

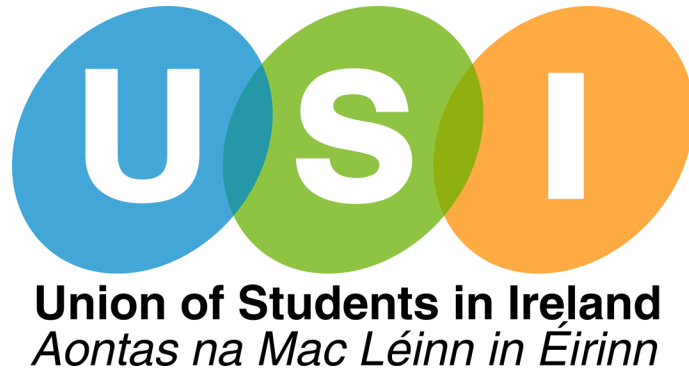


**MORE TALK**  
**MORE ACTION** ▶▶

## **USI Mental Health Strategy 2014-2017**



**Union of Students in Ireland**  
*Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn*



### **About USI**

"The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 354,000 students in over thirty member colleges across Ireland, North and South. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience."

### **Objectives of the Union of Students' in Ireland:**

1. An education and training system open to all, irrespective of any consideration, including consideration of national origin, ethnic background, age, ability, sex, sexuality, creed, political beliefs or economic circumstances, so that each individual can realize their full potential.
2. An education and training system which truly serves the interest of the people of Ireland.
3. The right of students to a decent standard of living including the right to adequate financial support, proper housing and future prospects of employment in Ireland.
4. The defence and promotion of all democratic and human rights.
5. The provision of student services for the benefit of the membership on the principle that control of student service should lie with the membership.
6. To represent the interests of the students of Ireland at international level.



## USI VP for Welfare Foreword

It is with great pleasure and hope that I present the USI Mental Health Strategy 2014-2017 'More Talk, More Action'. It was an honour to lead the development of this strategy. I would like to take this opportunity to thank member Students' Union Officers and various mental health organisations for their support, input and dedication in developing and providing USI with a new strategy on mental health.

This document aims to assist my successors and local Students' Unions in following a coherent and consistent framework for ensuring our colleges and universities are mentally healthy, wealthy and prosperous for years to come. This strategy provides for good practice for the support of students, the promotion of mental well-being, promotion of help seeking and prevention of mental health difficulties.

Together, we can focus on promoting educated and positive attitudes to mental health and well-being and a positive approach in what we do as we lead students in looking after their own mental health and those around them.

**Let's Talk, Let's Change Minds, Let's Reach Out.**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denise McCarthy". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Denise McCarthy

USI Deputy President/Vice President for Welfare

2013/2014

# Background of Strategy

**In Ireland, there are approximately 354,000 full and part-time students in higher education - in over 30 colleges both North and South of the border. USI has the potential to reach huge numbers of students, including those most at risk of mental illness and at risk of suicide.**

The number one health issue for young people is their mental health. Mental health has been defined as a state of well-being in which the individual recognises their own abilities and is able to cope with normal daily stresses in life (World Health Organisation, 2005).

Traditionally mental health and in particular mental illness has largely been the responsibility of mental health professionals. However, we now know that roughly 1 in 5 young people will experience a mental health problem at some point (Kessler et al 2005). This means that more people, from the community, family, friends and those working with young people need to understand more about mental health and how young people can best be supported.

Youth is a term that refers to the period between childhood and adulthood. It is a time of great change as young people move from a position of dependence to one of independence and brings with it both opportunities and challenges for young people as they seek to develop their own sense of identity and discover their place in the world. While the majority of young people navigate their way through this period of time without developing mental health difficulties, research tells us that about three-quarters of adults with serious mental health difficulties started having those difficulties by the age of 24 years (Kessler et al 2005, McGorry 2007). Given that, it is reasonable to suggest that the more emotionally and mentally healthy people are in their youth, the less likely they are to experience emotional and mental health difficulties in their adult lives.

## USI and Mental Health

USI has been at the forefront of conversations on mental health and continues to collaborate with many mental health organisations and runs a national mental health awareness campaign each year.

Currently, youth suicide rates in Ireland are fifth highest in the European Union (World Health Organisation, 2005). The many and complex theories that surround the act of suicide can sometimes distance us from the simple idea that no one takes their own life unless there is something very wrong with it. It is often said that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary situation. Many survivors of suicide attempts speak of their desire to end the deep and desperate pain they felt, not necessarily to end their lives. At the time though, they could simply see no other way out (Taking Control of Your Mental Health, Shine, 2009).

It is necessary for USI to recognise the opportunity to influence attitudes to mental health, promote help seeking and suicide prevention among students by doing this, the students who will move on to working life with a positive and open attitude to mental health issues.

The stigma surrounding mental health difficulties prevents people from coming forward and seeking the help and support they need. It also means we are prevented from understanding the voices of those experiencing mental ill health and recovery (Taking Control of Your Mental Health, Shine, 2009).



We recognise the need to engage with students where they are looking for information and support that is outside of the college setting. According to the My World Survey (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012) 77% of young people surveyed reported they would be likely to use the internet as a source of help. In addition to this the young people were asked about ways that help them cope when things are tough. The most frequently reported ways of coping were friends, talking, music, family and exercise. We must use this when engaging with students.

We believe, through knowledge gained by working with young people as student leaders, and through our lived experience as students, that Students' Union Officers are uniquely positioned to work for the better mental health of our student populations.

We believe our colleges and universities are communities and families, and to ensure the relationships within these institutions are strong and healthy, all members must be safeguarded, cherished and protected.

We recognise that the lack of resources in Students' Unions contributes to stress and pressure upon officers, and their ability to support others in difficulty. It is important Students' Union are trained and supported throughout their terms.

Ultimately, we recognise the need to work with others in the mental health sector to further our aims and ambitions. We also recognise the need to be trained and supported in our work, and to find ways to support each other.

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## USI Mental Health Strategy 2014-2017

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This strategy aims to provide a framework for good practice for the support of students, the promotion of mental well-being and prevention of mental health difficulties, to be implemented by both the USI Vice President for Welfare and local Students' Unions.

The USI Vice President for Welfare must follow the USI Mental Health Strategy and assist local officers in following through with its recommendations by disseminating the strategy at the start of the year as well as providing support and training throughout the year.

# Collaborations and Partnerships

USI acknowledges the importance of collaborations and partnerships when it comes to mental health organisations.

## USI must:

- Continue to work with a varied list of organisations relating to mental health.
- Expand relationships with and promote the work organisations do raise awareness of mental health among the student population in Ireland.

## Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:

- Local Students' Unions should work as much as possible with relevant organisations, both internal and external to our colleges.
- Local Students' Unions should keep on file a directory of local mental health resources and provide these during crossover to their successor.

# Training and Support

Students' Unions should be equipped with the skills and information necessary in dealing with casework.

## USI must:

- Organise training for Students' Unions in the understanding and communication of positive approaches to mental health.
- Ensure that all training on mental health is delivered by professional trainers and is beneficial.
- Assist Students' Unions by way of promoting mental health organisations, where to source materials and information and assist them in running local mental health campaigns and activities.
- Further engage with relevant groups and NGOs to publicise the various means of supporting people with mental health difficulties to the wider student population.
- Organise self care training for Students' Union officers and encourage them to look after their mental health and wellbeing.
- Strengthen relationships with relevant groups such as the Irish Student Health Association and the IAUCC (Irish Association of College Counsellors).
- Organise Mental Health First Aid training and make this training available to all Students' Union Officers.

## Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:

- Local Students' Unions should liaise with student support services on campus while developing mental health initiatives on campus for extra support and guidance.
- Investigate what local services are available to support mental health campaigns.
- Local Students' Unions should emphasise the connection of mental health with other issues such as finance.
- Welfare Officers should engage with on campus counsellors to develop a system of supervision and support.
- Students' Union officers who deal with casework should be supported with casework supervision.



# Stigma Reduction

It is vitally important for USI to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues in the student population and encourage help seeking and open attitudes towards the discussion and treatment of mental health problems.

## USI must:

- Maintain its partnership with See Change and the role it plays in stigma reduction.
- Coordinate its national mental health campaign will work to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues.
- The use of theatre, newspaper articles, and testimonies from those who have lived life experience should be encouraged as a means to reduce stigma and encourage open discussion of mental health.
- Support and promote the Green Ribbon Campaign by See Change to get people talking openly about mental health problems

## Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:

- Local Students' Unions should recognise the positive role that clubs and societies play in mental health campaigns and USI and Local Students' Unions should engage clubs and societies to reduce stigma.
- Local Students' Unions should encourage the formation of societies, clubs, support groups that discuss and debate mental health issues as well as providing safe, supportive spaces for students.
- Local Students' Unions should incorporate stigma reduction messages in mental health campaigns.
- Local Students' Union should engage with the Green Ribbon campaign and distribute ribbons on campus.

# Suicide Prevention

Our college communities need to be safe, suicide aware spaces for all students.

## USI must:

- Organise training for Students' Unions on suicide alertness and intervention, i.e. SafeTALK & ASIST. (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) as early as possible after new sabbatical officers begin their term.
- Engage in an open collaboration and dialogue with HSE suicide prevention resource officers.
- Promote all HSE suicide prevention resource officers to member Students' Unions.
- Engage with groups such as Suicide Aware and assist local Students' Union in receiving the Amber Flag.
- Promote World Suicide Prevention Day and have a social media plan in reaching students who may not be back to college after the summer break.

## Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:

- Coordinate SafeTALK training and ASIST on campus for students, class reps, welfare volunteers, peer-based support volunteers and other SU officers with the support of USI officers.
- Work with college authorities in ensuring admin, academic and non academic staff are encouraged to take part in this training.
- Listening services, both internal to the college and external should be protected, supported and promoted to students.



# Funding and Services

The wider impacts of the recession have seen an increase in people, particularly young people, experiencing difficulties with their mental health. The strain, anxiety and uncertainty associated with financial difficulties in their personal and family lives have undoubtedly been a contributing factor in this. According to the My World Survey 60% of young adults report being stressed by their financial situation.

## USI must:

- Build stronger connections with Mental Health Reform in promoting improved and prioritised mental health services in Ireland.
- Campaign for multidisciplinary community-based mental health services and ensure that adequate supports are available for those who need them.
- Lobby for the full €35m committed for investment in community mental health services to be allocated, along with the €15m balance of the under spend in Budget 2014, to a total of a €50m investment in these essential services.
- Campaign and lobby for more funding to be allocated to the Student Assistance Fund and to protect other financial supports such as the Grant and Back to Education Allowance.
- Assist local Students' Unions in ensuring a high standard of support services on campus.

## Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:

- Local Students' Unions should work to protect funding of student support services on campus
- Local Students' Unions should work to ensure student support services meet the highest standards of quality.
- Local Students' Union should work to ensure that students in financial need are catered for in college through hardship funds etc.

# Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

As per USI's Physical Health Strategy, USI acknowledges the connection between being physically active and improved mental health.

Exercise and regular physical activity has numerous benefits beyond those commonly associated with it such as reducing anxiety and reducing chronic fatigue for an example. Experts believe that exercise releases chemicals in your brain that make you feel good. Regular exercise can also boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, look and feel better (Mental Health Foundation, 2011).

Taking part in physical activities offers many opportunities. It's a great way to meet people. And it can be a chance to give oneself a well-deserved break from the hustle and bustle of daily life – to find some quiet time.

The USI Vice President for Welfare (2013/2014) has been co-opted on to the Health, Well-Being and Physical Activity Committee of Student Sport Ireland (SSI).

## USI must:

- Maintain this seat and strengthen its relationship with SSI (Student Sport Ireland) in research, training for officers and should work together with SSI where possible to act as a conduit for health related programmes and in the delivery of programmes with and in support of SSI and the Health, Wellbeing and Activity Committee.
- Organise health promotion training for member Students' Unions.



**USI's mental health campaign should take place in the first academic term, incorporating information about:**

- Positive mental health
- Mental health difficulties
- Stigma reduction
- Suicide reduction
- Encouraging help seeking/  
highlight importance of talking
- Support services

Materials distributed during this campaign must be all inclusive and must have input from member Students' Union.



**USI will:**

- Acknowledge the importance of positive mental health and is committed to promoting positive mental health among students.
- Continue to work with See Change and St Patricks' Mental Health Services with the hope on continuing 'Chats for Change' and strive to expand the campaign in the coming years.
- Engage with students around stressful times of the year, e.g. exam time in supporting students and promoting support services. USI will continue its 'Exam Prep' campaign.

**USI must:**

- Engage with students using online campaigns and tools to inform and support students.
- Maintain its relationship with Please Talk and maintain the seat on the Please Talk Steering Committee.
- Provide advice, support for and promotion of local Mental Health Campaigns in MOs across the country.

**Suggested actions for member Students' Unions:**

- Welfare officers can benefit their students by being more aware of this and by actively working to raise awareness among the student body.
- It's important that Students' Union promote physical exercise among their student body. USI would recommend member Students' Unions to make links with their Student Health Centres in an effort to establish health and exercise programmes.
- Ensure there is access to non-competitive sport within the college, or if this cannot be achieved, try to encourage links with local non-competitive sports groups.
- Promote positive mental health by coordinating activities on campus.

# Acknowledgements

## **USI wish to thank the following for their input into the strategy's formation:**

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