

**WHEN
IT
FEELS**

**LIKE
TOO
MUCH**





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*The pressures of university can have a negative impact on students' mental well-being. Even taking the first step and asking for help can be a challenge. **Emma Clarke** meets with the University of Malta's counselling services to find out more.*

didn't know it at the time, but my experience was not at all unusual. University, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, can be a challenging time for many people.

I first walked into a university counsellor's office when I was 24 years old. I was on the brink of what should have been a new, exciting phase of my life: I had moved to a beautiful Scottish city far from my hometown and embarked on the PhD program that had been a dream of mine for almost three years. The lab coats, the expensive-looking machines, lunchtime seminars, prestigious academics aggressively debating gene function in the canteen next to me while I sipped coffee — it was surreal, but I felt that I was in the exact place I needed to be.

Imagine my surprise when I began finding myself hiding in the bathroom outside the lab for increasing lengths of time, breathing deeply to stave off a dark panic that had begun creeping up on me almost every day. I was feeling intense amounts of pressure and isolation, and in the midst of the stress, my world had slipped into greyscale. I felt that I had tricked my way onto the program with the expertise of a con artist and that I would soon be caught out — a common fear among graduate students that I later learned from my counsellor had a name: 'imposter syndrome'.

LOOK FOR HELP

Dr Joan Camilleri is the head of the counselling service at the University of Malta (UM). Her specialised team is made up of six full-time professionals, all women, each with a different background and area of expertise. Ms Elena Borg, for example, is a gestalt psychotherapist specialising in panic disorders. Dr Karan Carachi has experience in a range of adult mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and trauma. Joan Camilleri herself has worked with prison inmates and has interests in eating disorders and adult mental health. Ms Donatella Pace Olivari is the unit's social worker.

The multidisciplinary nature of the team at UM shows that there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to mental health. Different people find different therapies helpful. 'It's why it's so important that we have such a range of experience,' says Camilleri. In a similar way, the different counselling professionals each have their personal reasons for being motivated by the work. Ms Sandra Schembri Wismayer is a cognitive behavioural therapist. She recalls a moment from her youth when she was facing difficulties in her life and realised that 'changing your perception of things can change *everything*.' This realisation inspired her career as a counselling professional. Charmaine Mifsud 



Team members of the Ġ.F. Abela Junior College (JC) Wellbeing Services and the University of Malta Counselling Services. From left to right: Anna Maria Borg Bartolo (JC), Fleur Mifsud Bons (JC), Elena Borg (UM), Marika Attard (UM), Claire Gouder (UM), Sandra Schembri Wismayer (UM), Joan Camilleri (UM), Charmaine Mifsud Cardona (UM), Donatella Pace Olivari (UM)
Photo by James Moffett

Cardona on the other hand, who is a systemic families therapist, notes how her experience shows that ‘tending the inner child can pave the way for healing.’

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Understanding the problem is the first step to tackling it. The team is engaging with research to better understand the mental health of students at UM. A local 2009 study by Cefai and Camilleri found that first, third, and final year students tend to be the most stressed. Of those surveyed, 96% found university life to be very stressful and referenced exams and assignments to be the greatest source of stress.

A later study in 2021 by Dalli Gonzi and Camilleri noted that the most stressed students tended to be the students in transition, either from college to university or from university into professional life. These changes, combined with the pressure of academic performance, can create a challenging environment.

At one point, my head of school had implied that a mental health crisis was a ‘rite of passage’ for a PhD student. His words had shocked me, but the research suggests that he could be right – a 2018 survey published in *Nature Biotechnology* found that 39% of graduate students suffered from moderate to severe depression during their studies – that’s compared to just 6% of the wider population. The survey had respondents from 26 countries and 234 institutions, so the issue is not unique to any one country.

The story is similar for undergraduate students: substantial research has found that the prevalence of mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts are higher in European students than in the wider population. It seems that even our younger students are at risk of poor mental health.

Not everyone is equally at risk; if you are transgender or part of the gender non-conforming population, you are more likely to suffer from mental health concerns, and women are significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression at university than men. The factors that feed into mental health are complex and varied, and everyone’s experience is slightly different.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

When the issue feels so widespread, it can be difficult to know where to start. How can we support our students?

For me, the university counsellors were the first people to help. They understood the symptoms which to me had felt so mysterious, like strange imposters in my personality. Best of all, the university counsellors responded with concern and compassion instead of shame and criticism. I was not surprised to see that new research, published in 2021 in the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, found that university in-house counselling services are highly effective at reducing depression, anxiety, social anxiety, and academic distress while increasing mental well-being. Data was



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taken from 5,000 students across four different university counselling services, and the paper shows that university counselling reduced distress in students from 60% to 27% post-counselling.

The counsellors have different reasons for joining the service, but they are united by their passion for the tools that they offer and their desire to help students. Ms Charmaine Mifsud Cardona notes that 'giving the students the resources they need to support them now will serve them for the rest of their lives. In this work, we're catching the issues early.'

The team is also invested in helping to train university staff to better support struggling students. This element of the service is critical. My own experience is that academic supervisors who may be more experienced in writing publications and grant proposals than handling mental health matters can contribute to the shame that struggling students might feel. Half of the students surveyed by Cefai and Camilleri had found both academic and non-academic staff to be unsupportive. At UM, the counselling service is actively working to provide that support to staff, even for the times that they might be facing difficulties of their own.

Whether universities are currently experiencing a mental health crisis or these issues are simply coming more to light is difficult to say. Arguably what matters most is that students and staff alike who are struggling know where to find support when they need it. If that's you, the university service can be reached online. [T](#)

Further Reading

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