Prioritising 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, welcome back to the BeWell podcast. I'm Bekah Walker, your host, and I'm joined here today by another panel of guests for today's episode to discuss mental health, and the importance of prioritising it today, tomorrow and every day. So before we start, can I go around each of you to introduce yourself to our listeners telling us who you are and why you joined us today? Bex, can we start with you?

Bex [00:00:32] Hi, my name is Bex. My pronouns are she/her and I work within the Student Experience team.

Ottilia [00:00:39] Hi, I'm Ottilia and I am a fourth-year and I study English with Creative Writing and my pronouns are she/her.

Eleftheria [00:00:46] I am Eleftheria. I am a third-year and I study Biomedical Sciences with Molecular Biology and my pronouns are also she/her.

Bekah [00:00:54] Great, thanks guys, and thanks so much for joining me. I'm really looking forward to today's episode. So, mental health affects all aspects of our lives and affects how we think, feel and act. We all have mental health, and it is measured on a continuum, spanning from mentally well to mentally ill. And we all fall somewhere along that continuum and we move along it continually throughout our lives. Unlike mental wellbeing, not everyone has mental ill-health, and it's really important to know the difference. So what would you guys say are the main differences between mental wellbeing and mental ill-health? And are there any key things that we should be looking out for in ourselves or each other?

Eleftheria [00:01:36] I think it's necessary to understand that even people that are considered mentally ill can have mental wellbeing, like everyone can be happy for a few days in the row. But we need to understand that there is a difference between emotions and disease. I think that there is a really big misconception about mental diseases, especially due to the fact that for so many centuries it was in the back and it wasn't even classified as mental disease.

Ottilia [00:02:08] I also want to add that I think it's also very important to understand that being sad for a few days does not mean that you are depressed. I think that's a really important thing, to make a distinction between those two.

Eleftheria [00:02:51] I would like to add that it's OK for everyone to see a therapist. There are also many biases out there, and there is still so many misconception like based on what Ottilia said. Some people are sad for certain months of times, and they're not sure what this means. It's so difficult to judge. It's based on the fact that there are not so many evidences. Recently, on one of my courses, we learnt that they deny a lot of mental health, drugs and research, and they do not go into more research and clinical trials because there are still a lot of biases in the scientific domain. There are so many biases that still need to be crossed in order to fully make a picture and understand how mental health works.

Bex [00:03:41] So, I agree with everything that's being said here. For me, I think the difference is that mental ill-health is medical, it's a condition, it's an illness that is

diagnosed, and mental wellbeing is about taking care of yourself. It's about looking after yourself, the same way you'd look after your body.

Bekah [00:04:00] Yeah, definitely. And for me personally, mental wellbeing is more about how you feel and your ability to cope with the ups and downs that come everyday with life. Whereas mental ill-health is a range of conditions that can affect your mood or behaviour, and I guess it can be diagnosed and undiagnosed, and that's where the big continuum comes into play. Even if you do have mental ill-health, maybe you do have an underlying condition that has been diagnosed, you do still move up and down that continuum, ranging from mentally well to feeling mentally unwell again. So, it was really important to know the difference on that. Everyone, whether you have a diagnosed mental health condition or you don't, we all move up and down that continuum. And I guess the term 'mentally healthy', we're hearing it so much more in today's society, particularly during the pandemic as well, it's something that we've heard a lot, you know, keeping yourself mentally healthy. So, I wondered what the term mentally healthy means to you. What are some things that you guys do to try and keep yourself mentally healthy?

Ottilia [00:05:11] Personally, I try to understand myself and listen to what I'm feeling that day. For example, if I'm feeling sad, I don't need to be overly happy or I don't need to compensate for that sadness. But it's the same - if I'm feeling happy, I can feel happy and I listen to myself and respect what I'm feeling. Listen to just my feelings. I think that's the basic level. And then you can always add a lot of things on top of it.

Bex [00:05:46] So for me personally, I didn't prioritise my mental health being mentally healthy and wellbeing for the longest time, and it was actually during 2020 when everything got changed and I joined this job within the university that I actually started to focus on my mental health. Before that, it wasn't a priority for me, it wasn't something I considered. So for me, it's about recognising and validating my own feelings. So even if I'm having a down day, it's OK to have that down day. It doesn't mean that my life is ruined. It doesn't mean anything bad is happening. It doesn't mean it's the end of the world. I can have those feelings and they're validated and if something is annoying me, I'm allowed to be annoyed. If something is making me happy, I should enjoy that happiness. If something makes me angry, I'm allowed to be angry. And it's kind of coming to terms with the fact that those emotions, those feelings are valid and giving myself that priority to have those feelings.

Eleftheria [00:06:47] Me being mentally healthy means that I get to wake up in the morning with no thoughts in my head whatsoever, that I get to wake up and I do not have to stress about things, that I do not have a second think about my actions and that I feel accepted. And it becomes more prevalent as time passes and I get more into being an adult and having a lot of things in my head and not feeling OK all the time, that it's good to go back and think of things that actually fill me. What gives me fulfilment and what gives me meaning as a person is what makes me healthy, because health is something so different for all of us, and everyone has different happy memories, and it's so easy to focus on the negative things when it's all you are surrounded by.

Ottilia [00:07:40] Like, you have the energy to do things that you enjoy and the energy to wake up in the morning or go to uni and kind of like go through your life and not get stuck at the little things because I've, for example, I've experienced that I can't even make breakfast and then try to change my clothing or that kind of stuff. So, I feel that's also very important, to have the energy to do things that you need to do, but also the energy to do things that you want to do.

Bekah [00:08:10] Yeah, I completely agree. And I really like how you've described that about energy and motivation to be able to get up and perform daily tasks. If someone is really struggling with their mental health, that can be really, really difficult for someone to do, the smallest task can seem like such a mountain for someone to climb. And I do believe that mentally healthy is about what you guys were saying as well, it's different for every person and what you determine as healthy within yourself. And that's fine. There is no right or wrong answer. It's about how you feel. And I guess it's a little bit about resilience and how you can react to situations that come up in the day. So, yeah, it really is something unique for everyone. I think it was you Bex, who said it's about identifying those feelings in yourself and all feelings are valid. And yeah, it's fine to have a down day. Everyone has a down day, it takes someone really strong to recognise that it's fine that 'I'm having a down day today' and just to try and be really kind to yourself as well because it can be really easy to let that, you know, eat up inside you that 'I'm not having a great day' and then kind of everything seems to spiral and then you're maybe not feeling great within yourself. And then maybe a piece of coursework becomes a bit more challenging than it normally would have. So I think when you have those days like that, it's OK to say 'I'm having a bad day' and just take that time away to refresh and recharge. And hopefully the next day, things will be a little bit lighter for you. I think another thing, one of the most important things actually, I feel in terms of looking after your mental wellbeing is putting yourself first. And sometimes that can be saying 'no' to someone, and that often doesn't come naturally to people. I think most people are generally quite willing and keen, and it's like, 'Oh yeah, I can do that'. But I just wondered if you guys ever had a personal experience of having to put yourself first and say no to someone? And what was the outcome of that situation, really?

Ottilia [00:10:14] Well, personally, I'm currently going through this phase of not wanting to go out or partying because I experienced a few panic attacks at clubs or whatever. So that kind of ruined the party scene for me personally for a while. But I think it's really important to have the people around you who respect that you don't want to go partying or you don't want to go clubbing or even just going for a coffee date. That shows that they appreciate you as a person and they also respect your wellbeing. And especially if you have experienced something like panic attacks or anxiety or depression they will help you to go through that and understand and respect you.

Eleftheria [00:11:04] I've learnt in my relationships that it's always nice to be nice to your friends and to favour them. And I feel like what you learnt, especially as a kid, is that you need to be helpful. But more and more I try to force myself to say 'no' to things that I actually don't want. Especially in university, you are surrounded by so many different people every day - you don't have to get along with all of them. Sometimes you should not force yourself into social situations, whether this is anything given from your friend group or your course, you should not force yourself into any social situation that makes you feel less of yourself. And I'm currently trying to learn to say 'no' to my interpersonal relationships because I feel that for me, it's something very hard to do, to not give happiness to someone because I've learnt that you have to be nice.

Bex [00:12:09] So, I'm kind of going to bring this back to the current situation with COVID. But for me, I have a lot of COVID related anxieties, I have got an immune deficiency, so I've been very high risk throughout the whole pandemic. And it's not necessarily me saying 'no', but it's me recognising I need to deal with that. I'm very lucky in where I currently work, my management team has been very supportive and I've been accommodated very well in terms of the Homeworking policy, but also taking more time off when being sick and

taking longer lunch breaks to have a walk for mental health and then working different hours that aren't the usual 9-5. And that was something I had to ask for, and it's actually the first time, I'm 30 years old and it's the first time I've ever actually disclosed my medical condition to an employer. And that actually made me feel very empowered in that moment when I was saying 'No, I can't do a 9-5 and I can't come in all these days' and I'm very supported. On a personal level, happening this week, a relative of mine is getting married and it's 12 hours away from here and I was planning to go. I RSVP'd Yes, I'm happy to visit and see everyone. But as the times got closer, my anxiety has flared up about travelling that far, going down to England, where the rules are different, and then being in a big group of people. And suddenly, I became very, very scared about going down there with my health condition. And I had to say 'No, I can't go. I'm really sorry. I know it's your wedding, but I can't make it', and I actually got a bit of negative feedback from some people within my family for not going. But it was recognising that I do need to prioritise myself over you right now. And it was the anxiety of actually finding out what they were going to say, and I kind of felt like I was going to get a negative response, and when I did get a negative response it did feel like a punch in the gut that I impacted someone negatively and then I had to deal with that. But I've come to terms with the fact that I need to do what is right for me.

Bekah [00:14:11] Yeah, I completely agree with what you guys are saying, and I think saying 'no' sometimes to someone in a certain situation is a really, really brave thing to do and to be able to identify that you're not comfortable in that situation. I think a lot of it comes down to your friendships and circles. If you have that relationship with your friends, you know, everyone will, I guess, feel like if they say 'No, I don't want to do that' then there's always the fear that like, 'Oh, well, she always says, no, so I'm not going to invite her to come again'. And that's definitely not the right way people should be approaching that. If someone says 'no' to going on a night out or something like that, you know, that's fine. They're valid to say 'no' because they could have any issue going on. They might just not want to go out that time, you know, with all the COVID rules changing. Anxiety, is something I didn't really experience or really suffer from until the pandemic. You know, when you're stuck inside and you've been told to stay indoors. And then when we were told that we could come back to work to welcome our new students I was like, 'Oh yeah, that's perfect', I was really looking forward to it. And then suddenly, that day came and I was just like, 'I can't, I can't go, I just can't come in', you know, I was obviously really supported by my employer. And yeah, I've managed to work through that and, you know, get back into the office, and it's great. But I think it is OK to speak about that and actually see the reason behind it as well. And sometimes it's also OK not to say why, it is a personal thing within yourself. I guess what I'm trying to say is if you say 'no' to someone, that you don't want to go out or, you know, 'sorry, I don't feel I can do that just now' that hopefully we have good friendship groups and they are compassionate and understanding. And then the next time they are planning a day away or planning an activity, you still get that invite because your feelings might change and be different on that day. So, I think it's really important for us to be able to say no, but also to feel supported by our friends and family when we do, because we're looking after ourselves. And ultimately, that's the most important thing. If we don't look after ourselves, we can't support any of our friends, families, peers who are maybe going through a hard time because we are then going through a hard time because we've not talked to ourselves, if you know what I mean. Another thing that I feel sometimes gets overlooked is the importance and the power of self-care in terms of taking time away from your work or your study to look after your wellbeing. It is recommended to have at least 30 minutes a day where you really switch off and just focus on refreshing and recharging. And I just wondered, is self-care something

you guys make a priority, is it something that you schedule into your busy lives? And do you think it impacts your resilience?

Bex [00:17:12] So as I mentioned, I only really started taking care of my wellbeing in 2020, and for me, it's little things like taking a walk in the middle of the day, which is something I've never used to do. And I now take two hours off at lunch and then I work later on in the evening instead. And those hours suit me better for my abilities at work. But it's also things like having set days for myself. So Sundays are my days. My wife and I both have Sundays as our days, not necessarily together but, you know, on Sundays, she games with her friends online, and I spend that time by myself. I take a book to a café and I enjoy that time to myself and again, it's only something I've really started doing since 2020. But having that day where it's like I'm canceling on anyone who invites me out on a Sunday and basically saying no, because that's my time. Before I joined this podcast, actually, we were talking about 'You know what? We haven't had a date in about a month. Let's do that. We're having rubbish times right now. Let's just spend a day where it's just us and we switch off our phones. We don't do anything and we just focus on us two and being together in our relationship', and things like that as well have become a priority in my own mental wellbeing, spending that time with the people I want to spend time with. And so I've been a lot more consistent in knowing like, that's my time, and I think that's important.

Eleftheria [00:18:41] I personally prefer not to have calendar notifications to support my health care because I feel like it gives me extra stress that I have to take the day off and that I have to add it as part of my routine and part of my schedule. I prefer to wake up on a Sunday morning and decide that you know what? Today we're going to walk to the beach. We're going to go for ice cream. It's OK to have a different way of planning how you want to take care of yourself. At the end of the day, it's yourself, but no matter what, you need to focus on yourself because nobody else is going to be there for you. You first need to be there for yourself.

Ottilia [00:19:32] I think we've all mentioned going on a walk, so personally going outside has really changed the way I feel because honestly, like before this year, I haven't really thought about how fresh air and seeing the sun make you feel. I'm from the north, from Finland, and during winter we get about five hours of sunlight. I think that has really changed my mental health. Right now here in Aberdeen, exercising is also something that makes you feel infinitely better about everything but it also creates a routine like personally, a routine for me works out the best. Like, I wake up at the same time, I go to bed at the same time and I go to gym. I have my dance classes or like things like that.

Eleftheria [00:20:32] I'm from the opposite side of Europe. I am from Greece, and just because I've gotten used to going outside and having the outside as part of my life, I feel like I have connected it with a part of myself and it's OK, even in the like, really dark, gloomy days to go to your garden, to go around your block, seeing even the birds, cute animals outside is a big, big emotional health boost.

Bex [00:21:04] If I tell myself I need to exercise during this time, it will put me off and I won't do it because it's something I don't want to do. I don't enjoy exercise. I don't get anything out of it when I do it. And so if I say to myself, I am going to the gym for my mental wellbeing, I won't go. But I love walking my dog and I could go for hours and hours and hours of walking. So I had to change the way I thought in my head, like, you know, this is my exercise. I'm not a failure because I'm not going to the gym because that's not my way of exercising. It doesn't work for me. It puts me in a bad mood and obviously going for that walk puts me in a really good mood. So for me, yeah, it's just interesting how we're all

very different and how we all need certain things. And maybe exercise is one of them. But I have to say it to myself in a way where it impacts me positively, not negatively and changing that and knowing that I'm not a failure because I'm not getting up at six o'clock in the morning to go to the gym because I'm getting up at six o'clock to go for a two-hour walk with my dog. And that's fine too.

Ottilia [00:22:00] I think that's true. Personally, I only realised the importance of exercising once I discovered that I like dancing, which was at the beginning of uni. And before that, I was just like, No, I don't think the gym does anything for me. But now I've fallen in love with exercising because I don't really consider dancing as an exercise. It's more of like an art form or like, you know, doing a nice thing for yourself. Another thing, a really, really random thing that makes me feel better is ice water swimming. Last summer, my girlfriend and I went ice water swimming for the first time, and I could not feel anything else, and for the rest of the week, I felt great. I felt so good. But that's a bit of an extreme example of like being there for yourself.

Eleftheria [00:22:49] I think we can highlight that something different works for everyone and that we should not listen to any advice from the internet or from our friends, but do something that works for us personally. Like, yes, I would love to run around and give me any type of ball, and I would play any type of game and any type of sport. But I think that I prefer arts and I prefer to listen to music, write music, draw something. And that's OK. Because if it's something that makes you feel OK you do not need to hear anyone else's advice but your own.

Bekah [00:23:35] I completely agree, and I really like how naturally, when we were all talking about the things that we do for our self-care, everyone is so different and that is really nice. So I hope for anyone, any of our listeners who are listening and thinking about, 'Oh, I don't really do anything proper self-care wise or anything like that', but as you said, it doesn't matter what you do, as long as it makes you feel better and you're doing something for yourself, whether it is, I'm having a day to myself or I want to catch up with a friend, these are all kinds of self-care like that social interaction is really good as well. And if you are maybe struggling with anything or you're worried about something or concerned, like going out for a walk with a friend or having just a chat with a friend can often make you feel in a better place, just because you've spoken to someone about that. So I think it's really important to highlight this support network as well. And, you know, in terms of your self-care, however it works like some people like to schedule it in, personally I do schedule in self-care into my day, and I add it into my calendar or my diary or whatever, so I know what I'm doing when. But on the flip side, that can be a little bit overwhelming as well. When you look at your day and it just looks like so busy and there's something scheduled every single hour. And then if something takes a little bit longer, then you're late for something and that can cause anxiety. So I do like to schedule it in, but part of me has changed a little bit - I'm like, that's making me a little bit anxious looking at my to-do list for the day and adding an extra thing. So it's whatever works for you and like whatever helps you to cope, hopefully with the things in your life. You can trial and error things and see what works for you. I just want to touch a little bit on university life in general. So obviously being a student and university life can be stressful. There will be times when all of us at university feel a little bit overwhelmed or a little bit stressed out. And here at the University of Aberdeen, we are really lucky that we have a lot of support services for our students. So at this point, I kind of just want to cut across to Bex because she works at the university, just to tell us a little bit more about the services that we have available at the university to support our students.

Bex [00:26:06] I did both my degrees at Aberdeen University and now I'm a staff member. And looking back, I wish I would have reached out more and taken advantage of what was available. So I want to start by saying that there are services for you to go to and use. I think a lot of people feel they are going to be a nuisance for coming forward to ask for help - and that's not the case at all. It is there for you. So we obviously have the Student Support services, which are open to everyone. They're a great team, your first point of contact for anything that you might need. We have a Counselling service that offer one-at-a-time counselling sessions. They're there for you if you need them. We also have the Student Helpline that is there for you and the Confidential Reporting Tool. So, if there's anything that you need to report and you don't know how that's obviously there as well. I would recommend looking at the Support and Wellbeing webpages on the website because they list all the support services we have and there is support in there as well for specific groups of people or specific things that you might need. So, have a look there for more details. But your first point of contact is Student Support, they are definitely there for you.

Bekah [00:27:21] Thank you, Bex. That's really helpful to know all the services that we have to support everyone, and I think that's the key thing, right? Don't be afraid to reach out. When I was at university, I had no idea of the support that I could have gotten. I think it's quite easy at university to feel like you're alone and the only person feeling the way you do and more often than not, you aren't.

Bex [00:27:46] I know this is obviously more aimed at students, but there are staff members listening as well. So, I just want to reach out and say there's actually a lot of support on the website for staff, and that has been used by myself and my wife quite recently, and it's been very supportive. So I would recommend for staff as well to also don't be afraid to reach out and take advantage of that too.

Bekah [00:28:07] Yeah, definitely. And that is so important. It kind of comes back to what we were saying at the start as well like if you don't put your own mental health first and look after yourself and seek the support that you need, you're not going to be in the best place to help and support others, whether that be your friends or other students or as a staff member supporting our students as well. So I guess it is just really important to prioritise yourself.

Bex [00:28:32] Obviously, there are a lot of times when people don't feel they need something right now but it's something that you might need in the future. And also, just keep an eye on things like the social media channels (@StudentLifeUoA), and the newsletter that comes out every fortnight - they all contain information on support services but also public events and opportunities. Knowing that there's somewhere else to go beyond just support services like the Careers and Employability Service and events that can help your wellbeing as well so look at what support is available for your holistic life as a student.

Bekah [00:29:09] Yeah, definitely. And that social aspect of your wellbeing and shouldn't be underrated. There really is something about connecting with others face-to-face and interacting, and that's something that we've all lacked during the pandemic. At this point, I guess, we finished on the support services. I think that's a really nice way to end the podcast. So, I would like to thank you guys so much for joining me. I hope that our discussions today, if we have any of our listeners who are maybe struggling or feeling a little bit alone, they feel a little bit less alone now and they feel that they're able to reach out for support if they need it. More information on the support services is available on our

university website. I think Bex said under Support & Wellbeing. So, I would just like to thank you guys for tuning in and listening. I hope you enjoyed the episode. Take care and I'll see you next time.

Voice Over [00:30:01] This podcast has been brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.