At the End of the Line: Students helping students
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I wonder what images come to mind when you hear the word student? There may be the stereotypical ones of long-haired, bearded, young men and mini-skirted young women who drink and party a great deal, dabble in drugs and who sit up half the night philosophising about the state of the world. What perhaps we don't see are intelligent young people gradually feeling their way into adulthood. Some find it easy – some don't. What I would like to talk about today is an extremely valuable organisation London Nightline which was set up by students for those students who don't find it easy, and why that might be.

Introduction and origin

It's quite a remarkable coincidence that I have been asked to give this lecture about the work of London Nightline as this year, we are celebrating 40years of London Nightline's existence. We are planning a gala dinner in June for current and past volunteers, coordinators, trustees and patrons.

It is even more remarkable that it is exactly 40 years to the day (today's date being 21st March 2011), that the 21st March 1971 saw the opening of Imperial College Nightline in a room at No. 8 Princes Gardens in South West London. The impetus for the establishment of an out-of-hours service – during term time which would allow students to be able to talk to someone when existing College Counselling Services were closed, was the tragic death by suicide of three Imperial College students during the previous year.

One year earlier in 1970, the first Nightline was established at Essex University and I believe one of its founding members, Geoffrey Hosking, is in the audience today. Nightline was, and still is, an organisation run by students for students who offer out-of-hours non-judgemental listening to any student who makes contact either by telephone or on-line.

Initially, Nightline was known as West London Nightline and consisted of Imperial College, the Royal College of Music, King's College London, LSE and UCL. As time went on and other universities and colleges in London came to appreciate and value the work that Nightline was doing, so the organisation gradually evolved into a London-wide service as did it's structure and organisation. In 1985 the Steering Committee was formed and I was asked to be its first Chair. In 1990, it moved from its original site in South Kensington to renting premises at the University of London Union in Malet Street – where it's name changed to London Nightline at ULU and where it is still located today. To date there are 34 colleges and universities affiliated to London Nightline and 23 students' unions. In 1993, we became the first Nightline in the country to attain charitable status and in line with Nightline's increasing professionalism, the post of coordinator was made full-time, the salary being linked to students' union sabbatical pay, in order to reflect the increasing responsibilities of the job. Funding comes from a 30p per full time capita contribution from the affiliated colleges and universities and 10p per capita from Students' Unions.

Structure

The day to day running of Nightline is left to the coordinator who tends to be either a recent graduate or a final year student who has deferred their course for a year. All potential coordinators have to have considerable experience as a volunteer in order to be considered and interviewed for the post.

The coordinator is answerable to the Board of Trustees and reports each term to the Steering Committee which consists of representatives from each of the affiliated universities and colleges, Students' Unions and the Trustees. In addition, a number of volunteers with particular responsibility for such matters as social events, online services, policy and procedures, training etc make up the Executive Committee which meets with the coordinator twice per term in addition to attending termly steering committee meetings.

We are particularly fortunate in our current patrons who are: Rabbi Lionel Blue, Mr David Blunkett MP, Mr David Lammy MP, Jo Brand (Comedian), Mrs Doreen Whewall (Former Trustee and founder member of London Nightline).

Significant Developments

At the moment, Nightline is solvent but this hasn't always been the case. 1995 – 6, Nightline's Jubilee Year, was celebrated with a huge fundraising and awareness campaign which enormously increased Nightline's profile. One spin-off of the stylish and instantly recognisable advertising campaign and logo, was free advertising in Time Out and London Student. Over the last 40 years, Nightline has continued to go from strength to strength. The achievement in 1999 of the quality standard for helplines under the auspices of the Telephone Helpline Association; the introduction of email listening in 2000; the establishment of the on-line listening service in 2009 and involvement in the university suicide prevention initiative, have strengthened our profile and ensured that London Nightline at ULU is a professional organisation committed to providing a high standard of training and support to volunteers and therefore a high standard of service to callers.

All of these achievements, however, would not be possible without the army of student volunteers whose support and dedication over the years have kept the Service going. They are indeed the backbone of Nightline as are the truly creative and gifted coordinators who each year continue to impress the Steering Committee with their initiative, ideas and suggestions for improving the Service.

Organisation

Over the years, Nightline has broadened it's scope and image . Having been established with the help of the Samaritans with similar guidelines and policies, it has developed from being an organisation to contact if a student were feeling suicidal and despairing which is still the case, to one which is run by students for students who ring for a wide variety of reasons as the charts show.

Recruitment of volunteers

Every year the coordinator attends what are called 'Freshers Fairs'. These are fairs organised by the individual university and colleges' students' unions to showcase the wide variety of clubs and societies students can join. Each year, approximately 100 prospective volunteers go through a selection and training process.

Pre-selection training is split into 3 hour sessions that are generally made up of group work, discussions and role plays which include the skills needed to properly take a call or deal with a query online; how to handle difficult calls i.e. abusive, repeat and suicidal callers, which can be very distressing.

Nightline usually takes on 40-45 new volunteers each year, depending on how many volunteers have been retained from the previous year.

After the new volunteers have been selected, there is a further full weekend of training, which is compulsory for all new and returning volunteers.

There are three compulsory top up training sessions per year – one in December, one in January and one in March. The third term is avoided due to examinations!

Those who are taken on as volunteers are required to do 12 overnight duties per year i.e. 4 per term. It is currently policy for three volunteers to do a duty together. The premises which London Nightline occupies at ULU, has beds, a kitchen and a shower so that volunteers whose duty begins at 6.00pm and ends at 8.00am can get ready, breakfast and go straight to lectures.

Support and debriefing for volunteers

Support for volunteers is one of the most important aspects of Nightline, as dealing with calls either by telephone or online can be a very emotionally draining experience.

All calls are confidential within Nightline i.e. confidential between caller and the organisation, not between caller and individual volunteers. Volunteers are encouraged to talk about the calls they have had, especially if a call has been upsetting. Volunteer welfare is of the upmost importance during a shift and in extreme cases this will take precedence over answering calls. After all, if a volunteer has been very upset by a call they have dealt with, they will not be able to deliver a good service to other callers. When logging call statistics at the end of a shift, volunteers are given an opportunity to write down how they felt about a call. This is effective both in encouraging volunteers to debrief and allowing the coordinator and members of the Executive Committee, to contact volunteers to check that they are feeling okay following a difficult call and to identify whether or not any further support is needed.

As part of its carefully structured support system, Nightline ensures that each new volunteer is allocated an experienced volunteer as a support buddy. Their first shift will be completeld with this person and subsequently they will keep in touch with them at least once per term. A volunteer's first port of call is their support buddy if they want to discuss any aspect of volunteering. London Nightline also has a support officer on the Executive Committee who keeps in regular contact with volunteers and acts as a support buddy to the support buddies.

The Nightline Coordinator is on call 24 hours a day during term time. Volunteers can call any time of day or particularly at night for both technical/practical queries and for emotional support. London Nightline also operates a drop in policy in the office, which means that volunteers can call in at any time to talk about any aspect of Nightline. This can be particularly useful for those calls that continue to be disturbing a few days after a difficult duty.

We need to remember that volunteers may be going through some of the same pressures and stresses as the callers. Many of them have had difficult times in the past and it is these experiences which have often inspired them to volunteer for Nightline.

Why is a service like London Nightline needed?

As you have seen from the charts – Nightline volunteers deal each year with an increasingly large number of callers, some of whom have very worrying problems. Why is this and why do university counselling services throughout the country report an expontial rise in the numbers of students contacting their services with increasingly serious problems?

In January 2003, the Royal College of Psychiatrists published a report entitled 'The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education'.

According to the report, the increasing number of students presenting with mental health problems reflects the rapidly increasing access of young people to higher education and the associated growth in student numbers. It also reflects the growing rates of mental health problems among young people generally. The report said that, given the trends in the general population, it is hardly surprising that the rates of psychological disturbance and psychiatric illness among students were rising. The available research suggests that students report increased symptoms of mental ill health compared with age match controls. However, according to the report, there is no empirical evidence to confirm that students are more likely to suffer diagnosable mental disorder or illness than the age matched non-student population. It is also essential to differentiate severe mental disorder or illness, from less severe conditions, as their management and potential implications for continued study, are likely to be different.

Contributing factors to the increase are cited by the report as – moving away from home, family and childhood friends to an unfamiliar place and culture (this is particularly true of students from overseas) as additional challenges at an age when most students are also negotiating and consolidating significant developmental changes. Thus, if for whatever reason, the young person fears growing up, being sexually potent, leaving his or her parents, then he or she may neglect their appearance, attack their body suicidally, by anorexia or abuse of drugs; they may neglect their work, avoid contact with peers, or deny sexual interest in either sex.

The normal developmental processes of late adolescence which are characterised by change, transition and sometimes risk-taking behaviour, are therefore going to overlap with being a student – so that the academic and social commitments which are essential to university life, force a student into facing those developmental issues which will cause difficulties if the individual is not ready to tackle them.

For most young people entering university, there is an abrupt change from a tightly structured school curriculum to one where they are responsible for structuring their own hours of study; from having being a biggish fish in a small known pond, to a very small fish in a frightening large pond; from having been thought of as a teenager, the young person is now assumed to be suddenly adult; having had a family to fall back on, he or she is suddenly left without adults monitoring his or her safety. Similarly, the values and behaviour of other students may appear very strange; teaching methods and subjects are very new; some may have idealized the course before arrival and come with widely unrealistic expectations, only to be disappointed. Many students feel ashamed to admit any concern about whether or not they are able to cope and look around for someone else to blame; a rotten course, boring lectures, lousy teaching. Some may be ashamed about feeling inadequate or appearing vulnerable - fearing that it will be held against them (this is particularly true in more explicitly vocational courses such as medicine). Some admit to home sickness, feeling that nothing will ever be the same again.

The young person going to university is therefore undergoing very major life changes; from adolescence to adulthood, from living within a family to being very much left to his or her own devices. The individual thus experiences the loss of an external structure which inevitably places a severe test on the stability of their internal structure. For some, the change and the losses involved may be very painful and difficult whilst for others it may be overwhelming. Under such circumstances, the anxiety which accompanies change and the strain of staying with the psychic pain of loss, of having to find oneself as an individual within a new setting while yet retaining the capacity to be open to new experiences and knowledge, may be too great. Students may break down, drop out or be easily tempted into the various sensuous escape routes such as drowning their sorrows in drink, drugging themselves into oblivion, or plunging into a hectic social and sexual life to make up for, or sidestep the sheer terror of failing the course, academic competition or dealing with authority figures. Others may give up their attempt to master social and sexual fears by over diligent studying, complaining that they have too much work to do to join in the social life of the College.

Many of these students may well find their way to the university student counselling service or telephone their university Nightline, but by no means all who are deeply unhappy or at risk will have the courage to seek help. Because he or she is supposed to be an adult, the student may not feel entitled to seek the help they need or alternatively feel it is shameful to need it. So the young person may try to act in a preconceived so called 'adult' way and pretend there is nothing wrong – sometimes at great cost. Parents may react in one of two ways either they may feel inhibited about visiting or phoning for fear they are conveying their own anxieties and will be thought to be intruding into their off-spring's freedom. This of course can lead to the young person feeling forgotten and uncared for. Alternatively, parents may become overprotective. These are known as 'helicopter' parents – not allowing their son or daughter to find their own feet and make a few mistakes or treating their offspring as if they were 'brains' rather than as persons with troubled and searching minds.

As a result, students can feel very lonely and may come to rely for support exclusively on members of their peer group. They may be lucky enough to find good, reliable friends but out of loneliness may quite easily be drawn into less helpful adolescent cultures. All of this happens within an atmosphere and an environment which tends to stress achievement at the expense of thoughtfulness and where the overthrowing of value systems often parades as open-mindedness.

For some students, the issue is even more fundamental. They are not entirely sure why they are at university or medical school; they have hardly begun to separate themselves physically or emotionally from their parents. Prior to entering higher education, they may have followed their parents' directions – for years, university may have been their parentally inspired goal so that some enrol on a course often vocational of their parents' choice when their own natural inclinations, of which they are perhaps unaware, lie in other directions. When they arrive, the freedom of Higher Education, allows them, perhaps for the first time, to question parental choices, leading both to rebellion and to guilt. Many may be ambivalent about their chosen subject, which is seen as an arbitery choice, and their aimlessness may betray a very real need to find an academic or personal direction. Work, therefore, becomes of lesser importance.

For some students, the only way to rebel successfully against their parents and authority figures is to fail. Academic failure becomes a successful subversion and a displacement from other grievances: for

instance, the getting of a degree or qualifying as a doctor or dentist may be a gift for the parents, to repay them for all they have done. But if the student harbours grievances and resentment (not uncommon at this age, and indeed occasionally to be welcomed as a way of separating from the parents) then the gift will not be quite so straightforward and simple.

Therefore, the unconscious wish to fail is an important issue for some students who present for help, because they are worried that their work is not going well and they are afraid of failing. In fact, when one explores what is going on, they are often unconsciously more concerned about succeeding than failing. The unconscious wish to fail and the subsequent fear of success often presents difficulties for the brighter students rather than the less able ones.

An example of this developmental unconscious wish to fail, was a first year female history student who had prepared well for her exams, had high marks for her course work and seemed all set to do well. In the exam, her mind had gone blank. Underlying this meaningless self-destructiveness was a pervasive form of self-preservation. Deep down she was terrified of adulthood and adult social relationships. Passing her exams meant that she would have to socialize throughout the summer vacation; if she had to re-sit she could avoid social life with the excuse that she had to study. She was sabotaging her potential academic success to avoid social and emotional development. Of course the converse is also possible. If students achieve academic brilliance despite their unhappiness, it may well be at the expense of their emotional and social life.

This is also a factor, particularly during finals, where the students' unconscious fear is that to be successful will force them to leave College and enter the adult world. Medical students, for example, coming up to finals frequently complain of how unprepared they feel to be qualifying, how poor the course has been and of course how terrified they are of not knowing enough and of killing a patient.

Another feature of this unconscious wish to fail, is academic paralysis. A young male Asian medical student whose ambitious, driving parents had pushed him to go to medical school talked at one level of wanting very much to become a doctor; but on another level the degree represented a capitulation to demanding parents whom he resented. He felt obliged to please his parents after all they had done for him, but was aware that his guilt about the sacrifices they had made for him had never allowed him to stand up to or separate from them. He had never had a girlfriend, thinking his parents would be devastated if he did and would feel that this would distract him from his studies. Failing his medical degree or leaving and getting involved in a sexual relationship were the two things he both wanted and yet feared most, because both represented a decisive break from his previous pattern of emotional dependence on his parents. He wanted to break this pattern and yet was terrified of it. The synthesis of all this was academic paralysis.

It is worth mentioning at this point, that examinations can be seen as rites of passage and if students are ambivalent or anxious about their own development, this will to some extent, be reflected in their examination performance. Similarly, where personal self-esteem or self-worth is entirely dependent on academic achievement, particularly if they come from backgrounds where academic success has been considered very important and heavily rewarded, often to the exclusion of everything else – one can often find that when inevitably work stops going well, those students who have used their intellect to hold themselves together, become very depressed and apathetic because so much of their self-worth is identified with how well they perform academically.

In addition to these psychological developmental processes which may affect all students regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, there are other problematic issues which affect students. Widening participation has resulted in increasing numbers of students coming to university who may come from backgrounds where going to university was not seen as a realistic option or where they might be thought of as above themselves. In addition, there are those students with a disability either physical or psychological who have particular needs requiring specialist support; there are students either indigenous or from overseas whose ethnic or cultural background may make it very difficult for them to integrate or to ask for help if they are in difficulty. Another group is of course mature students particularly in vocational subjects such as nursing, who are predominantly female and who are often juggling a home and children as well as anxieties about whether they are going to be able to cope with the demands of academia after a long absence from formal education.

Financial problems are another major stress-inducing factor for all students to contend with. Even before the coalition government's intention to treble student fees, university welfare advice services were already seeing increasing numbers of students struggling to make ends meet; having to juggle a job along with

their studies and often leaving university many thousands of pounds in debt. We forget that one of the reasons American university undergraduate courses take four years, is because there is a culture of students working their way through university. Our university three year undergraduate courses don't make allowances for students having jobs. Is this something that will have to change? In addition, the economic recession means that there is no longer a guarantee of a job for a graduate at the end of their academic and financial endeavours.

For many disadvantaged students, however, the emotional, material, financial adversity and personal experiences of failure they may have experienced in growing up, can mean that they encounter difficulties adjusting to university life and to the expectations and demands placed on them. It can be difficult for such students to adjust to the predominantly middle-class environment of university and to being with a more privileged group of students, some of whom will have more money, better parental support, more material possessions or a marked sense of confidence and self-worth. For some students, these differences may lead to a feeling of inferiority and a sense of shame – for who they are and for where they come from. Some may try to hide these feelings by 'blagging' – by pretending to know more than they do or to own more than they have.   Another reaction might be to pretend they come from a different background. Some students describe feeling like an outsider – the observer of a situation where they don't know what's going on or they don't know the rules in terms of how university life is organised and how to make their mark.

It should always be remembered that learning is not just a cognitive process – it is also an emotional experience, so that many feelings or behaviours that indicate an inability to understand, to concentrate or retain what is being taught or learned; an inability to meet deadlines, a need to be guarded and self-protective, to be overly critical or argumentative, may mean that the individual needs help in order to work through those personal experiences, memories and feelings which are preoccupying their thoughts and capacity to concentrate on their academic work.

For all of the reasons I have mentioned, it is vital that universities have structures in place such as health centres, counselling services, welfare and disability advisors and tutorial systems in order to give students the support, help, treatment and guidance they need in order to achieve their potential. But in the middle of the night when everything looks bleak and all these services are closed, there is Nightline.

Although London Nightline is the second oldest, largest and most well established of the Nightline Services, most large universities now have a Nightline Service and a National Nightline Coordinating Service has been established. I think you will agree however that in this 40th Anniversary year of the establishment of London Nightline, whilst we celebrate the work it has done and the thousands of students who have been helped by the existence of London Nightline, that the need for its and other Nightline's existence has never been so vital .

I'd like to end with some comments from Nightline Users:

"Fantastic service. Slightly frustrating not being able to ask for an opinion on things. However I can appreciate why you can't. I thought the online chat service is the best, the anonymity of online chat made me feel much more free to talk about issues".

"I am really glad that there are students out there volunteering their services on this line. With help from Nightline, students like me who have little peer support on certain issues can find a listening ear, and that makes problems easier to deal with."

"Incredibly helpful, the most polite help you'll probably get at ridiculous o'clock in the morning".

"The person on the phone was very friendly and listened well as I do tend to go on about things a lot. Overall I was very satisfied with the service provided."

"Very good listeners. Non-jugdmental. They are doing great work. Highly recommend to anyone in need."