always just go through is, okay, what is my kind of basic work life balance in terms of - am I getting enough sleep? So if you're sleep's disrupted, you're obviously just going to feel terrible. So can I make myself have a little bit more time or, you know, make myself get to bed earlier or something like that just so I can hopefully get a little bit more rest. Am I eating okay? You know, sometimes I might not eat as much if I'm getting very stressed or, you know, I have a lot to do and making sure I'm eating relatively healthily as well. So those are kind of just little things to take care of in myself. And then a big thing is that balance. So one thing that I notice a lot is obviously if you're working or you're in uni, then you're going to end up like maybe stuck in a room typing out essays and exams and you really need a chance to again have that rest and have some play activities that you enjoy, as Malcolm said. So trying to make myself get outside, go for a walk, go for a run, find an activity you enjoy to take a break and just really look at your life and see is there like a balance there, are there things that you're missing? Are there important parts of self-care and daily living that you're just missing? And try and take stock of those first.

Nick [00:30:54] Thanks for that. And Sam, obviously, as a student, is there any parts of a kind of traditional student year that you find are more difficult to get through or not? I was invigilating an exam today on our Qatar campus and a number of students came up to discuss how they were feeling and how little sleep they've gotten, etc. And I know that's a bit of a traditional one, but I know there are points in the year for actually you don't expect to maybe feel worse. And especially in Aberdeen, we were not famed for our wonderful winter nights and our darkness, and that's always been something I have found as I've gotten older the impact of that, I notice more that actually in the winter, when it's dark nights and it's dark mornings, I am not as productive. I don't feel as good. I find it even harder to try and motivate myself. Anything like that from your site and the kind of cycle of a year that makes things worse or better?

Sam [00:31:46] Oh, definitely. So, one of the first things is feeling kind of connected when you arrive at uni or when you rejoin. And part of that is, you know, there are lots of societies, there are lots of events, but maybe if you're just feeling a bit down, you're feeling quite exhausted and you don't get out to many things and then you just feel isolated, you know, is it too late to go and join the clubs? Is it too late to introduce you? Because everyone's already got like a friend group or something, especially during a time like COVID, where it's just that little bit more effort to get yourself out and get to those events. So if you're missing out on those and then again, as you mentioned, the kind of dark months and maybe even again, holidays when people have gone home and there's not quite as much going on. You do mention exams, though, and I will say like a big time is obviously exams hand-ins and also the end of term. Whether it's maybe, you know, three or four essays, assignments within a couple of weeks of thesis hand-ins, I know a lot of people going through thesis stress at the moment and that's definitely a massive drain. Another one that I think it is something is just when you're coming to uni or when you're leaving uni because there's a lot of uncertainty. There's a lot of stress. There's a lot of, kind of things going on and really having that support there because a lot of people really feel like they really don't know where they're going, what they're doing. And that's just a critical time to have somebody else tell you, "Yeah, it's okay. I don't really know what I'm doing either and here's some support, here's some options, here's some people you can speak to."

Nick [00:33:09] Thanks for that, Sam and Malcolm. I know one of the famous things that everyone likes to think of staff who work at university is the fantastic summer break that we get. Three months of not doing anything when actually it's probably the busiest period of time, I think most of us have, but what do you find in terms of that kind of points of the year that cause issues or help out?

Malcolm [00:33:28] I think it's exactly that, actually. You know, as much as academics, we complain about marking periods, that's quite a condensed period of time. I mean, I have an honours course just now that I'm marketing 47 essays for, got to be back within the three-week period and those kinds of things. So that brings with it stress, but it's in a short period of time and you just work through them until you get them done. But for me, I might be an odd academic in this respect, but I actually find the summer some of the hardest periods of time and partly it's because of concentration because when you're in term time, from September till Christmas and then from January until the exam period in May, you have a bit more structure. If you're trying to do some research, you know, you've got a couple of days a week where you can fit it in around your teaching and then, you know, you've got stretches where you've got marking to do, you've got meetings with students, dissertation supervisions etc. So you're constantly juggling. It's busy, but you have a real structure. You know, once the exams are done, once the graduations are out the way and the students have all gone home. You've got this period of time for research, but it's not really, it's not really organised. In some ways that's good because you know, you can kind of put your own structure onto it but in other ways I feel quite bereft if you like, I really miss students when I'm not teaching. But that experience of having that time and like, you know, it's for me to organise, I find that really difficult. And so I get out the highlighters and the post-its and make sure I'm blocking out hours and 2 hours in my diary to make sure I'm doing a particular task and I have to be that organised otherwise the days just fritter away and it's September and I've done nothing.

Nick [00:35:10] Yeah, I definitely agree. I think when I don't have a bit of a structure or when I've got a bit of a period where there's not clarity in what I'm doing, it can be easier for my mind to then just fill that gap in the way it wants to. And obviously, I can't agree that academics complain about marking, I mean, I've never experienced that I don't know what you're talking about there, Malcolm. One of the things that we discussed at the start and I mentioned was social media, and Malcolm, you mentioned this is something that brought a positive source of support for you, and I know sometimes it can bring a positive source of support. But Sam, do you have any thoughts on social media, especially given that when I was a student, Twitter was just coming into formation, so I did not have to deal with this as a student. But what do you think it is? Is it good? Is it bad? Is it both?

Sam [00:35:53] It's definitely both. There's aspects of social media that I think are really trying. Obviously, there's a lot of people presenting only their best self and this kind of positive comparison. So again, we have the image that we talked about earlier with you presenting yourself only as this no health issues, that you're just doing fantastic and everything's going great. And if you look out and see everyone else like that, that can actually make you feel really alone. Similarly, also that there is some to stress whether that's news or bullying or other kind of just events and things that happen on social media and can leave you feeling quite terrible and negative about yourself. But this is also a place that can be positive. There are a lot of good individuals, good posts, good blogs that are designed to try and help people with mental health to help you feel seen and support you through that. So it really depends on what you're following and it can definitely connect you to people when you're really struggling to find a friendship or social group to connect with. So it has a lot of positives and a lot of negatives and it really comes down to

managing it well and being vigilant with enforcing that structure because sometimes the first thing that you go to look at, because you're interested in something that's maybe a disaster going on or, you know, something horrible someone said, but you really need to kind of restrain that impulse and go, "No, here's what's actually helpful and useful. Is scrolling through my social media feed make me feel terrible?" Then either you need to stop that and reduce that, or you need to really change what you're actually looking at, what you're following.

Nick [00:37:28] I couldn't agree more with that. Some use the word there that I was thinking of managing and I think, you know, someone said and I can't remember where it came from, but they were talking about not letting social media manage you, you manage it. And I actually took a break from Instagram a couple of months ago just because I felt it was that exact thing of comparing where you are, what you were doing to everyone else. And my friends are now at the peak age where they are having second children or they're getting married, and it's things like, "Oh, I'm getting married late." I'm like, Oh, great, well, that makes me feel fantastic. And actually just taking that break away from it really helped. And similarly, even on Twitter, I think just being a bit more active in muting certain words and certain people and certain conversations, because actually you have the power to do that. You don't have to see it all if you don't want to. And actually, if it is causing that negative impact, I just removed it from my feed and it made a massive difference. Malcolm, obviously you use Twitter quite a lot and it's been really positive for you, so what are your thoughts on social media and any tips that you can have for people that are maybe wanting to explore using it in a positive way?

Malcolm [00:38:34] I think you know, what Sam said there is absolutely right. Again, it's about managing it. You know, it's that classic meme of "I'll be up to bed in a minute, there's someone on the Internet that's wrong." I can't let it go. You know, you don't want to be that person. I love a debate as much as the next person but at some point, you've got to just, you know, shut it down and forget about it and just agree to disagree, let's move on. You know, you're absolutely right. It's about management. It's about recognising that this can be a distressing place. I'm thinking, you know, recently about, you know, the situation in Ukraine. You know, as an academic in Politics and IR, it's a kind of thing I feel like I have to know an awful lot about. But at the same time, I need to take a break. I'm in a very fortunate position that I can take a break from it. But you know, you need to recognise yourself that you're no help to anyone else if your mental health is going to take a bit of a dip in this situation as well. So it's about recognising that. It's about having the tools to be able to, you know, as Nick said bear, you know, mute certain words, certain phrases. It doesn't make you a bad person for switching off from something for a little period of time or a longer period of time. It's about protecting your own mental health as much as anything else. I really do like Twitter. I'm not sure how much I'm going to like it if Elon Musk takes it over. But you know, I've got a really interesting community of people that I follow, people that I've met from Twitter. I've been on it for, I think about 12 or 13 years. When I lived in Edinburgh, we used to periodically meet up, a kinda Scottish political community. So it's great for those kinds of things. You know, there's a real sense of solidarity, I suppose, in different communities on it and people do tend to look out for each other. And, you know, if someone says that they're struggling, you know, if you do have that kind of community to fall back on as well. But it's about curating the right group and about the right accounts to follow and to take care of what it is that you're looking for from social media I think.

Nick [00:40:40] One of the things you've just mentioned there, and Sam you touched on this earlier is, you know, for the individual who maybe is offering support, is looking after yourself as well. And we did discuss about how being open and non-judgemental, having

that conversation and just being there for someone is really helpful. But obviously, that can sometimes have an impact on that individual and I guess I just want to touch on making sure that individuals are taking care of themselves. Within the kind of student support community we have a phrase that we love to use called "you can't pour from an empty cup", and if you're supporting people day in, day out, you become quite used to maybe using more formal ways of looking after yourself of clinical supervision. But at the university, we do have ways that you can get formal support. We have a counselling service who can help our staff members debrief if they've helped an individual or had a difficult conversation. Students can also use that service and we also have our student helpline and our staff helpline as well, which are available 24/7 and can link you up with a trained counsellor. But I guess I wondered if either of you have used anything that maybe isn't a friend, but a more formal source of support that you would recommend to an individual that's going through a tough time that you could talk about just now. Whether it's provided by the university, whether it's a charity, is it the NHS? Is there any sort of sources of support that you have found helpful for your own mental health challenges?

Sam [00:42:03] So personally I have interacted with the NHS and it's not always the easiest. There's definitely some long waiting times. There can definitely be kind of confusion over meetings and everything, but I did in the end find that useful. I did do some CBT through that and I also got some medication that did actually help me personally a lot, and I think that's also something that is somewhat stigmatised. But personally, for like anxiety or something, having something that I could take when things were really bad and it just helped me personally to deal with a lot of my really difficult times. I also have used counselling services and things before and sometimes those have been very useful and sometimes there's been something else that's not quite right. The main thing that I would encourage people is. Sometimes things won't work out at first, and that's just an annoyance of the system but you can keep at it. You can keep searching for what you want or something that works for you, and hopefully, you will find it in the end it will help and make things easier.

Nick [00:43:08] Thanks for that, Sam. Malcolm, how about you?

Malcolm [00:43:12] Yeah. I think it's, it's really interesting that we've gotten, you know, quite a long way through this podcast before we started talking about medication. And that, you know, is a, I don't know how we want to read into that, but I think, you know, as Sam said there, really important to recognise that different things work for different people. My experience, I guess similar to Sam's, you know, I did have a meeting with a counsellor through the NHS. I went onto some medication. The first set of medication I tried didn't really work that well, so we changed it onto a different one, changed the dosage a couple of times. Coming off it was a nightmare, but starting on it wasn't too bad and then, you know, tried some things like CBT and mindfulness and those kinds of things as well. Again, varying levels of success. So it's about trying to find the right treatment or the right, the right method for you. That's incredibly important and also knowledge of the fact that it's not necessarily going to work. The first thing that you try isn't going to necessarily work. So it's about, you know, persevering with these things and to come full circle, I guess, from the things that we spoke about, the start. You know, medication counselling, CBT, mindfulness, whatever it is, none of these things are a weakness. They are a means by which you are taking control of your situation. They're you managing the circumstances that you find yourself in. I often compare mental health to physical health and something like, if you broke your leg, you wouldn't be just thinking it better. You know, you would be going to get it reset, you would be going to get medication for it. You would be on a course of physiotherapy for a few months or whatever. All of those things are important and it's

exactly the same with mental health. You have to kind of build up the right things and it's a gradual process it's not something that happens overnight.

Nick [00:45:04] Thanks for that, Malcolm. I'm very conscious of the time and I really just wanted to give you both the opportunity if there's anything else that we haven't been able to cover today that you wanted to tell our listeners, whether it's an experience or a bit of advice. Sam, you kick us off anything that you haven't been able to say so far.

Sam [00:45:21] Yeah, I just want to emphasise that there is a strong feeling of being alone with something and of not being able to open up and share and fear of, you know, how people will react and how they might respond to that. And again, you know, we've talked about how some of that is driven by kind of images of how you should be and what you're supposed to be. And really just to say that, that is not how things have to be and that you can do your part to change that. And to do our part to change that, you just have to be honest about yourself and your vulnerabilities and the struggles that all of us go through and to be willing to make that jump. Even though it's scary and reach out and speak to someone but also be there for other people. And we've said again, your mental health needs to be in a good place first before you can be there for others. Your mental health needs to be in a good place first so that you can then be there for other people and help them. But this is something that is really important just for all of us to have that accepting environment where we all feel comfortable to come forward.

Nick [00:46:25] Thanks for that, Sam. Malcolm, what about you?

Malcolm [00:46:29] I think, again, I agree with just about everything Sam was saying or indeed everything that Sam said there. I think it's really important that, you know, we are in a situation where, you know, we're both acknowledging our own mental health, but also being aware of other people around about us and there are situations with mental health as well. I mean, I'm in the sad situation where I've lost a couple of friends to suicide without knowing that they were struggling, without knowing that there were any kind of, you know, issues that they were going through. You know, when those kinds of things happen, you're constantly going back and saying, you know, could I have said something else? Could I have opened up a little bit more? And that's why I think it's really important that we have more of these conversations that we are constantly asking, you know, are you okay? It's okay not to be okay, but you need someone to ask you that in the first instance. And I think that's the really important thing, because if someone doesn't ask you, you're then not inclined to talk about it. So it's maybe incumbent on both sides of this conversation to make sure that we're open to it and allow people to have that space to feel comfortable to talk about it. So I think we've come full circle in this conversation. It's about creating those circumstances that allow for these conversations to happen more, because I think that's the only way that we're going to make any progress in this area.

Nick [00:47:54] Thank you for that, Malcolm, and thank you both for joining in the discussion today and for sharing your thoughts and experiences. I think for me, the key message is that you are not alone. Lots of other people are going through things. And to encourage our listeners that they can start that conversation and hopefully in some instances be there for someone who has that conversation with them as well. There's lots of information on mental health and the various support services that are available on the university website, and you can find that just by searching 'support and wellbeing'. I also want to quickly just signpost you to some external sources of support. If anyone just needs to talk, then you can speak to the Samaritans who are available on 116123, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And also Calm, which is a national helpline to talk about any issues

that you're experiencing and they're available on 0800 585858, from 5 o'clock until midnight. Thank you to all of our listeners for being with us today. Sam, Malcolm, thank you very much for your contributions and Bekah thank you for making things run so smoothly behind the scenes. I hope that you've enjoyed listening. I'm sure that we might want to revisit this topic of conversation again, as I'm sure we could have probably spoken for 2 hours if we weren't running to a bit of a time scale. Thank you very much, everyone, and we'll speak to you very soon.

Voice Over [00:49:19] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.