Description

Professional Midwifery Advocate (PMA) Student Midwife Wellbeing Day

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Summary

Introducing ideas to manage the sometimes tricky and stressful working environments within today's maternity services, is a proactive measure towards nourishing the mental health and wellbeing of student midwives. The academic Professional Midwifery Advocate (PMA) platform can be used to increase awareness about the importance of managing one's health and wellbeing. Instilling this mindset, early in the career pathway, is an important aspect towards increasing retention, reducing burnout, improving job satisfaction and ultimately enlightening the outcomes for women and birthing people.[1]

Introduction



Barbara Macdonald

As a midwife, an academic PMA and educator, I am passionate about psychological support for women, as well as staff and students. There is much evidence to demonstrate the increased levels of stress and burnout affecting midwives[2] and to further detriment, often self-compassion is not fostered in oneself.[3] We are seeing decreasing numbers of applicants to midwifery programmes (a 20% decline)[4] demonstrating that the midwifery profession is becoming a less attractive career option. Unsurprising, as quite frequently there is a negative narrative within the media and it can be challenging to find ways to share a positive mindset and advocate amidst the high levels of burnout. The reality surrounding maternity services in the 21st century can be somewhat disheartening for those within the profession and whilst overall, training places are filling there is awareness that student midwives also consider leaving during their training.[5] Therefore, it is crucial to consider ways to best support the current generation in their navigation to a most wonderful career and how to keep them when they get there! As such, the idea of a student wellbeing day was born, to include the promotion of self-compassion, focusing on mind and body wellbeing.

Navigation of the academic PMA for student support

Through adopting the A-EQUIP model,[6] it is beneficial that PMAs demonstrate a compassionate approach in their support for student midwives.[7] The compassionate leadership approach, adopted by PMA's, models' the behaviour which should reinforce our future midwives and leaders[8] considerations and expectations, as part of their journey to becoming a midwife. Taking a support-focused approach towards improved working environments and cultures within the workplace, will benefit sustainability and resilience within the profession.[9]

It was anticipated that a blended approach for facilitation of learning, through external speakers and group activities, would offer both enjoyment and engagement. The academic PMA offers space for the student voice. Recognising, not only do students midwives deal with the pressures of working in a challenging NHS environment, but some also struggle with the transition to university life and anticipated social connections. Living through a more virtual and technological lens affects mental wellbeing and positive experiences for students should be a top priority for educators. Listening to the student's experience, hearing their needs and relating that to targeted support with wellbeing aims in the educational arena, demonstrates a compassionate approach to the curriculum for the growing midwifery workforce.[10] The academic PMA role lends itself to supporting students holistically, providing the opportunity for face-to-face connection whilst learning and reflecting.[7] The wider midwifery team also participated in the development of ideas for the day and supported the event.



Students in attendance on the day

Application of the academic PMA role and focus for the day

In a world that often demands perfection and relentless productivity, it's fundamental to pause and prioritise mental and

emotional well-being.[11] The day incorporated three key principles of self-compassion to support both personal and academic goals. Firstly, to consider the connection between physical and emotional health. Taking care of our bodies is not a matter of vanity but a fundamental act of self-compassion.[12] Whether it's nourishing ourselves with nutritious food, engaging in regular exercise, or ensuring we get enough rest, it is well known that prioritising physical well-being is a foundation for emotional enlightenment.

Secondly, mindfulness can be a powerful tool for developing self-compassion.[13] During life's chaos, mindfulness invites us to anchor ourselves in the present moment, free from judgment or attachment. Through practices like meditation, deep breathing, or simply pausing to appreciate a moment, we can foster a sense of inner calm and compassion towards ourselves.

And… thirdly, embracing the liberating truth that imperfection is not only acceptable, but a natural part of the human experience. Give oneself permission to be imperfect. Recognise that mistakes, setbacks, and failures are not reflections of worth but opportunities for growth and learning. By embracing flaws with kindness and understanding, freedom can be found from the burden of unrealistic expectations and self-compassion can be nurtured.[12]

The wellbeing day was added to the curriculum timetable, at a time when all students had the opportunity to attend and take advantage of peer connection between cohorts and year groups. The first part of the day encompassed external speakers, delivering information directly related to 'self-compassion' and learning through self-reflection. The use of reflection within learning is meaningful to increase personal growth in the focused themes of the day and especially for those in higher education.[14] These included; emotional freedom techniques, ways to navigate the challenges within the midwifery profession and considering how to adopt healthy interpersonal dynamics in relationships with others. During this there was a break and a lunch period followed, where students could access information about support for health and wellbeing available within the university. All4maternity held a stand offering advice, support, journals and wellbeing freebies! In the afternoon the students moved around a variety of short 20 minute 'taster' sessions. These were group activities of no more than 28 students, randomly mixed cohorts and years, students chose a small group of friends within that, for familiarity. Activities were relevant to health and wellbeing and included, aromatherapy hand massage, compassion circles, mindfulness, yoga, a compassionate practice workshop and a breakout room with music, colouring and henna. The day concluded all together with a round-up, evaluation and a free raffle (prizes related to health and wellbeing).



Students at the All4maternity stand meeting Sheena Byrom

Evaluation and critical review

Student's feedback was overwhelmingly positive, praising the extra level of support demonstrated from the academic team and the external speakers on the day. All students felt they had learnt something new from having attended the day and reported an improvement in personal wellbeing. Students felt valued and appreciated, an outcome that had been anticipated in light of the theme of the day and the efforts to run such an event. They especially enjoyed mixing between different cohorts and year groups as well as the opportunity to 'get to know' the academic team members outside of the classroom environment. Students were offered the opportunity to be involved in the planning/delivery of the day, however there was minimal engagement. It would have been beneficial to have collaborated in the planning, to co-create this day and it is hoped that students will play a larger part in the planning and organisation of such an event in the future. Options to encourage this engagement are being considered by the academic team.

Conclusion

This idea was inspired by other fabulous, caring midwives and PMA's. Brought to life with the invaluable help of a fantastic team of midwives and nurses. It evaluated extremely positively, demonstrating the benefit from such provision and was a joy to create and participate in. It was an opportunity for the academic team to work in tandem and has generated new ideas for future events. This supportive approach also directly links to several aspects within the Safe Learning Environment Charter[15] soon to be launched. So, run with your ideas, work together with others that bring out the best in you and be sure to share your work widely to inspire others in future endeavours!

Considerations

1. Do you need to be a PMA to plan such an event?
2. Who could support you in your endeavours to offer extra support to student midwives?
3. What tools can you use to help develop an idea?

Acknowledgement

Thank you to all attendees who gave permission to use their photo for promotion of the event.

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1. All4Maternity Blog

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1. PMA
2. professional midwifery advocate

Date Created
9th July 2024