No More Blue Mondays- Putting Postgraduate and Early Career Wellbeing on the Agenda

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This March, an anonymous blog titled 'There is a Culture of Acceptance around Mental Health Issues in Academia' (http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/mar/01/mental-health-issue-phd-research-university) provoked unexpected levels of attention and discussion when it was posted on The Guardian's Higher Education blog. The anonymous academic related their own observations from working as a researcher development officer in a UK university, arguing that mental health issues have become a tolerated yet invisible feature of the postgraduate experience -'I see students who feel like it is not OK to admit that they are not OK. And this is not OK'. The Guardian subsequently published the results of a voluntary online survey this Spring which revealed that the academics and PhD students who responded were reporting high levels of mental ill health (http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/may/08/work-pressure-fuels-academic-mental-illness-guardian-study-health). Since then debate about the severity and extent of this issue, and its underlying causes and possible solutions has animated not only the Guardian's blog and comments section but numerous other news outlets. These discussions brought into the mainstream press conversations which had already been apparent for some time on Higher Education blogs. Discussions have focused both on systematic pressures and individual experiences. Twitter conversations such as #academicableism have also provided a platform for lively debates about the issues faced by students and staff seeking support for health problems.

No More Blue Mondays (http://nomorebluemondays.weebly.com/) was born of a series of conversations between myself and fellow Edinburgh University PhD candidate Lucy Hinnie during the winter of 2013 about our experiences working on our PhDs and the challenges which we, and our peers, reported experiencing. Whether it was coping with chronic ill health, family commitments, feelings of isolation or, every early career researcher's old friend, imposter syndrome, it seemed like similar themes came up again and again. We both had a strong desire to put these topics and, health at work in general, firmly on the agenda in conversations about research students and early career researchers in our school, and to come up with practical ideas for creating a healthy work environment. The resultant project is designed to act as a conduit between research students, and the support services and resources they need.

Starting a course at a new institution is often accompanied by a veritable avalanche of new information. There are supervisors to meet, libraries to use, accommodation to find, perhaps a whole new citation system to master… As students get busy with work and building a life in a new place sometimes finding out about the services and support mechanisms that they have access to gets put on the backburner. If a problem arises finding help can feel like taking on a mountain.

This is where we like to think we can make a difference. Admitting that you're lonely, struggling with your studies or having issues with your mental or physical health to a stranger can be daunting. Booking an appointment with a service you have no experience of, attending a workshop or a class somewhere you don't know, these are all things which feel difficult when you're already feeling vulnerable or worried. Add to this the perceived stigma attached to asking for help and it's no wonder many students don't seek support. The idea behind our workshops is really very straightforward. Bring together representatives from a series of key support services within the university to deliver short informal introductory sessions, and allow students to come along,

participate, have a cup of tea together and interact with those representatives. The sessions are organised by, and only open to, postgraduates and early career researchers, allowing students to feel that they have privacy to be honest about their experiences. They are designed to do two things- familiarise students with the wealth of resources available at the university and encourage dialogue amongst participants about the things they find challenging.

It's important to state here that a workshop is not a silver bullet capable of addressing all of the different problems which have been raised during the debates on academic mental health. Conversations about larger issues within academia are essential, they will, and must, continue. However, in the short term, small grass-roots projects like No More Blue Mondays can make a measurable difference to life on campus. Whilst we can't alter someone's personal circumstances or change the way academia works, we can signpost support services they might not have considered using and open up a space for dialogue and peer-support.

We're also aware that workshops don't work for everyone and that for some people they might seem just an intimidating as a doctor's appointment or a mindfulness class. For this reason we also use our website and social media to engage with students and early career researchers, regularly posting links to articles and resources we think they might find interesting or helpful. Where we can only include 20-30 students, at most, in a workshop, our highest traffic posts on Facebook can have hundreds of views. We hope they remind people that they aren't alone in their thoughts and feelings, encourage them to think and talk about well-being, and familiarise them with our project so that they feel more comfortable coming along to our events or accessing the services we work with.

Overall, we are still in the early stages of our project, which is constantly growing and changing shape as we respond to the changing environment we work within and the changing needs of researchers. If you want to get our (occasionally cat-related) well-being updates No More Blue Mondays can be found on twitter (@nmbm2014) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/NoMoreBlueMondays). Our website also hosts a list of resources and facilities available online, in Edinburgh and within the institution which is a great place to start if you're not sure where to look for information or help (http://nomorebluemondays.weebly.com/resources.html). I think the most important message we want to propagate is that asking for help, talking about things you find difficult or seeking support is not an admission of personal weakness, rather these conversations are vital in creating a strong research community. If we want our universities to be healthy spaces in years to come then saying you're not OK should always be OK.