

## **Stay Mentally Healthy (SMH) Initiative in Education**

An educator is moved to change the face of mental health provision in education.

Dr. Mariko Howard-Kishi shares her experience of integrating the Stay Mentally Healthy (SMH) initiative into her educational setting, why she now volunteers for the SEJ organisation and is a passionate advocate of the SMH initiatives.

“As an educator at a university, it has become very clear to me that the current mental health provisions offered by the educational institutions are no longer fit for purpose, not because of any lack of trying on their part. But because the waiting times are too long, the criteria to be met are too hard and sadly, for some, it is too late. Many students feel unable or reluctant to ask for help due to stigma, but equally, they wish to learn how to help themselves. Unfortunately, the services are offered as an intervention when the mental health crisis has set in and when the demand is sky-high and limited in scope. What students need are preventative measures that they can learn as part of their academic life skills, embedded into the curriculum. What is needed is a comprehensive mental health strategy, such as the ‘Stay Mentally Healthy’ (SMH) initiative, where they can learn how to stay mentally healthy in a structured, practical manner.

I have conducted research in collaboration with the SEJ organisation to ascertain the real impact of the SEJ Process Training (which is the cornerstone of the SMH initiatives) on students across various cohorts and degree courses in the last 4 years. The results are clear: the SEJ Process works in all areas of their lives, with an immediate and effective outcome in dealing with their stressful thoughts and emotions, enabling them all to find their own empowering solutions and reach their full potential. You can read further details of our research on <https://www.thesej.co.uk/research>.

Not only the students, but also the staff have benefitted from incorporating the SEJ Process training at my university, as a CPD course to learn how we, too, can learn to stay mentally healthy and reach our full potential. Like students, we did not have any easily applicable training or support in managing our own mental health, let alone how to support students when they have a crisis. I lost two students to suicide, and I had no support at the time from my work. I sought to find my own solution and found the SEJ Process training and support valuable and empowering. For one of my colleagues, however, the experience of losing a student to suicide was too much, and they left the job they loved, unable to cope. They did not have access to the SEJ Process or services at that time, I wonder if the outcome would have been different if they had?

One of the key in the SMH initiatives, provided in the setting’s own SMH Hub, is having an onsite SEJ Consultant who can give immediate and timely support and help to students and staff whether they have learnt the SEJ Process or not. They are trained to enable each person to find their own solution to stay mentally healthy with the issues at hand in a structured and empowering way and offer referrals to the educational setting services if needed. The turnaround to reach empowerment happens in moments with the SEJ Process therefore no lengthy, nor potential ongoing sessions are needed. This, in turn, addresses issues with backlogged services; as when the SEJ Process is integrated into the curriculum and an onsite SEJ Consultant is available, the backlog overtime comes to a state of ease.

In addition, having a trained SEJ Consultant onsite who can support those feeling suicidal, where they can safely express that 'they are feeling suicidal', is truly lifesaving. I can't help but wonder if I would have been able to support the two students I lost, if I had been trained to assist them at the time.

I have also seen how families are often excluded, something that, unfortunately, we see all too often in the media. I was told by a friend of one of my students that the family had lost two sons to suicide, and they felt left out and had not been supported or involved. I hear families/parents often talk about how they feel excluded when it comes to their children's (whatever their age) state of mental health, particularly during crisis, many times due to GDPR cited as a reason. This is not an acceptable state of affairs; we must focus on supporting everyone in every educational community to stay mentally healthy, whether they are students, educators/staff or families with an easily accessible and effective mental wellbeing provision such as the SMH initiatives that are offered.

It is as simple as 'sharing the good news' of how easily we can all learn to stay mentally healthy, as I am doing here. I have been a long-time passionate advocate of the SEJ Process and integrating it into an educational setting because I have seen the successful outcome not just for students but for everyone. Mental Health is a modern pandemic that affects every member of our society. I am a passionate and keen advocate because I want to change the face of mental health provision for everyone. I believe strongly that knowing how to stay mentally healthy should be available to everyone, enabling all of us to live long and happy lives, no matter what our background or circumstances."

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