



#promote



There is a growing recognition of the need for university and college counselling services to market their department within their institutions. **Ruth Clowes** looks at the importance of promotion and how best to go about raising the profile of a service

Increasingly, students arriving at university consider counselling to be an integral support service. Having become used to the presence of counselling in their school or community, the stigma of using such a service is vastly less than it used to be, and many students view it as a vital aspect of their university's pastoral care.

Unfortunately, the attitude of some senior staff at many universities is less enlightened. A lot of counsellors in academia feel that their work is not valued at a senior level, and that it falls victim to a long-standing tension between the academic aspects of university or college life and issues concerning student wellbeing. In a climate of financial stress, this attitude is dangerous and, with the threat of outsourcing and staff cuts looming large, it has never been more important for services to successfully promote the many benefits of in-house counselling.

Many counsellors in further and higher education (FE and HE) are uncomfortable with the idea of promoting their service and its work to senior staff within their institution. In a busy counselling service, it can be extremely difficult to find time for marketing, not to mention that many of us are uncomfortable with the very idea of it. In this feature, we'll look at why promoting your service is so important, and how to go about it in a way that is effective and time-efficient.

Why promote your service?

If senior staff members are unaware of the breadth of the services you provide and the benefits that this work brings to the institution, they won't value it. And if they don't value your service, it risks being unappreciated, overlooked and judged as an indulgent 'nice to have' add-on at best, and a waste of money at worst. The implications of this kind of attitude among key decision-makers during times of financial pressure or restructuring are obvious.

I spoke to Tim Martin, recently appointed Marketing and Commercial Manager at BACP. Tim stressed that the key ingredient in raising awareness is effective communication: 'Universities are diverse places,' says Tim, 'so it can be a real challenge to garner internal support and a problem made more difficult by complex hierarchies. So how do you stand out from the crowd? The answer of course is marketing and it is important that you proactively promote the services you have to offer.'

Put simply, you can't afford not to promote. Only through effective communication and disciplined marketing can you be sure that the right message reaches the right audience at the right moment. How

the service is perceived by key decision makers within the institution is the counselling team's responsibility. So it's time to take control of it.

If all this sounds a little intimidating, it needn't be. Similarly, it doesn't have to be time-consuming or hard work. Next we'll look at some tried and tested techniques to improve the profile of a service.

Step 1: Maximise the efficiency of your service

In order to feel confident about promoting your service, you need to know that it's as user-friendly and productive as it possibly can be. Having a service that has been honed to be as efficient as possible will also free up time that can be used to promote your work. Finally, making positive changes to your service can be an extremely effective PR tool in itself, as Louise Knowles, Head of Counselling and Psychological Wellbeing at the University of Sheffield, explains: 'We worked with the University of Sheffield's Process Improvement Team. They got us to look in minute detail at each process we used and the end result was that we massively streamlined our processes and made our service a lot more accessible and efficient.'

The Process Improvement Team is an initiative set up by the university's Senior Management Team that uses 'lean review' techniques to encourage continuous improvement of processes throughout the university by eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy. Many universities have such initiatives and the results speak for themselves. By increasing the usability of their service, Louise and her team saw a 35 per cent increase in demand, as well as a significant decrease in waiting times. Taking part in a high-profile project that had the backing of the university's Vice Chancellor and Registrar had other benefits too. 'The counselling service was the first department within the university to work with the Process Improvement Team,' says Louise. 'We are now held up as a case study for the scheme because of how successful it was for us – it's done us immense favours in terms of positive PR.'

Getting involved with new, management-endorsed initiatives within your establishment is a great way to embed your service into college or university life – an issue we'll look at in greater detail later on. In addition, the process of streamlining your work, whether through a scheme similar to that which Louise undertook or independently, is a great first step in getting your service promotion ready.

Step 2: Arm yourself with the facts

With any marketing campaign, key messages need to be identified before deciding how best to communicate them. The good news here is that there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that having a counselling service in a university is beneficial not just to the wellbeing of individual clients but also to academic outcomes, as well as being financially advantageous.

In this issue of the journal, Patti Wallace outlines the latest research evidence highlighting the added value provided by an in-house counselling service. I'll avoid repeating Patti here and instead concentrate on the importance of generating positive statistics within your university or college.

Ruth Caleb is Head of Brunel Counselling Service, which won the 2013 BACP award for improving access to counselling and psychotherapy. The award was made to Brunel Counselling Service in recognition of the work they did to adapt the service to meet the changing needs of students and staff at the university.

Ruth explains how her highly successful service uses client service evaluations to generate helpful data: 'We use a recognised outcome measure to measure the effectiveness of our work,' says Ruth. 'It demonstrates benchmarking and helps show the effectiveness of the work we do.'

Evaluation forms can be an important source of statistics too, Ruth says. 'We ask the student if counselling helped with their academic studies or, if they are a member of staff, if it helped them to do their job. The vast majority say that counselling helped. We also ask them if they were thinking of leaving before they had counselling, and many people answer yes to this question too.'

Crucially, on gaining this vital information, Ruth packages it up in straightforward financial terms, making it accessible to an audience of vice chancellors and other senior staff. 'Last year we estimated how much the service may have saved the university in financial terms. We were able to say that it could be at least £1.5 million over the course of the year, because our work retained students who would otherwise have left the university, which would have resulted in financial loss. This year we expect that figure to be considerably higher. By making the argument a financial one we are really able to get their attention.'

Tim Martin reiterates the point that, having identified the appropriate information, it must be condensed into a format appropriate for your audience. 'You must be able to promote your service quickly and effectively,' he says. 'A great way is to create a casual verbal presentation that can be used to promote your services – in short, an elevator pitch. This is a short description of your service that anyone can easily digest, and enables you to give a powerful explanation that will leave them wanting to find out more.'

Tim's elevator pitch is a great idea: with a little practice, a well-honed précis will become second nature

and will mean that team members are never stuck for words when presented with an unexpected opportunity to promote the service. Remember to include the full range of what the service offers in your pitch. It is often easy to concentrate solely on the one-to-one work and forget the other work the department does. Think about the many ways the service benefits the university or college and make sure that people are aware of them.

Step 3: Recruit ambassadors

In BACP's public attitudes survey, carried out in March 2014, over half of those questioned said they'd either had counselling themselves or knew someone who had. Consider the number of senior staff at your institution; logic suggests that a handful of them will already be aware of the positive difference that counselling can make to someone who is struggling to cope. The next job is to identify these individuals and kit them out with the evidence of the service's efficacy so that they can act as high-level spokespeople for the service.

'Go out of your way to find a champion,' advises Ruth. 'Find them and nurture them. They will keep you in mind when they're at the senior staff meeting. Arm them with the knowledge they need to stick up for counselling and wellbeing, so that, if someone suggests cutting the service, they can come back with the relevant facts.'

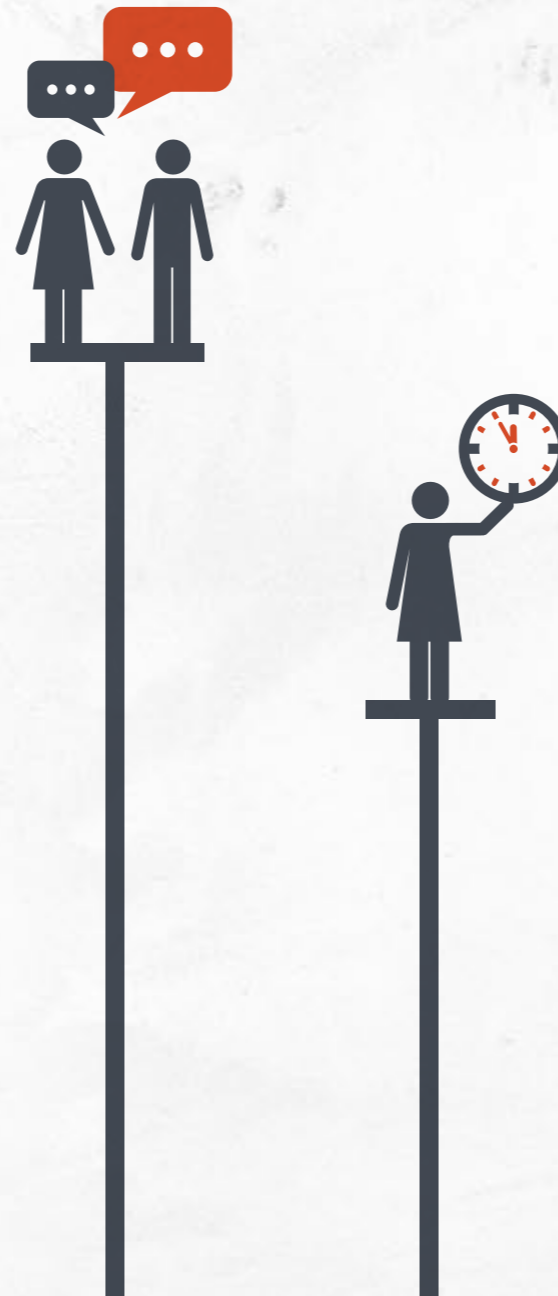
Remember to make things as easy as possible for your ambassadors. Go out of your way to make contact with them on their terms, provide them with a 'cheat sheet' of key facts and make it clear that their time and effort is valued. Ruth says that she makes sure that someone from the counselling service attends the vast majority of the training events and meetings held at the university. A little investment in time can reap huge rewards – a chance conversation over the coffee machine could be the beginning of an invaluable relationship.

Step 4: Embed the service

The more intricately the service is woven into the everyday warp and weft of university life, the more firmly entrenched it will become – and the less likely it is to be considered as a dispensable 'add on'. There are myriad ways you can achieve this; indeed, a multi-pronged plan of attack is likely to be the most successful.

The list below has been collated with the help of both Tim, in his capacity as a marketing specialist, and Ruth, with her considerable on-the-ground practical experience. Take a look, think about the resources available to your service and build an action plan based around your own capacity and what is most viable for your service. Start small, with just a couple of things on this list. Then aim to expand output as confidence grows.

- Research the various **special interest groups** at your establishment and offer to give a brief talk about your service.



- Look into the possibility of contributing to your institution's **social media** output.
- Get friendly with your **student union** – the head of the student union attends senior management meetings and could be a valuable ally.
- Make sure your service's pages on the **website** are up to date and reflect the full range of work you do – this is a valuable resource to point people to in order for them to find out more about your work.
- Engage with your university's **alumni team** – they could be an excellent source of contacts, referrals and testimonials.
- Attend **open days** and promotional events – get involved wherever you can and get your face recognised at key events.
- Contact the editor of the **student magazine**, newspaper or radio station and offer to collaborate on a piece about the service.
- Produce **marketing material** such as an annual report, leaflets or business cards, and use these to show off the benefits of your service and spread the word.
- Consider applying for **BACP Service Accreditation** if your service isn't already accredited – it gives your service added kudos and demonstrates an ongoing commitment to competence.

Step 5: Keep it fresh

So, the service is streamlined and the key data from national research studies and service records have been collated and presented in a user-friendly format. With commitment, a couple of ambassadors will have been recruited and team members have gone out of their way to embed the work of the service into the everyday life of the institution.

The important thing now is to keep up the momentum and to continually refresh and review the approach to marketing. Things can change quickly; a new vice chancellor, for example, could lead to an entirely different dynamic within the senior management team. If your team keeps up-to-date with what's happening in the broader university landscape, they'll be more likely to be able to respond quickly and effectively to developments.

Ruth agrees: 'Never be complacent and don't stop networking – even if you think you've already done it,' she says. 'Staff changes happen regularly and you can find someone you like, then they leave and you have to start all over again.'

As well as allowing a service to bounce back from such setbacks, keeping your finger on the pulse puts the service at the front of the queue when it comes to taking advantage of new opportunities. Just five years ago social media was little used as a marketing tool; now every university and college has a Twitter feed and a Facebook page. Being aware of new promotional opportunities and getting involved in innovative projects from the outset is a great way to further anchor counselling and wellbeing in the life of the university.

Resources

If the idea of promoting your service is a little daunting, the good news is that you don't have to go it alone. There are resources available that will make the job easier, and marketing professionals are on hand to offer encouragement and support. BACP's marketing team regularly advises members on ways they can promote their work, and is a regular fixture at member events.

Tim explains the type of assistance his team is able to offer: 'Hearing about issues first hand enables the marketing team to offer individual assistance to members wanting advice about their marketing. We also provide marketing expertise on specific projects ranging from social media support to working with committees on creating new content for campaigns such as videos.'

An institution's own marketing or communications department will be able to offer invaluable advice on how best to promote a service. Each university or college is different and insider knowledge goes a long way – a quick meeting with someone in the know could give a whole new insight into ways of promoting a service's work. If you're putting together marketing material, they might also be able to provide guidance and templates to make the work look more professional. There are myriad online tools that can help with this too – www.canva.com is a good graphics site. This user-friendly online tool puts the ability to create professional-looking leaflets, posters and other documents at your fingertips.

Don't forget to also take advantage of your own professional networks – keep in regular touch with other BACP Universities & Colleges members and share what's worked well and ideas for new initiatives. Similarly, LinkedIn and Twitter can be powerful forums for learning and getting speedy advice.

Seizing the moment

There has never been a better time to engage in a campaign to promote your counselling service. Students are increasingly expecting their place of study to provide on-site counselling, and consider it a vital part of the university's pastoral care provision. When it comes to promoting your service to senior staff members you will always be up against myriad other demands on their time. With restricted budgets, high academic expectations and countless other pressures to deal with, it's vital that your counselling service is not incorrectly perceived as yet another burden. Through effective promotion, you can successfully demonstrate that your service makes a vital contribution to achieving your college or university's goals.

Ruth Clowes is Media and Communications Manager at BACP