

Tackling mental health head on – Bridget Moss



During the Year 7 mental health week, the students engaged in many activities, including team-building tugs of war

I came across mental health journals when I attended a course to become a mental health champion in our school, led by Marilyn Tucknott, an education mental health trainer.

As creator of the journals, she discussed the benefits of enabling young people to express their emotions, feelings and opinions and reflect these in a positive way. It soon became clear to me that working with our new intake before behaviour issues started to materialise could have a significant impact.

Our school is in a deprived area of the North West. Last year we ran a mental health week for Year 7 pupils. This included a couple of assemblies around keeping yourself safe and keeping yourself happy. During the week we focused on heroes and role models, and looked at how we can become the best that we can be. At the end of the last session, we offered a mental health journal to every child. Most took a copy, although some opted out.

Produced by Butterfly Print, the series comprises four personal, paper diaries, each one designed to cater for a different age group.

It starts in Key Stage 1 with *Being Me*, which invites children to make statements about themselves and accept themselves for who they are, before going on to explore themes such as empathy and forgiveness, as well as more difficult areas, such as not feeling guilty about adult behaviours. This is followed in Key Stage 2 by *Understanding Me*, which acts as a mentor for pupils by providing a range of phrases, actions and solutions to everyday scenarios, such as being bullied and supporting friends through difficult days.

Live Out Loud is small enough to fit in a blazer pocket but looks appropriately subversive for its target user – students



The school works hard to ensure students are well balanced by offering a good mix of learning and extra-curricular activities

in key stages 3 and 4 – being ink-stained and filled with graffiti-style artwork. It addresses a range of issues, from making apparently superficial choices to exploring sensitive hopes and fears.

The final journal in the series, *Mindspace* for key stages 4 and 5, asks more searching questions. Like the others, it encourages interaction and creativity. For example, students are invited to

become more self-aware by commenting about themselves and reflecting on their actions. Some pages are quite directive and others are more exploratory and open to interpretation.

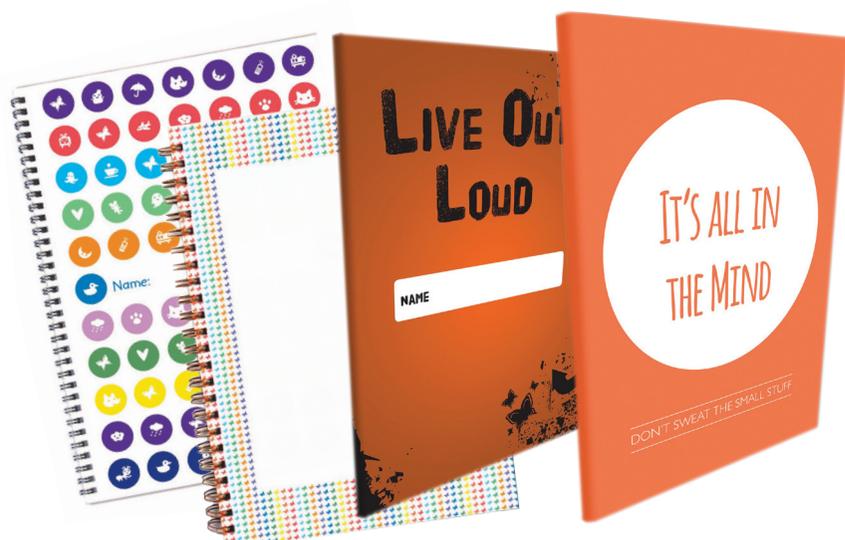
Subtitled *You can always change your mind*, its starting point is that there is much to be angry about, whether this regards personal issues or worldwide concerns, and it guides young people who are feeling overwhelmed, who are dwelling on things that could go wrong and who feel they are on an emotional rollercoaster. Among other things, the student is encouraged to review the usefulness of their current thinking, do a reality check and learn to keep their inner critic quiet.

(As it happens, *Mindspace* was created specifically for Wigan Council. The KS 4-5 journal available nationally – *It's All In The Mind: Don't sweat the small stuff* – has almost identical content.)

Although form teachers talked to students briefly about how they might use the journals and how they might prove helpful, ultimately it was up to the young people to make use of them or not. This was not something we could monitor because these are private diaries. Yet we felt confident that the tone and level of literacy was something all the students could engage with.

Some children with SEN need more emotional support than others, so we made sure that those we thought would benefit in particular from the journals all received one, and we also offered them help on a one-to-one basis. The journals are designed to help them with self-esteem and their own self-image and so hopefully they have been empowering.

Meanwhile, improvements in behaviour are reflected in the data. I



collate a behaviour report at the end of every half term. At the time of writing, the last one I compiled was in late October when I would expect Year 7 incidents to be relatively rare – the children are still finding their feet in a new school. On the other hand, Year 8 students traditionally like to push the boundaries at this time. And yet the current Year 8 has logged fewer behavioural incidents than any other year group, with a tally of 13%. This compares with 14% for Year 7, 31% for Year 9, 18% for Year 10 and 24% for Year 11. In fact, Year 8 had the lowest number of students on any kind of report. Of course, there are lots of other factors

involved, so it is not just down to the journals, but I would say that these have had a positive impact.

We know that early intervention, before behaviour issues emerge, is best. As a school, we need to help young people in the early stages of mental health difficulties. Addressing the root of the problem is far better in the long run than just dealing with the impact, which is behaviour. The journals help with this.

Unfortunately, we did not have the resources to give a journal to every student in Year 7 this year. However, we do still use them, in particular with students in Key Stage 4 who are causing

concern, especially those who don't have someone they can share worries and concerns with.

Single copies of KS1-4 journals, published by Butterfly Print, are £6.99 each, with generous discounts for large orders. www.butterflyprint.co.uk



Bridget Moss is assistant headteacher at Bedford High School near Wigan