



Interview with Dr Lee Allen

Dr Lee Allen is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne, where she is the Mental Health Subject Coordinator to the Doctor of Medicine. She is a Consultant Psychiatrist at Austin Health, in the Youth Early Psychosis Service and Director of Training of the Victorian Northern Region, for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists.

From a medical perspective, what is “mental health”?

Broadly, it's part of the overall health of the individual, there's no health without mental health. And within the concept of mental health, this can cover a broad range of experiences from mental illness at one end of the spectrum to a very positive mental wellbeing at the other and I suppose in between areas where people may have some mental health difficulties.

What effect can psychological distress have on students' learning?

It can affect someone's mood state, so they may with this have impact on their energy levels, and with that an impact on their capacity to concentrate, their capacity to be motivated, their capacity to make a decision. So if these things are impaired this can significantly impact on their planning, organisation, belief in themselves or in their ability to put down a reasonable answer, and so can impact significantly on not just attendance at university but also completion of assessment tasks. And yet for some people with mental health problems it may affect more of their thinking processes, so that may be significantly impaired, which may make comprehension very difficult, or expression of their thinking, so that that can become muddled. For others can be difficulties with impulse control and so being much more erratic in their behaviour or more disinhibited, so has a period of time where they are not really putting their best potential forward in being able to complete assessment tasks.

I think it's really important to try and reach out to the students in those situations because the suffering they are going through isn't something they've brought on themselves, it's being overwhelmed with the stresses that are in front of them at that time.

You would have to think a significant number wouldn't be achieving their full potential and I suppose that's why we are wanting to think how we can better support them in the university setting to help them achieve the potential that they have when they come into the university.

Dr. Lee Allen

Psychiatrist and educator
Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne