Walter: My name is Walter Pisarski and I’m an Associate Lecturer with the Open University and have been so for the last 25 years. I teach in the new school of WELS and Health and Social Care and I’ve been teaching Health and Social Care modules from Level 1 through to Level 3 so different modules at different levels.

Question: Why is it beneficial for a student to declare their mental health difficulty to the OU?

Walter: You might have heard of the 1 in 4 campaign, or sometimes it says 1 in 6. And basically what it says is that statistically 1 in 4 of UK adults or possibly 1 in 6 of UK adults are likely to experience a mental health problem throughout their life. So if we transfer that into the student cohort, let’s say as Associate Lecturer I have a normal student group of about 20 students, possibly a quarter of them might suffer from a mental health illness or mental health problem and if I don’t know or if the Open University doesn’t know then we can’t give the students the extra support that they need. Also, it is the recent research has suggested that university students with a mental health problem are more likely to drop out from the university than those who haven’t got one. So, that’s clearly a problem for the institution but also for a student because once you’ve started studying you have been unsuccessful, again it’s less likely that you will restart the module or any other qualification because you probably just think “I have to give up”. So those are two reasons why it’s really important that if students have any mental health issues they declare them to the OU, and whatever they do would be confidential and it’s only the institution and their tutor who know about it, it won’t go outside that.

Question: What support can tutors provide to their students who declare their mental health difficulty with the OU?

Walter: Generally, tutors provide two kinds of support, one is what is called the study support, so this is where we help student in their study, explain the module content but also then mark and assess their assignments, their TMA’s. We also have another function and that’s generally called the pastoral support, so we’re there to support students in their life as a student. Helping them to deal with anything that affects their studies. Now clearly if you have any mental health issues you might also suffer from stress, particular stress that you can’t cope with. Study is generally stressful but if you have a mental health issues, you probably have even more stress. Now, unless you tell your tutor and the tutor might suggest that you take an extension for your assignment or you might take a study break or you defer sitting your exam until such time that your normal life is more under control. Then if tutors don’t know that they can’t help a student deal with it and the student will be left in a very stressful position on their own.
Question: Is it common for students to lack confidence in discussing their mental health with the OU?

Walter: I think so and I don’t think OU students are any different from the general population and generally people will be very reluctant to discuss their mental health in particular when they have a mental health issue with other people. Mainly because of the stigma attached to it. Also, language is a really important factor because many people when you say or when you want to discuss the topic of mental health they immediate equate it to ‘madness’ or ‘disability’ or being extremely ill and they see it at something really special and negative. So, in order to declare it one really needs to have a strong personality to start off with and be assured that if they declare that they have a mental health problem then it doesn’t backfire and become something negative for them.

Question: As a lecturer in mental health studies, what do you think are the steps to tackling the stigma associated with mental health?

Walter: I think the main step is really to tackle the stigma attached to mental health and for me mental health is just part of the overall health of a person and I see the personal health as mainly in terms of wellbeing which has mental health and physical health as two components. And, I think we’re all on a spectrum of health whether that’s mental or physical health. We have the two extremes in terms of mental health and physical health. We have one extreme where we have a constantly and severely ill and the other extreme where we’re really well mentally and physically, but most of the time I think we’re somewhere in between and the first thing is to acknowledge that and to say if we then have some problem, some mental health issues which is maybe stress, stress caused by studying, stress caused by personal circumstances, then that is nothing unusual and it’s quite normal. And it only becomes a problem when we can’t deal with it and most of the time we can’t deal with it if we’re trying to deal with it on our own and without seeking help. So, for me the first thing as an AL is to say to students “share with me” if you have a problem. If I can’t help you personally I can then pass you on to somebody with much more experience, but unless I know, I can’t help.