Hello and welcome to We Are Students podcast of the OU Students Association. My name’s Jodie projects officer in the student community team and we are recording here on a lovely day at the OU Students Campus at Milton Keynes. To my right I have my fellow community team projects officer Hannah.

Hi.

And to my left we have support officer Sammi.

Hello

And just across from me is the president of the OU Students Association Nicci.

Hi there.

So we’re here today to talk about University Mental Health Day which will be on the 1st March.

That's correct.

Thank you very much Sammi. I thought we could just quickly go around and just introduce ourselves a bit more just to break the ice a bit as this is the first podcast. So let’s start with Sammi.

Sure yes. So my name’s Sammi as Jodie said and I'm a projects officer in the Student Support team and I've been here since July now. So part of my role is to run campaigns and support students with campaigns and so we’ve done a few now and we did World Mental Health Day last year in October and now this is Uni Mental Health Day. So I think that's me.

So our newest member of the team is Hannah.

Yes so I have been here since November, so not very long. I am projects officer alongside Jodie and we organise events such as University Challenge and freshers and now we are getting stuck into Uni Mental Health Day with Sammi.

I'm getting to you Nicci I can see you waving over the table.
Nicci It’s all about me.

Jodie I was just going to quickly comment that the fact that we’re with the community and support team is because the team for University Mental Health Day is community hence why both teams are working together on this. But enough of that because Nicci is desperate right now to chat and tell us all about her role as president.

Nicci I’m just going to be quiet now I’m not going to say anything for the rest of this podcast. Yeah so my role as president I started on 1st August last year and I get involved in lots of different things that the Students Association do, working with the other members of the central executive committee and I have personal experience of mental health difficulties so it’s great to be able to sit down and talk to colleagues about it today and to hear from other students what their experiences have been and how that element of community has really been important in our lives in supporting us.

Jodie Brilliant. I’m going to hand over the Sammi to start the discussion wherever you want to go, you’re planning this day.

Sammi Yeah so I’ll start just by introducing the idea of Uni Mental Health Day. So it’s a national campaign and it’s to focus efforts on promoting the mental health of people who live, work and study in higher education settings. So that’s why it’s aimed at staff and students. And essentially to ensure that everybody has a part to play in cultivating a positive mental health community at university. And this is actually run jointly by Student Minds and University Mental Health Advisors Network who are a registered charity. So there’s a lot of work that goes into this annually and the momentum is picking up each year and I think it’s the first time the Association has done something, am I right, for Uni Mental Health Day?

Jodie Yeah at least this much.

Nicci It’s the first podcast, I think we’re written some articles in the past and we’ve had some conversations with students around different support they could access, but I think it’s the first podcast we’ve done.

Jodie Definitely around this topic as well and getting the mixture of staff and students, so it’s a really good one to start off this with.

Sammi Absolutely and I guess as well because we do now have a student support team and the community team is bigger, so it’s a really good opportunity for us to actually do something bigger than we have done in the past. And really
I guess it’s helpful that we can come at it from different angles, so the sort of things we’ll cover are how as a student you can get your communities more involved in talking about mental health but also then on the support side what support do we offer these students when they’re in the communities, so what are we signposting students to.

Nicci  It’s also about I think recognise when you have support needs and when you need to seek help and what you can do to get the help that you need and how you can be more involved in your community.

Sammi  Absolutely yeah. Shall we talk about the meet up packs that went out Hannah?

Hannah  Yes so here in the Students Association we encourage students to have meet ups all across the UK and Europe. We actually have the big Feb meet up which is this Saturday which is the 24th February and we sent out our packs to our host which included a set of cards that came with the pack that Sammi got in relation to Uni Mental Health Day and the questions included on these cards were: where do you feel part of a community and what do you do for your mental health? And the idea is that those attending these meet ups can talk about these questions but only if they feel comfortable and get the conversation going really around mental health. So we’re hoping we get some images back from people, what they’ve written on the backs of their cards, but it’s a great opportunity for students to meet other students and open up and get to know their community and make friends.

Nicci  I think throughout Uni Mental Health Day we’ll also be looking at those questions again online and be having conversations with students so it will be great to see lots of participation in that.

Sammi  That’s a really good point actually. So there is a hashtag which is #UniMentalHealthDay, and we’d be really keen to see students getting involved in the discussion on social media, so tweeting or writing Facebook posts and using that hashtag. We’d really like you as students, or staff as well if there are any staff listening, to tell us what you do to make your communities more supportive. So a few examples really, so one that I would probably give is that I would talk more opening about my own mental health and hopefully that would then encourage other people because it’s not such a taboo topic. I don't know if any of you have any other examples?

Jodie  Yeah so it’s always a weird one, I always feel a bit bad when I admit sometimes I have a mental health issue, only because I don't think I have like a long-term one but I think it's one of those things you almost get periods of
in your life when you get them. So I think it’s to speak up in those parts and be like, actually it’s okay to say, “I’m having this issue, I’m just going to chat to my friends about it or my family.” So I think that’s what I would probably take away to be a bit more open and that I’m not always this happy-go-lucky and lah-lah-lah everything’s fine. It’s okay to stop and be like, “Oh you know what it’s not a good day, I’ll let someone know.”

Sammi  Yeah it can be quite draining as well to like pretend to yourself that you’re having a good day when really you’re not and I think it’s best just to say, “Look (sighs) today is not going very well,” and then you’ve done that bit and then someone else can say, “Well talk to me about it,” and that's you having a conversation about your mental health, it doesn’t have to go into detail about the impact it will have on you long-term, or it can just be what’s in the moment can’t it?

Hannah  And it’s okay to have a bad day and although myself I don’t have long running mental health issues but as Jodie says we’ve all had those moments of feeling down or just be like, you know what I'm really just not happy right now. And that's still similar, you can be open about it and it’s okay to not be okay and to talk about those things and it’s okay to speak and say, “You know what I don’t feel happy,” or, “I’m down at the moment,” even if you don’t have long running mental health issues, you can have both.

Nicci  I think that’s one of the really interesting things about mental health is that sometimes people can think of it in very black and white ways, you think you either have a mental health problem or you don’t but actually life can just be challenging sometimes and that can make you more stressed and more anxious and it’s how do we create environments in our home life, in our work life, in our student life that actually make it okay for us to recognise that things aren’t maybe 100%. But also looking after and helping to create an environment that supports people who do have those longstanding health issues which might require slightly different interventions and different types of support.

Sammi  Sure. That leads us on quite nicely actually to talk about the OU’s student support because in fact the student support teams are fantastic aren’t they for when students are declaring any sort of difficulty or anything they’re going through in their life that’s having a bit of an impact on studying and on our Students Association website if you go under, I think it’s under Help and Support and then there's some advice guides and there’s a whole resource area on mental health. And Emma Greenstein who’s the university mental health adviser has actually written a piece on the importance of declaring mental health difficulties to the OU and the sort of support you can get and
it’s fantastic because there’s support for all sorts of things but all you need to do really is just call your student support team because they act as like a triage if you like so you call them first with whatever issue you’re going through and then they can point you in the right direction. But also our website does that as well. We have so many different resources on there and there’s one even on there from Emma Greenstein which is about practising mindfulness which is really important because so many people get caught up in these difficulties and actually sometimes it’s just about trying to stay calm and trying to deal with one thing at a time. And there’s so much stuff out there for that as well.

Nicci  
It’s interesting though you talk about how much stuff there is, sometimes there’s so much stuff it’s actually quite overwhelming.

Jodie  
That's true yeah.

Nicci  
So one of the things I have found in my history and my past is that I have gone on to the internet and done the Google search and found whole lots of resources and things and sometimes you just don't know which to go for and which to believe and what kind of advice to take from people. And sometimes those online communities I have found they aren’t always really 100% supportive. Sometimes they can actually be quite challenging to get involved in. So I have health problems, I have a physical disability and I've noticed that my mental health and my physical health are really closely connected, so if I can look after my mind my physical conditions are slightly better than what they would be otherwise. And likewise if I'm having a really bad physical day then my mental health can sometimes suffer. So it’s that relationship between the two.

Anyway so when I was first diagnosed and looked for a supportive community I actually found that some ‘self-help’ groups, and I'm using the inverted commas here, quote marks, weren’t really that supportive.

Jodie  
Really?

Nicci  
And so sometimes you need to find your community, it might not be that every community is the one for you and so the community that supported me mostly was through the OU Students Association rather than anything specific to the illness that I have. And in that way I was engaging with people with all sorts of different issues and different solutions to things and actually just feeling that my identity was as a student at that particular time, it wasn’t that my identity was connected to the illness that I had or the label that I had
been given. So find your own community and see what your place is within it and I think that can really strengthen your experience just in life.

Sammi That's a really good point actually isn't like building your own communities and ensuring that the people in your community are supportive and not having people who do... I'm not saying people brought you down but people you couldn’t necessarily relate to or you weren't getting that support you don't need people like that in your community if you can help it, if you can have that sort of control.

Hannah And it's great to know that you found the support here at the OU Students Association because even that will probably improve your student journey and you got to know other people.

Nicci Definitely I mean connecting back to what you were just talking about, about declaration of your disability or health problem with the university a lot of students don't know about that. You might get asked when you register but you're not really sure what it is so if you have another community that you can talk to and say, “Well how did that help you to tell the university what your problems were?” and you hear that other people have gotten those benefits from letting them know it reassures you that it’s okay to tell the university that you have these issues. And when things maybe are a bit more difficult in your life if you need that extension on your TMA or you just need to let somebody know that things aren’t 100% then you have that support there.

Jodie Yeah I think that’s important as well is that you can declare at any point in your student journey, so just because you started off and everything is going great I think sometimes the curve balls of life can completely derail you and you might think, ‘Oh I can't make this deadline anymore,’ and it’s totally fine to call up the student support and tell them, “Hey this has happened,” or you don’t have to say exactly what’s happened but, “I need some help with this,” and they'll be happy to help. Because I think yeah like you said it’s not black and white you don’t always have good mental health, you don’t always have bad mental health, I think it’s up and downs. When you mentioned sometime about the physical and mental thing connects it’s a bit different but I got injured playing sport once and it really made me dip down because I couldn’t play my sport, I’d sprained my ankle really badly and I couldn't actually leave my bedroom for a few days and it was just the most draining thing because I couldn't go out and see my friends, it was really draining. It was only when I reached out to them and I was like, “Guys can you come and see me because this isn’t working and I can't go out and play with you guys, I can't go out and see you,” and then they all rallied round, they all came over and...
helped out. So it was really nice. But it’s something small that you might think, ‘Well that’s not going to have a big impact,’ but it really can.

Nicci Did you think before when you were playing sport that this was something that you actually did for your mental health or was it only when you weren’t able to do it anymore that you realised actually that was something that was really good for my wellbeing and it’s my not being able to do it you recognised the impact it would have?

Jodie Oh definitely. I initially played sport to try and get healthy and be fit, so I guess physically healthy I thought of but I never thought how much it actually impacted my mental health. So I play rugby which everyone is like, “Surely that must be terrible.” I say, “No it’s great, it clears my head.” Every week I play a game or I do my training. I can get out of almost like my work and my other social life mental bubble and just for like an hour or two I’m just focusing on doing this one thing. I’m with my friends and my players and we’ve all got this one goal and it’s just great. It just helps me separate for a bit and then I think yeah the next day I just feel great because it’s a bonding thing as well.

Nicci I imagine if you’re playing rugby there’s not really much time for distraction about what’s going on in work life or study or anything else like that you just have to be focused on what you’re doing?

Jodie Oh yeah the joy as you’re getting tackled to be like, “Oh I forgot that piece of work,” that never pops up. You’re never like, “Oh no I didn’t send that email! I didn’t finish that thing.” No it’s a really good way to just get away and I think sometimes you need that, just like a little break just from your day to day bits and pieces.

Nicci Definitely.

Sammi I’ve found like when I’ve had a really bad day I come home and I just want to scrub things, I just want to clean, like that helps me, like getting frustration out on a really greasy baking tray or something is just fantastic for me ((laughs)).

Jodie Rugby is my baking tray.

Sammi I like that, it’s cool.

Hannah You see I’m the opposite I just like to go home and chill, just lay on my bed, get underneath my blanket and just like put Netflix on and just chill out and
just completely zone out and I'm a person who needs my own time and sometimes I just need like my own time and it's great after work just to get away and just have me time and that for me is doing nothing.

Nicci  I’d say for students that’s quite difficult at times because if you’re working or you have other responsibilities and then you have a transition from that into study time and then also trying to build in that switch off time it can be quite a challenge to really make the transition throughout your day from one part of your life into a different part and then to be able to get into bed at the end of the day and switch off and get over to sleep.

Sammi  Yeah that’s one thing I’ve noticed actually, it’s slightly off topic, but like since working here I’ve noticed how supportive students are to each other on online forums with situations like that. So you know, “Oh gosh I just need a minute to myself,” like say you’ve got three children and your TMA’s due and you literally just want to have a moment and I’ve seen people exchanging tips and stuff, like for example the Disabled Students Group people are always talking on there about how to overcome issues and I love working somewhere like this where you can actually see students sharing tips and strategies and actually like other students then saying, “Oh yeah I didn’t think about that, that works for me too.” And it’s really nice.

Nicci  I have posted on the Disabled Students Group and indeed other social media groups that students just are in at three o’clock in the morning and you know that there’s going to be somebody there who responds to you and that’s lovely to be part of that community and just know that if you need somebody to chat to about anything there’s generally somebody else out there who’s in a similar situation or who’s also awake, who’s also thinking about what they’re going to have to do the next day and trying to relax and get through.

Sammi  So we touched on connecting with others there and I’m just wondering whether it’s worth we talk about volunteering as well because it’s been said that in various different pieces of research that actually volunteering can support somebody’s mental health by keeping active and connecting with others and even just giving up your own time can feel rewarding like when you do things you’re helping other people but actually it does make you feel better about yourself, they’re like intrinsically good things and I just wonder what you guys think about that, whether you think volunteering might have an impact on you guys? I mean you’ve done a lot of volunteering as well.

Nicci  Absolutely. So I’ve been a volunteer for basically as long as I can remember in somewhere or other, so first of all helping out with youth clubs and youth groups and things like that and getting involved in charity shop work and
going off and doing challenges in different parts of the world and also more recently with the Students Association. And I think just for me having a focus in your day to get out and do something can be really important, especially if you have other challenges and you might not be in a work environment, I found that was a really, really good focus for me getting out and meeting other people here and other things happening, but giving back. And also boosting my own confidence, boosting my skills and kind of opening my eyes a little bit as to what opportunities are out there. But for me in the Students Association that's really why I got involved was to combat some of that isolation that I had as well connected to health issues and not being in work and not meeting as many people as I would like. So getting involved with the association and gradually from dipping my toe in the water from one role and just getting more and more and more involved and becoming president eventually.

Sammi Yeah that's lovely, that's really.

Jodie I always try and do volunteering that sometimes is also maybe a bit different to what I do day to day. So when I used to live in Wales we used to do some beach cleans and bits and pieces like that. Last year as a staff team we went to do…

Sammi Was it a foodbank?

Jodie That was it yeah we went to the foodbank where you split into twos and one team did it one week and the other did it the next and it was great we had a whole day of just packing food, sorting it out, we had a guy there who was just like military, he was like, this, this, this and then we packed it and then it was off and then you got another tray straightaway but it was great. It was a great break and it really did feel like you'd done something to help because afterwards they showed you like, oh so these bunch are now going to go over to this area, this is going to go help these people. And you came away feeling like, I did a good thing. So it was almost like you were helping other people but I always feel like it helps yourself as well and I think you can take that away and I don't think you're being selfish for being like no it's okay this has helped me as well.

Nicci And it was totally different from your day job.

Jodie Yes it was great. It was lifting and moving around whereas a lot of ours is we sit at our desk and then we all go out and do things but yeah it was a really nice different thing to do.
Sammi  That sounds good.

Hannah  I haven’t done any volunteering recently but I was actually looking into Age UK and being, I can't remember the exact name, but …

Sammi  Is it a befriender?

Hannah  Yeah a befriender where you call the same individual every week and you become friendly with them. I was thinking of doing that, I just need to get into my routine a little bit more because you call them the same time every week and it’s not good to let these people down. But also I think I’d love to get involved in a foodbank, someone here instead of doing Secret Santa one year asked for people to give her tins instead of a Christmas gift and she donated them to a foodbank in Milton Keynes. So I've definitely got some ideas but I have been thinking about being a befriender for Age UK.

Nicci  I think the really interesting thing for me about volunteering is that there are so many different types of opportunities that actually suit lots of different people. So in all sorts of different types of work but also in terms of there are volunteer opportunities that are regular commitments like that one where you do something over a longer period of time, same sort of time each week, or there's more micro volunteering opportunities and little times where organisations where we need somebody to get involved for one day or a couple of hours just to come on board and do something to fulfil a particular need that they have at that time.

Sammi  I think on our website we actually have a search function don't we under the volunteering part.

Nicci  There is yes.

Sammi  So you can actually specify whether it’s long or short-term and there's so many different roles on there isn't there?

Jodie  Yeah you can specify whether it’s travelling or if you want to do it more home-based. It’s being currently revamped so there's loads of different ways you can get involved. And one of the things I forgot to mention is when I was doing my volunteering was actually meeting the other volunteers because you've all gone there to do this volunteering, you've chosen to do it so you all have that in common already. So we actually made friends ((0:22:14?)) and the people we did beach cleans with years ago. So things like that it’s great as well and I know people have made friends over volunteering at the association as well.
Nicci

One of the things I love about volunteering is that okay you are with like-minded people because you all have that common interest but you also meet people who are from totally diverse backgrounds and maybe you meet people that you wouldn’t have the opportunity to meet with in any other part of your life. So within the Students Association there's a really wide range of ages that are being represented. So last week I had a great chat with our volunteers who was telling me about their experiences of work in the 60s and the 70s, what their career had been like, how it was different experience to what people might have now, talking about the challenges of being a parent at that time. So although you’re there to do a particular job it’s everything else that comes with that that you learn about people that you have the chance to just tell your story and hear other people’s stories and for me that's something really lovely to do. But then I just love people’s life histories and life stories and the chance to meet people from all sorts of backgrounds.

Sammi

Or on the flipside I've done volunteering and it’s been with animals, so there's volunteering if you don't even want to talk to people. If you do, like Hannah said, want your alone time like I went to an animal rescue shelter and spent the day cleaning out kennels and rabbit hutches and feeding the kittens and I just loved it, it was perfect because I mean I wasn't necessarily having a bad day I'd just gone to do some volunteering but like you say if you're the sort of person who needs quiet time then that could be some sort of volunteering for you as well where you don’t necessarily need to interact with people and worry about social situations, it could just be going to spend some time with some animals and having fun. So yeah I quite liked that.

Nicci

Yeah I remember my husband a few years ago went and did some volunteering in a conservation charity at home and he built a dry stone wall along with several other people and he was so proud. He was really, really happy that they'd all contributed to this wall. I hope he isn’t too embarrassed by me telling that story because he all had contributed to building this wall together as a team and a couple of months later he went back up there and he looked at the wall and it was still standing and he thought, ‘Yeah that was me and I pretty well.’ So there are all sorts of ways that you can get involved in local communities and it doesn’t just have to be about online it can be face to face type events.

Sammi

And I almost forgot to mention actually so we touched on the groups bit quickly we’ve got the PLEXUS Group which is the LGBT plus group and then we have the Disabled Students Group and both of them have their own events going on as well and PLEXUS will soon have a new website and the Disabled Students Group have currently got a website which you can go
online and visit. But I just wanted to quickly mention the drop-in sessions that Steph does as vice president community doesn't she?

Hannah Yeah that's right.

Sammi But she is doing a University Mental Health Day special and that's going to be co-hosted with the Disabled Students Group which will be on Adobe Connect, is that right?

Jodie So it will be in the virtual Adobe Connect room. It will be on the 1st March, I think it will be six until eight, that's usually, but it's like an informal drop in, so you don't have to be there for the two hours, don't get put off by the timings, you can go in for a quick chat. Steph does these fortnightly anyway, so use Adobe Connect they have joining instructions but I'm sure most computers can now connect to them. The only thing you might need if you want to talk might be just make sure you've got a microphone, usually most of them have them inbuilt.

Nicci The same sort of set up that you would need to have for online tutorials.

Jodie Yeah but you can also just type as well so you don't have to actually physically talk you can just type in the chat.

Nicci And it's quite common actually if people are joining in with the community chats because of the time that they're on people are there having their dinner, they're there talking while they're eating, they're just getting involved in bits of conversation about all sorts of things from what they're watching on TV that night, what's stressing them out, just anything that's going on.

Jodie Yeah it's a great way, like Nicci said it can be about anything to chat.

Nicci And I know actually that last night PLEXUS hosted a quiz using Adobe Connect as well. So students got together from all around and took part in a quiz which was hosted by our STEM faculty rep. So there's lots of things happening online as well. Just because we aren't all on the same campus all the time doesn't mean we can't find ways to engage with each other. I want to put in a quick plug for something else...

Jodie Yeah go for it girl.

Nicci …connected to societies so we've also launched the clubs pilot this year. So what we're trying to do is find ways to let students create clubs that are slightly less formal than societies and I have created a club and it doesn't
really have a name yet, we’re kind of between names but it’s really a group of students who are really interested in Harry Potter.

Jodie Yeah!

Nicci So for the last couple of months we have been reading and talking about Harry Potter together. So we’ve worked through each of the books and just had conversations, usually most days actually there’s somebody in there talking about various things, we’re sharing our love for Harry Potter and just posting general chitchat but actually students can try and create their own clubs based on what their interests are themselves. And I’ve found that a really good way to meet other students. We never talk about study in there. It is interesting and we just stick to what we’re there for, that bit of fun.

Jodie That’s cool

Nicci I know there’s another club which has been really successful which is make club which has been set up for people who are creative in all sorts of different ways. So if you make anything you’re welcome to join that club. We have people who make cakes, people who crochet, people who do different types of crafts, paper crafts, arts, all sorts of things, all sharing what they’re doing in their creativity.

Sammi That’s lovely, that’s really nice.

Nicci Which actually for a lot of people can be a really good outlet for stress.

Sammi Yeah definitely. It is a form of therapy isn’t it art, so that's brilliant.

Nicci The Harry Potter thing for me is connected believe it or not to that as well, I mean I could read and read and read the same books over and over and over again, it’s how I help myself get to sleep at night time and I don’t necessarily read lots of new things at that time of the day but if I can just read a couple of pages of Harry Potter it just helps me to switch off.

Sammi Did you know as well that Uni Mental Health Day is the same day as World Book Day?

Nicci Is it I didn’t know that.

Sammi 1st March yeah.

Hannah You can open it up to your Harry Potter Club.
Sammi Yeah it's a nice little link there.

Hannah Just touching on what you were saying about clubs Nicci, and this is exactly what we wanted from clubs, it to be really informal, really casual and you don't have to talk about studying you can have a club on pretty much anything you would like, from Harry Potter to making things to Prosecco and gin I think there was talks of one.

Sammi I'll join that one!

Hannah Me too! But yeah I think clubs will be a really great way for students online, social media, to talk to each other and not necessarily about studying. So we’re really looking forward to the launch of that and we’re hoping that we get some good clubs come forward.

Jodie I might have to join your Harry Potter one.

Nicci For me when you look at the questions actually that came out from your new mental health day one of them was where do you feel part of a community? It’s actually to me you’re part of multiple communities. So I'm part of the Students Association kind of rep community, all the student voice volunteers who are working together but I'm also part of that community of Harry Potter fans, I'm part of a community of people who like particular TV shows. So there's the benefits of being online now I think have allowed you to join up with people who you have similar interest too and from the comfort of your own house.

Hannah Yeah and you don't have to be part of one community, there's no rules, you can be part of as many as you want. And that's the same thing in relation to societies and clubs you can be a member of as many as you like there is no rules.

Sammi Brilliant. Well maybe that's a lovely way to end actually is to encourage people to talk about their communities online using the hashtag. So just to reiterate it's #UniMentalHealthDay and it will be really lovely if as many students and staff as possible could get involved and tell us how do you make your communities more supportive and what do you do to support your mental health in regards to like who do you go to and who do you speak to and what do you do? Tell us a bit more. You've heard a bit about us so let’s get to meet some more students and staff.

Hannah Yeah absolutely.
Sammi Brilliant thank you.

Hannah Thank you.

Jodie Thanks very much so yeah thank you everyone for being here today on this, well it's not as sunny anymore but that's okay as we said you can flow up and down so it will be sunny again in about half an hour. But yeah so it's been myself, Jodie, Sammi, Hannah and Nicci here at the OU Students Association. Thank you for listening to our first podcast. Apologies if there's any stumbling over words we'll work on it. So join us next time and thank you very much and good bye.

Hannah Bye.

Sammi Bye.