



Mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools - Case Study

#SECONDARIESCREATE

1 in 8 children have a diagnosable mental health disorder – that's roughly 3 children in every classroom

1 in 6 young people aged 16-24 has symptoms of a common mental disorder such as depression or an anxiety disorder

Half of all mental health problems manifest by the age of 14, with 75% by age 24

Source: www.youngminds.org.uk

Mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools

The crisis in young people's mental health is real and urgent. According to Young Minds, 1 in 5 young adults has a diagnosable mental health disorder.

We recently visited two secondary schools taking the mental health and wellbeing of their students very seriously. They have set up long-term, on-going projects to help support and de-stigmatise mental health within a school environment.

We look at how Wickham School and Sports College and with four of its feeder primaries in Gateshead, and Carmel College in Darlington, are using creativity to help support their student's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Carmel College

Carmel has a specialist area within the school called the Emmaus Centre, a place that everyone can access. Sarah Thornton is the Emmaus lead and the daily intervention programmes are supported by Diane Walker the student well-being assistant. Emmaus is open to students five days a week and offers a nurturing environment in which students can access support for anxiety, stress, ADHD, autism, loss or bereavement or any other related condition that is impacting on them as people or may affect their academic progress at school.

How long has the current wellness offer been in place?

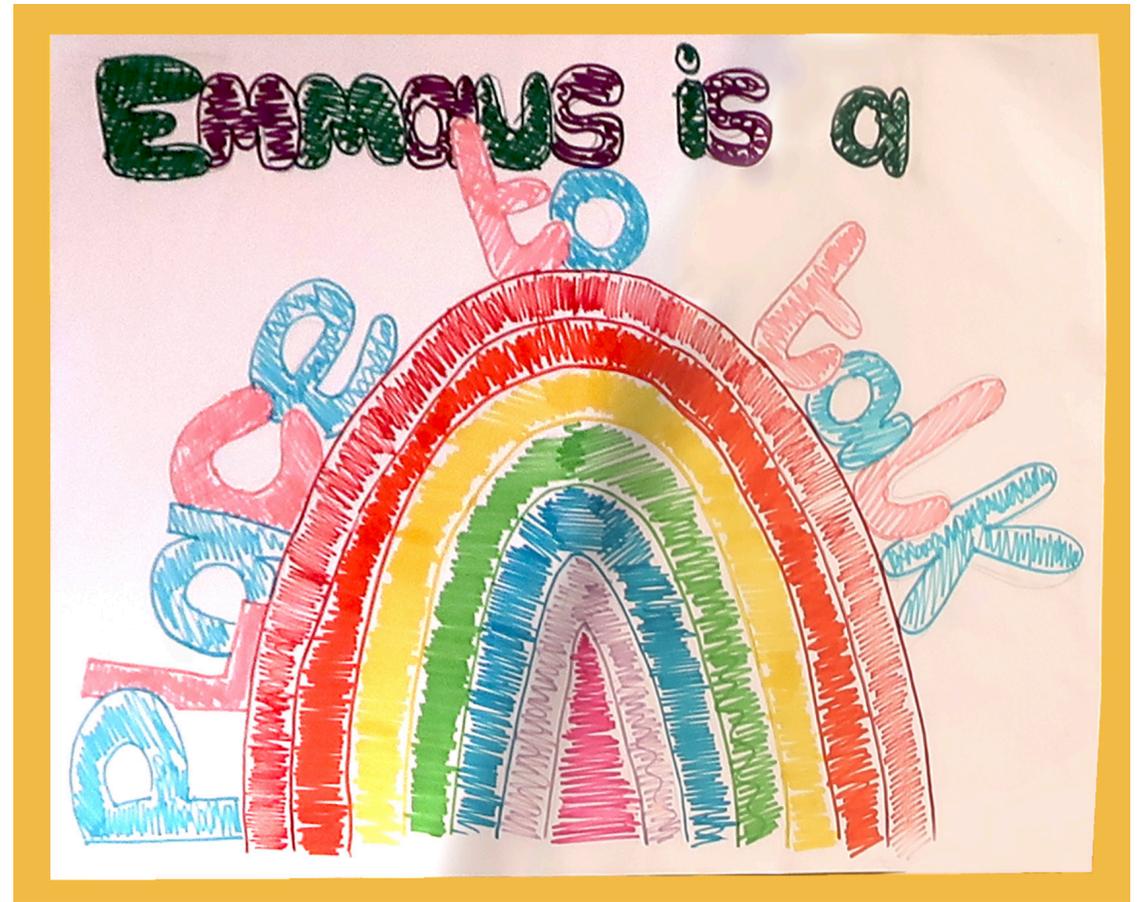
“Emmaus has a long history in Carmel. It has been operating for many years as a core part of the college offer and is at the heart of the College’s strong Christian ethos and values.”

Sara Crawshaw, Assistant Vice Principal

We spoke directly to Diane Walker, student well-being assistant at Carmel College to find out more about how this secondary school is meeting the emotional needs of its students. Here’s what she had to say.

Why do you think mental health and wellness are essential at a secondary school level?

“Now it’s more important than ever, as students are under lots of pressure with exams plus many are dealing with the breakdown of the family unit. All of this brings with it emotional stress and we think it’s vitally important for them to have someone to talk to and that is there to support them. We want to ensure that all of our students emotional as well as academic needs are met.”



Can you talk us through some of the therapy styles you use with the students?

“I try and use creativity as a tool to relax and engage the students and to help give them a focus in our sessions. Often young people find it hard to verbalise their emotions. Creating something visual can be easier and it can feel less intrusive.”

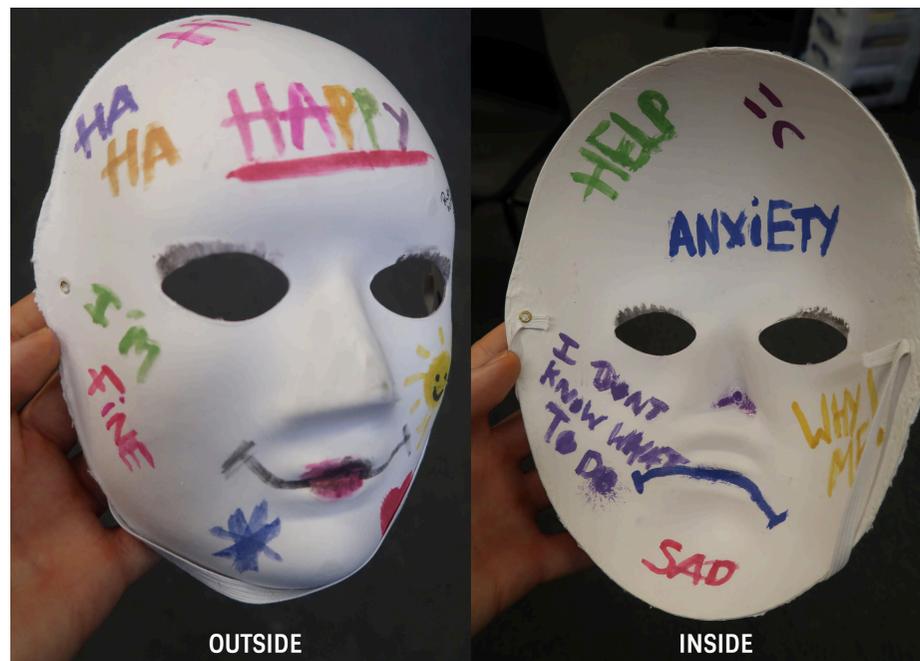
Making masks – stress and anxiety

“I ask students to create a mask that reflects how they portray themselves on the outside and to write on the inside of the mask how they feel on the inside. The masks are a very powerful tool to start discussion and to allow students the opportunity to reflect.”

Creating an elephant – bereavement and loss

“Another creative activity that I do with younger students when discussing bereavement is to create an elephant out of recycled milk cartons, as often the topic of death can be the ‘elephant in the room’. While making the elephant, we will discuss how each student’s loss has made them feel, be that angry, upset, or lonely. Then we discuss how people around us treated us and reacted to our loss and how we would have liked them to respond.”

“I teach them that often people won’t talk to them about loss because they don’t know what to say and we try and understand each other’s emotions and actions.”





Back-to-back drawing - resilience & communication

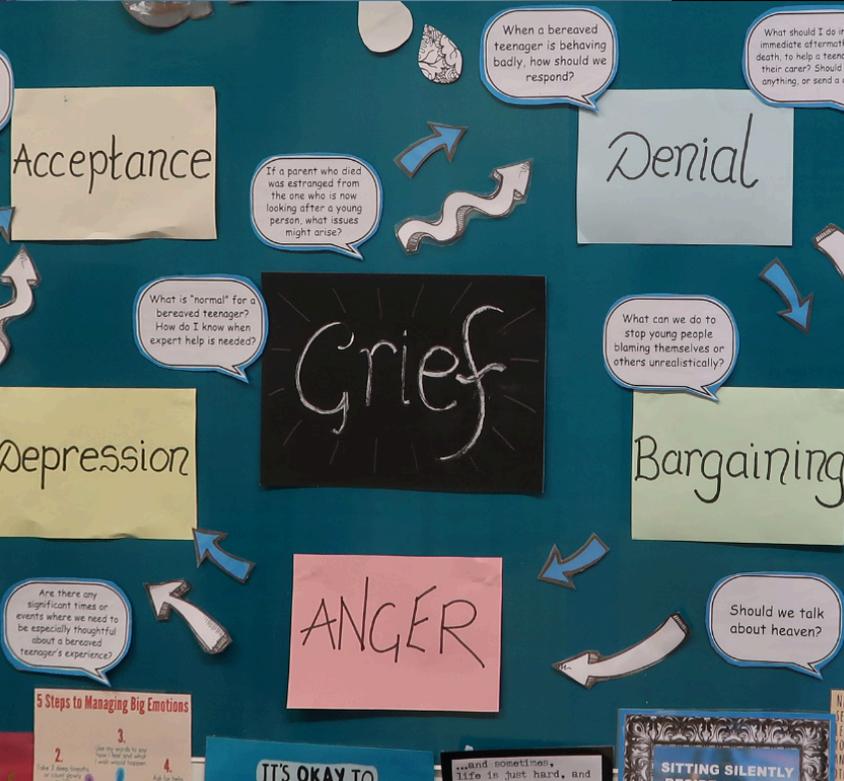
“An activity that I use to develop resilience with all secondary students is our paired back-to-back drawing task. I will put students into pairs and give one of them a sheet of paper with lots of shapes on it. They have to describe this drawing to their partner while sitting back to back, and their partner has to re-create the drawing from the descriptions given.”

“This can be an amusing session, as when they put the drawings side-by-side, often they look completely different. This allows me to talk about how difficult it is to communicate your feelings to someone else. If we can’t describe shapes accurately, imagine what can happen when we try and describe our complex emotions? I can then offer them a toolkit of how to improve their communication skills”

Sandplay - talking tool

“The other main creative tool I use is sand-play. This is where a student will draw in a sand tray; they can move the sand around with their hands to create something. Then I ask them to give their creation a name. One student once called their work ‘frustration hurts.’ Then I can ask them if there is a story that goes with it and again they will often tell you this in the third person. In later sessions they may reveal that the person they were talking about was themselves.”

The college has recently introduced art therapy. It gives children the opportunity to express their emotions through art.



Do you have any feedback from parents that you can share?

“Parents are very appreciative of the work we do as a college to support their children. Parents acknowledge that we treat each child as an individual and support them emotionally, spiritually, morally and academically.”

What do you love most about the work that you do?

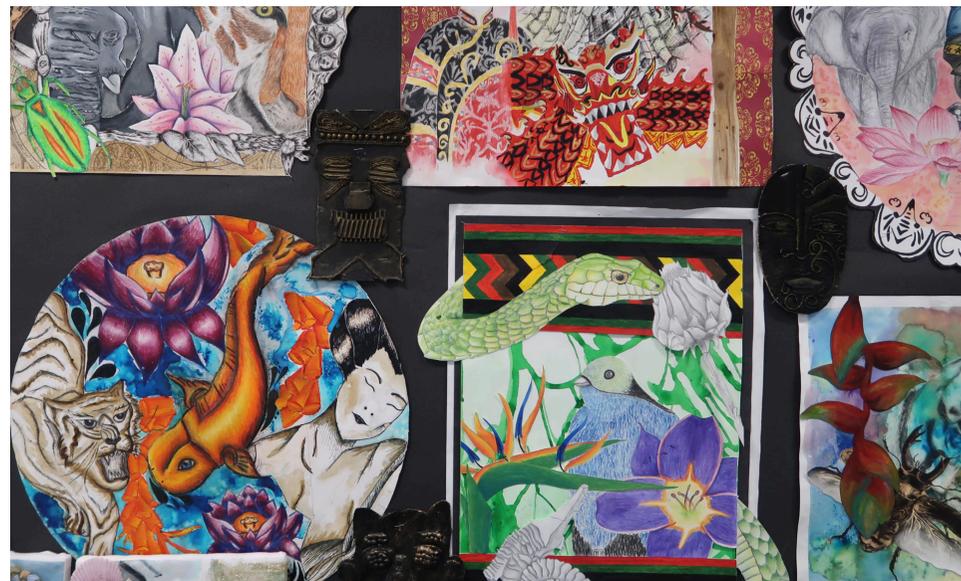
“I think it’s wonderful to be able to see the students grow and develop into confident young people with a strong sense of self, who love and respect themselves and others.”

How have the students responded to your work?

“It takes time to change opinions with regards to significant issues like it being okay to cry, or to feel anxious or to share your feelings, but all of the young people I work with find the sessions really helpful. A student recently said “Thank you for encouraging me to be who I am without judgment.”

How can students access the Emmaus Centre?

“The pastoral team refer students to Emmaus and the centre is open for drop-in at break and lunch times. This enables students to self-refer. We also work in close partnership with other programmes in college and external agencies to make sure students’ needs are fully met and that all work is coordinated and impactful.”



Whickham School and Sports College

What work is currently taking place at Whickham School and Sports College?

HELP is an innovative and inspirational programme that began in 2018 in conjunction with Gateshead Council four partner primary schools. It looks at how exploring self-awareness through arts based creative experiences is both crucial to the growth of successful young learners and supportive of their emotional wellbeing. It explores how the arts has the capacity to build resilience and coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety and the cultural sector has the skills to support that ambition.

We spoke to Steve Haigh, Headteacher, Whickham School and Sports College and asked him how he would describe the HELP program?

“It’s using the creative arts in the broadest sense to positively impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. The idea is that we are creating something that influences locally, regionally and nationally and we understand that this will take years, but we are committed to ensuring that we up-skill teachers to maintain and continue the work we have started.”

Whickham School and Sports College partnered with four primary schools and the Healthy Emotional Lives Programme (HELP)



Pictured left to right: Steve Haigh Headteacher, Whickham School and Sports College, Rebecca O'Neal, Deputy Headteacher at Front Street School, Jane Bowler, Youth Mental Health Nurse, Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust, John Quinn, Digital Artist and Ednie Wilson, Creativity Development Manager at Gateshead Council



We fundamentally believe that happier students feel better about themselves, have a more positive outlook and therefore learn better

Why has Gateshead Council decided to support this programme?

“We fundamentally believe that happier students feel better about themselves, have a more positive outlook and therefore learn better, and that’s why the council supported the school in their bid to raise funds to start this program of change.” *Ednie Wilson, Creativity Development Manager at Gateshead Council*

What has made this project so innovative is that Wickham School and Sports College has seconded Jane Bowler, a youth mental health nurse from Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust and appointed John Quinn a digital artist, working together to set up practices that the teachers and pupils in the schools can use on a long term basis to tackle the issues of mental health being experienced by the school communities.



Why is it important to have a mental health nurse working at the school?

What are the benefits of having a mental health nurse on site?

“I bring knowledge, experience and expertise on mental health in young people into the school. By being on site, I can see a young person face-to-face and quickly assess their current needs and decide what level of intervention is needed. Most of the time, straight forward strategies are offered and the young person can get on with their day without much disruption.” *Jane Bowler, Youth Mental Health Nurse from Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust*

What skills are the teachers currently learning to ensure they can maintain Jane’s work after she leaves?

Jane has given CPD sessions on mental health awareness and crisis management. Staff from the feeder primary schools have also attended training and are now Mental Health First Aiders. Teachers are also learning to deliver anger management workshops and emotional resilience groups.

What has the broader effect on learning been?

“What I love is that by changing the ethos of the school and committing to this program you allow the teachers to explore new ideas and concepts under this banner legitimately. I run a STEAM after school club, and we have decided to spend the next 8-weeks creating a fantastic mindfulness sculpture.” *Matt Horton, Art Faculty, Wickham School and Sports College*



We're running workshops that look at the creative teenage brain and mental health issues.

John a digital artist has been working with students on several creative projects. He is developing a spoken word piece with the year 9 English students, and this work involves John discussing information about how the teenage brain changes. Then he asks students to complete writing tasks, and the final aim of this work will be to create a piece of work that the students can perform.

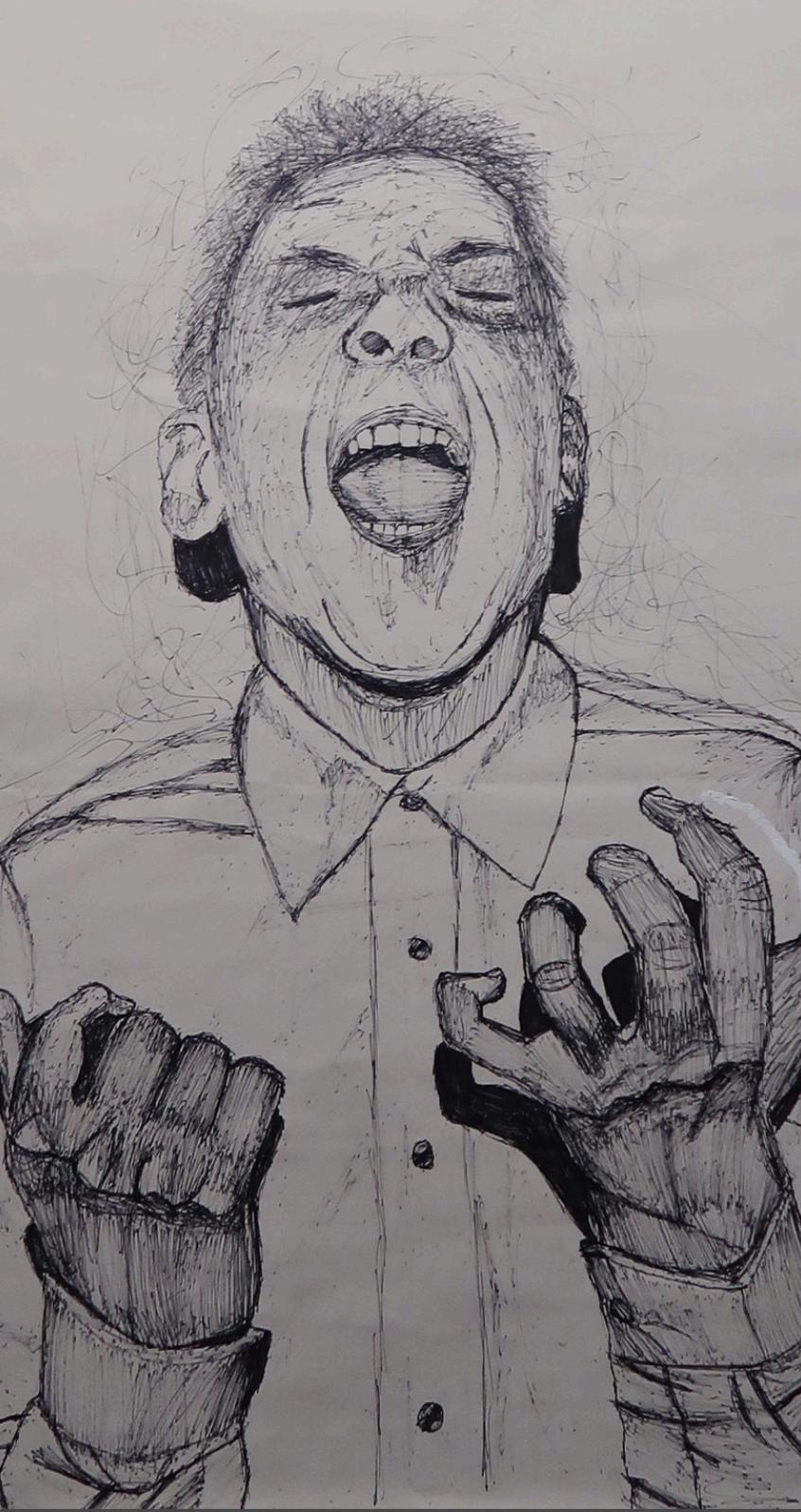
John also completed a project in which he made a film with some year 12 students for World Mental Health Day.

“The film that John and the students made was shown at a mental health conference in Gateshead and the students involved in making the film all presented and spoke about their own issues with anxiety and mental health and it was very powerful, and blew all of the 150 delegates away.” *Steve Haigh, Headteacher, Wickham School and Sports College*

John how would you describe your role?

“I am the artist in residence across all of the schools and my job is to offer creative approaches to managing stress and mindfulness with staff and pupils. I'm working on promoting a deeper sense of self with the students and I've been running workshops that look at the creative teenage brain and mental health issues.”

“ am also working on creating an emotional tool kit that the primary feeder schools can use on a long term basis with Rebecca O'Neal, deputy headteacher at Front Street School shared this lovely comment from one of her pupils 'I'm going to put all of these things in my box and when I'm sad I will get my tool kit out and use them.”



We are already seeing the huge impact that a focus on mental health and wellbeing can have

We spoke to several Year 12 students about their thoughts of the program and this is what they shared;

“This year we have to do everything, we have jobs, exams, you learn to drive, it’s hard to shut off and relax. So having the extra support in school and being able to talk about stuff is good.”
Year 12 student, Wickham School and Sports College

“I haven’t suffered from anxiety but in a discussion, one person spoke about how they felt and how social media stresses them out, and it made me think about what I say to people online”
Year 12 student, Wickham School and Sports College

Can you share any positive stories that have arisen from the program so far?

“There was a student who I was working with but they were struggling to open up, however they showed a love of art, so John came in and has been working on a 1-1 basis with the person in question and slowly they have started to open up. Their artwork has also led to a greater discussion, and John has now been able to build a relationship of trust with that person.” *Jane Bowler, Youth Mental Health Nurse from Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust*

Although both schools have different approaches they are both already seeing the huge impact that a focus on mental health and wellbeing can have. If you would like to find out more about these innovative approaches, please feel free to contact Culture Bridge North East, and we can put you in touch with the faculty at each of the schools.



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