



CARE + CONNECT

Delivering Mental Health Supports in Higher Education Institutions across Europe

The Human Side of Student Mental Health

When a student is struggling, the first person they tell is rarely a counsellor. It is more likely a classmate who noticed something was off, a peer who asked the right question at the right moment, or a colleague who made it feel safe to say "I'm not doing well." These informal moments of human connection are not incidental to mental health support, they are often where it begins.

The CONNECT programme was designed with this reality at its centre.

Not therapists. Something equally important

There is a temptation, when designing mental health programmes, to focus exclusively on professional intervention. But counselling services are stretched, waiting times are long, and many students will never seek formal help because the barrier feels too high. CONNECT takes a different approach. Rather than asking peers and staff to do something they are not trained for, it equips them to do something they are uniquely positioned for: to be present, to listen well, and to recognise when someone needs more support than a conversation can provide. Research consistently shows that early, informal support can be the difference between a student getting help and a student quietly withdrawing.

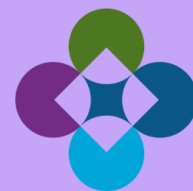
What the training involves

CONNECT runs across two streams. The Student-to-Student stream equips students with three core skills through structured workshops: active listening, empathy in practice, and recognising early signs of emotional distress. The Professional-to-Professional stream offers a more intensive experience for academic and support staff.

Both streams are grounded in clear boundaries. Participants are not being asked to become first responders or carry responsibility for their peers' mental health. They are shown how to have a difficult conversation safely, and given a clear understanding of when and how to direct someone toward professional support.



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A culture shift, not just a training programme

What CONNECT is ultimately working toward is something harder to measure but more durable than a set of workshop outcomes. It is a shift in campus culture, one where checking in on a colleague is normal, where noticing distress is not something people feel they should ignore, and where knowing how to respond is considered a basic part of being part of an academic community.

This kind of culture does not emerge from a single training session. It requires consistent reinforcement, institutional support, and the sense that these values are embedded rather than bolted on. CONNECT is designed with this in mind, the workshops are structured to build on each other, the skills are practical and immediately applicable, and the materials will be available as open educational resources so that any university can integrate them into their own induction or staff development programmes.

The bigger picture

Across the six countries involved in CARE + CONNECT, the conversations about what universities owe their students are shifting. There is growing recognition that academic achievement and mental wellbeing are not separate concerns, that a student who is not coping is a student who cannot learn, and that institutions have both a responsibility and an opportunity to respond.

CONNECT is one part of that response. Alongside the CARE digital platform, it represents a model of support that is layered, realistic, and built to last. One that trusts both technology and human connection to do what each does best.



Visit us at careandconnect.eu



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