# Dedication

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Why write this book?

In writing this book, I have more than a desire to disseminate information about mental health in the context of schooling. I want it to be a useful resource, but I am aware also of a campaigning edge. The book is designed to raise the issues and possibilities of a comprehensive approach to mental health in schools. A concern for the mental health needs of young people, and the school’s awareness of these, remains largely hidden. Schools are trying their hardest, often with success, to support young people in difficulty, and many hours are spent with parents and pupils trying to address problems. However, many professionals working in schools will recognise that they feel helpless and deskilled when confronted with young people who are self-harming, socially isolated and withdrawn, or behaving in a way that causes distress at home and school. These outward expressions of sadness, unhappiness or difficulty ultimately affect the learning and well-being of other pupils with whom they come into contact.

I believe that unless education places mental health and well-being at the forefront of planning, schools will remain purely reactive institutions with a ‘fire-fighting’ model of pastoral care. What is advocated here is a more proactive approach, where problems are anticipated and pre-empted, and where prevention and early intervention are keenly held concepts that influence policy and planning. This book seeks to raise awareness of mental health in schools and challenge schools with a new way of thinking.

Who is it for?

This book is for all adults who work in schools and who come into contact with young people in distress or difficulty. This includes teachers with a pastoral role, whether as form tutor or at the level of middle management. However, I would be pleased if it also appealed to all classroom teachers and assistants and those with newly created pastoral roles as a result of workforce reform. Clearly, these pages will be of use to other staff working in schools, such as learning mentors, special needs teachers and the school special educational needs coordinator. In addition, I hope that the book is read and discussed by school head teachers, other members of the senior leadership team and governors, in particular those with the influence to effect change.

The book is also relevant to the many other professionals working in schools, such as behaviour support, education social workers, educational psychologists and Connexions workers.
In fact, I hope this book will be of interest to anyone who sees schooling as more than an opportunity to pass on knowledge and help pupils achieve in the formal sense, important as these goals may be. It is for all professionals who wish to highlight the importance of promoting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people in our schools.

Importantly, this book is also about working with parents, family and friends whose lives are entwined with the child in distress – or become so. My aim is that the content and ideas explored in the book will open up purposeful and sensitive communication with families, and facilitate the kind of dialogue and sense of working together in partnership that is so necessary for quality support, intelligent home-school contracts and – hopefully – successful outcomes.

How should the book be used?

I want this to be an intensely practical book, written with a passion born out of many years of experience. As indicated above, I also hope that the book will challenge and offer new perspectives on the practice of pastoral care.

The book should be read in full because it is important that the arguments presented are understood. The book can later be returned to for reference and discussion. I would be delighted if the book were used for training and professional development. For this reason, I have included a number of ‘reflection boxes’ throughout the text at appropriate points. These can be used for self-reflection or in discussion with others. Where a page is headed ‘photocopiable’, please feel free to reproduce it for work with colleagues. Where material has been designed for pupils to work with, you may make multiple copies for classroom use. In addition, the text is interspersed with a number of ‘key points’ that attempt to capture the essence of the following pages.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This chapter will show that:

Young people in difficulty may have underlying mental health issues. Schools need to look beyond the behaviour to understand what might be going on for that young person. Narrow behavioural approaches are sometimes limited and may make matters worse.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the following case studies, which introduce us to some of the main issues to be explored throughout this book. These young people do not of course exist, but they represent an amalgam of some of the young people I have known during the last 30 years. While reading, you may recognise elements of some of the pupils you already work with. If I have learnt anything in my years working with young people, it is the complexity of their lives, the stresses they face, the loss they experience, the violence they encounter. Sometimes I ask myself: how would I cope in their situation? Do I really understand? Can I even begin to feel what they are feeling now?

Carl

Carl is a Year 8 pupil, small for his age. His junior school transfer information shows that he has had problems with his behaviour since Year 4 when his mother and father’s relationship reached an all-time low and domestic violence became a feature of the relationship – violence which Carl witnessed daily. Carl has attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but his doctors find it difficult to judge the correct levels of medication to enable him to negotiate successfully the school day. There are problems at school, and he has spent many hours in the school’s ‘time-out’ facility, offering respite to his teachers and classmates. His mother and father are now separated, and Carl feels let down by his dad, who rarely agrees to see him and often cancels at the last moment. Carl feels rejected and takes this frustration to school. He is aware of his ‘condition’ and is willing to talk about it; indeed, he is keen to do so. The school is aware of his special needs and has made real efforts to take them into account. However, the situation is deteriorating, and some of his teachers feel he is ‘getting away’ with too much. They have questioned
how much of his difficult behaviour is due to his ADHD, and therefore understandable, and how much is simply bad behaviour. This has introduced inconsistency into their approaches to him, and Carl is now confused and resentful of any intervention that is part of the school’s behaviour code. Carl has been allocated a mentor, who meets with him regularly, and SMART targets for ‘negotiated’ behavioural improvement. To redress the school’s apparently lenient approach to him, Carl has recently received a number of fixed-term exclusions so that he understands where the line is drawn. He has problems relating to other pupils and is consequently the subject of bullying, as other pupils react to his aggression and anger. They also resent the way teachers treat him differently and that he appears to be handled more sympathetically by his head of year.

Sunita

Sunita is a diminutive 11-year-old pupil who has struggled throughout Year 7. Her mother despairs over Sunita’s refusal to go to school. Her attendance at junior school is just about satisfactory, although some concern had been expressed. Sunita’s mother brings her to school, but the terrified child clings to the gate and cries. She begs her mother to take her home, promising to go to school ‘tomorrow’. The learning mentor at the school has encouraged Sunita to enter the school on occasion, assuring her that she can spend the day alongside her, but the mentor knows this is not a long-term solution. When encouraged to go to lessons, albeit on a limited timetable, Sunita cries loudly, and her desperate appeals disturb others. When in school, she inevitably complains of stomach pains and headaches, and occasionally she has to be escorted to the toilet to be sick. The head of year is under pressure to improve Sunita’s attendance, and the education social worker has been involved. Everything has been tried: encouragement and rewards, threats of court action, and the possibility of transfer to another school. Sunita has a very close relationship with her mother, and Sunita’s crying has made it hard for her mother to maintain firm boundaries. At times, it is easier to allow Sunita to stay at home. Her mother is herself depressed and feels guilty about her role, as she had been hospitalised for a good part of Sunita’s first few years of life. She remains intermittently unwell, and Sunita is worried that her mother will die as her aunt did.

Zoe

Zoe does not appear to be interested in school at all. Her Years 7 and 8 end-of-year reports showed an average student whose behaviour was within the normal range. Now, in Year 10, Zoe’s coursework is non-existent. Constant phone calls home do not appear to make a difference. Her teachers are frustrated because they feel she is ‘wasting her ability’. They are also concerned that her aggressive behaviour toward teachers and dinner supervisors is a bad example to others. Other students look up to Zoe and she occupies a position of power within her peer group. She has sometimes resorted to punishing those who challenge her superiority and status, by excluding them from the friendship group. Zoe spent just over a
These four case studies represent the kinds of issues faced by schools every day. In all parts of the country, not just in the inner city, school staff grapple gallantly with young people whose behaviour is causing concern in various ways. The situation at home has reached crisis point and Zoe does not want to stay there. She habitually runs away. Zoe is self-harming and recently was hospitalised briefly after taking 10 paracetamol tablets in the playground, an event that caused great anxiety in the school. Periodically, Zoe goes a whole day without eating, causing her friends concern. Zoe is often in detention at school because of her ‘attitude’ and occasional rudeness. School uniform remains an issue, and the school is determined that she should dress the same as others. She has been excluded on three separate occasions for fighting and smoking. There is a suggestion, but no evidence, that she is smoking illegal substances.

Mohammed

Mohammed comes from what appears to be a very settled and caring home. He has two brothers who successfully attended his school without incident. Both gained good A levels, went to university and now have excellent jobs. Mohammed’s parents show a great deal of interest in Mohammed, always attend parent consultation evenings, and comment in his ‘school planner’. At school, Mohammed’s behaviour is exemplary. He receives many ‘credits’ but rarely collects them. His attendance is faultless and he is often commended for the quality and accuracy of his uniform and preparedness for school, evidenced by his bulging pencil case. Mohammed is difficult to engage, although staff know he is highly articulate. He told his concerned form tutor that he has lots of friends, but he is rarely seen with them, preferring to sit alone in lessons and occupy the library at lunchtime. No one bullies him – he rarely attracts the attention of any adults or pupils in the school. He mostly goes unnoticed, although his teachers have high hopes that he will attain at least eight grade A–Cs. Mohammed is an asset to the school and his parents are proud of him and communicate their high expectations of him.

These four case studies represent the kinds of issues faced by schools every day. In all parts of the country, not just in the inner city, school staff grapple gallantly with young people whose behaviour is causing concern in various ways. To a large extent, the school’s response is a behavioural one, because schools have traditionally operated in a behaviourist way, emphasising behavioural and cognitive approaches over models that place feelings at the fore. This may have a lot to do with the way we train teachers now, with less emphasis on philosophy and psychology, and more on practice and learning from experienced teachers in schools. We would do well to question the distinct lack of the ‘pastoral’ in the development of our teachers – a strange phenomenon when we consider the inherently human nature of teaching.

Reward and punishment, the bedrock of behavioural approaches, leads teachers sometimes to address a pupil’s behaviour without really understanding the causes. The caring teacher who puts pressure on the underachieving pupil by establishing targets and offering rewards may, in
fact, be adding to the stress and anxiety of that child. If we concern ourselves with the overt behaviour of young people, we end up punishing the sad pupil whose depression manifests itself as aggression. We may end up dealing with Carl in incoherent ways because we do not quite understand what is happening to him in the classroom and corridor, and fail to support him with the confusion, rejection or shame he may be feeling. We caringly put pressure on Sunita to get into school because we know ‘what is best for her’ without recognising the underlying causes of her fear, thereby exacerbating her anxiety all the more. We become frustrated and then angry with Zoe, whose behaviour challenges our own professional sense of worth. In doing so, we fail to support her through her understandable anger and her need to control her immediate environment and relationships. We focus on her violence without really understanding her pain and hurt. When she deliberately harms herself and threatens to take her life, she generates fear in the adults who care for her, and this leads to a belief that she ‘needs help’ of a kind that is beyond the resources of the school. The reality is that Zoe will indeed need additional support from other professionals, but she remains a student at the school until she is permanently excluded – the most likely outcome.

Mohammed represents the many students who may be experiencing a mental health difficulty but whose behaviour does not cause concern or, if it does, it remains a lower priority for an overstretched pastoral system. It would be difficult to guess what might be happening for Mohammed, but his withdrawn and isolated behaviour should be a concern for the vigilant teacher and the school that recognizes that early intervention prevents the development of more serious consequences in subsequent years.

**Reflection box**

- Thinking about the young people you currently work with, do you recognise any dimensions of the pupils described in these case studies?
- Looking beyond the behaviour, can you identify what might be happening for Carl, Sunita, Zoe and Mohammed?
- What might each young person be feeling?
- When reading the case studies, what were you feeling? Did you feel sympathetic to each pupil?
- Think about a time when you were at school and you felt confused, unhappy, anxious or even despairing. What did you need from your teachers and the adults with whom you came into contact?
When pupils feel depressed or unhappy, or when they are anxious or scared, their capacity to learn is adversely affected. They may withdraw or show aggression. Sometimes they act out. When children feel unloved or neglected, they may seek attention or give up trying. As with young people, our own ability to learn will be affected by our emotional health and well-being. Learning involves risk, and when young persons feel that their sense of worth is in jeopardy, or when they have come to expect failure, they will resist learning. These activities call upon pupils to understand these concepts and relate them to personal experience.

**Time**

45 minutes.

**What you will need**

- copies of the following ‘Case Study’ activity sheet for all pupils
- pens and paper.

**How to do it**

Explain the potential link between emotional health and learning. Ask pupils to work with a partner. Distribute the ‘Case Study’ activity sheet and ask them to consider the two scenarios and accompanying questions. They should record their responses in note form. After 10 minutes, ask them to join with another pair and share ideas.

**Extension activities**

This material could provide an opportunity for role-play. Ask the pupils to work in pairs and each take on the role of parent/teacher and pupil whose underachievement is explored. The pupils could be asked to consider, individually, times when they have avoided work at school or when their learning has been impeded by strong thoughts and feelings.
Peer-support schemes

Schools have informally recognised the natural tendency for young people to offer each other support and friendship, particularly in times of crisis or periods of transition. Indeed, it could be argued that young people often seek out their peers first in times of difficulty, rather than turning to parents and teachers. Peer-support schemes recognise these processes and seek to harness this natural humanity found in young people. Space prohibits giving detailed procedures for setting up a scheme, but a number of publications by ChildLine (2002; 2004) form good starting points for schools seriously considering introducing a scheme of some kind.

Peer-support schemes take a number of forms, each with a different focus but equally valuable. These include:

- friendship, befriending or ‘buddying’
- mentoring
- conflict resolution or mediation
- peer listening.

I have used the term peer listening in preference to the sometimes used peer counsellor, which I believe is risky, in that it implies a specific professional role requiring significant training and experience. To refer to peer supporters as ‘counsellors’ suggests an activity that has expectations beyond maturity.

All of these contribute to the idea of a listening school. They often exist alongside and complement other listening ideas such as the school council and circle time.

Natalie Tormey (2005) sets out clearly some of the benefits of peer-support schemes. Pupils benefit from non-judgemental listening and ‘help, comfort and guidance’ which arise from wider social networks. Teachers see their school improve and appreciate the introduction of an additional level of support that is often neglected through lack of time. Young people participating as peer supporters gain self-confidence, improve their communication skills, and develop socially and personally themselves. Finally, Tormey sets out whole-school benefits of such schemes, which include reduced levels of bullying, the approval of parents, better behaviour and improvements in educational attainment.

The following checklist represents some of the key questions and issues that will need to be addressed if such a scheme is to be introduced. Cowie and Wallace (2000) set out the potential of such undertakings but also highlight the possible dangers if such projects are not introduced with care and considerable thought.