



The psychologist was part of a pioneering project aimed at helping young people, their families and their teachers. She speaks to Danielle Lett

DR BETH MOSLEY MBE: *Tackling teen mental health in Suffolk*

Established in 1890, the New Year Honours List recognises some of the nation's biggest, best and brightest - shining a well-deserved light on those who have dedicated their time to serving and helping the UK.

One of the most recent recipients of this revered accolade is Bury St Edmunds-based clinical psychologist Dr Beth Mosley, who has spent the last 17 years working in the field of mental health, focussing on children and teenagers.

Originally from Bristol, Beth and her family moved to Suffolk when she was nine, and she knew early on she wanted to pursue a career in psychology. "I grew up in quite a working class family, no one had been to university before I had," she says.

After finishing her studies at King Edward IV in Bury St Edmunds, and after a year living in America, Beth made her way to Portsmouth University where she studied for an undergraduate degree in psychology followed by a PhD in forensic psychology, with a focus on eyewitness testimony.

"After that, I became a research associate for a year and tutored students who would come to me with their challenges and problems. During that time, I realised I wanted the majority of my work to focus on helping young people who are struggling. I've always had an interest in children and young people, and knew very early on I wanted to work with them," she explains.

Shortly after, Beth was successful in getting on the clinical psychology doctorate programme and in the following three years, completed this training and became a clinical psychologist in 2005.

After starting a family in the south of England, she moved back to the east and joined the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust (NSFT) in 2015, working as a clinical psychologist.

But it wasn't until a few years later, in 2018, that she happened to stumble across the perfect role for her.

"I was working at the Bury St Edmunds child and adolescent mental health service, covering a maternity locum post when my contract was coming to an end. But I saw an article in the local paper advertising a job listing, asking for clinical psychologist," she explains.

This job came with a twist. Rather than working in a more clinical setting, it was based at a large secondary school. Thurston Community College, to be precise.

"I was immediately interested, as it looked like a very different environment compared to where I'd worked throughout my career previously. I've been based in hospitals and medical settings, so the idea of working in a school, where young people are learning, seemed really appealing."

Thurston Community College was actually the first school in the

country to recruit a full-time clinical psychologist to support both its students, as well as help its staff manage mental health difficulties.

After attending the interview and securing the job, Beth made her way to the school and began her post. "Looking back on it, it was such an amazing opportunity, to become part of the school's community and embed mental health and wellbeing into everything the school was doing. I was working not just with the students but with staff and parents too," she says.

"It was an unusual situation, but that's what attracted a lot of attention. It made sense to have a mental health professional working in the school, as it's where young people spend a lot of their time, and it's where difficulties are often identified. With 50% of mental health disorders in adulthood having started before the age of 15, the school years are critical to identifying young people who may be struggling and also supporting and teaching young people to build good mental health.

"Sometimes the challenges and pressures of school can create difficulties for young people - but we can help leaders in schools think about how they structure the school, the language they use, and how they talk about mental health."

Beth, who says she essentially became "part of the school's furniture", had her own office and would see around 60 students a week.

"It was a real mix of services, but I was available to both staff and students. I used to run my own alternative lessons, teaching students who had been identified as struggling with anxiety. I'd also support the leadership teams with how they ran the school. Mental health services are difficult to access. The pastoral care teams in schools are doing a lot of work, looking after students, so I would support them and help them make sense of what young people are going through. I'd also run assemblies," she says.

Teenagers, who can be notoriously hard to get to open up, were surprisingly receptive, according to Beth, as she explains: "I actually made a film with students about this, where we discussed what they found positive about having me there. So many of them said just being able to go along to my office on site and access that support made them feel really valued as young people - and being in a familiar environment made it easier to ask for help.

"They also said going to a clinic can make them feel like there's something wrong with them, but having me there in their own school made them feel like there wasn't necessarily wrong with them, just that they needed

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some extra support. The biggest thing for me is to ensure young people can get the right help they need at the right time, and that it's easy to access," she says, adding that it's a real challenge.

One in six children aged five to 16 are identified as having a mental health problem (that's 1,576,758 children in the UK). And only a third of these are receiving the appropriate help at the right age.

During her time at Thurston College, Beth noticed a number of factors affecting young people in today's world - many of them proving to be quite eye-opening.

"When I worked in the school, I noticed the sheer volume of young people experiencing adversity in their lives. I think that a lot of young people are managing an awful lot of challenges, and they just need that reassurance, and that the feelings and distress they're experiencing are normal based on the circumstances. They're experiencing distress based on being human, and that talking with supportive adults is the best way of helping - rather than bottling it up and feeling the pressure to fit in and be perfect.

"What really struck me when I met with the young people, sometimes I only met with them once, is they'd tell me their stories and they'd be anxious that there was something wrong with them. But I'd always be clear with them, and explain there's nothing wrong with them. Often, young people feel they have failed, but I reminded them how resilient and strong they are as they were still managing to go to school every day among over things. A lot of the time, it was enough for them to have their story heard by someone like me who could reassure them and tell them that the way they're feeling is natural."

As time went on, social media repeatedly came up. "It's really interesting because when I spoke to the students about social media, they were adamant it wasn't the culprit for a lot of their mental health difficulties. While it does enable them to connect with others, I do think that social media contributes to their sense of wellbeing," she says.

"I think there's a certain pressure on young people to conform to being, looking, or behaving a certain way, and they don't get much downtime away from those influences through their phone. It adds a lot of increased pressure and anxiety - whether it's a fear of missing out, or whether or not they fit in."

But while social media has its drawbacks, Beth explains it also has its positives - especially for those living in this part of the world. "Suffolk is quite isolated and rural, and a lot of young people I work with face diversity issues. For instance, those in the LGBTQ+ community, have said the opportunity to link with other young people across the world through social media has been immensely helpful for them, as they've often felt isolated with their identity. There are definitely plusses and minuses with social

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Dr Beth with some of her students at Thurston Community College



media, and it's all about getting that balance."

As Beth spent her days at Thurston, she was getting to the core of these issues, and began to understand more about what it is like to be a young person in the 21st century.

But in early 2020, the pandemic hit, and brought with it a new wave of issues.

Children across the world were taken out of the classroom to help curb the spread of Covid, and instead continued their studies from home.

Unable to see her teenagers face to face, Beth developed a series of methods that allowed young people (and their parents) to still get the help they needed during such an uncertain time.

"All of a sudden, parents had this newfound pressure - not only did they have to parent, but they also had to be teachers and friends to their children. So my team and I set up a virtual parenting programme which they could access through Eventbrite. This allowed them to find out more about how they could help young people, especially when it came to things like anxiety.

"A lot of parents were struggling with anxiety themselves, and

noticed their kids were, too."

Beth's online workshops proved to be a great success - and saw nearly 17,000 parents and caregivers attend. "They were a real lifeline for a lot of families," she adds.

When schools returned to in-classroom teaching, Beth went straight back to supporting students on an in-person basis, helping them come to grips with the ongoing global pandemic.

"We did lots of work helping them to make sense of how they might be feeling about returning to school. We tried our best to make sure that the support the young people and their parents needed was easily accessible."

The last two years have had an undeniable impact on everyone's mental health, as reflected in a 77% increase in referrals to specialist mental health services in the last year. This has further inspired Beth to ensure young people can get the help they need before it's too late.

"Right now, I'm the consultant clinical psychologist and lead for the early intervention and outreach part of mental health services for young people, and we're currently looking at transforming services so we can



make sure children and teenagers can have easier access to support. We're planning to do more direct work in the community to help adults and other people who are in the lives of young people, to help support them - whether that's schools, youth groups and parents, or just anyone who might have contact with adolescents. "We're also trying to encourage young people to support their peers with their mental health. So we've started filming TikToks and making Instagrams, to make sure all of the credible information is easily available. We essentially want to get closer to the ground, so people don't have to wait a long time for specialist services."

All of the work Beth has done, and continues to do, certainly hasn't gone unnoticed, as she made the 2022 New Year's Honours List - recently collecting her medal at an investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace with her 13-year-old daughter by her side.

"I had no idea at all, it was such a shock. I was so staggered and surprised - but also very humbled. I felt overwhelmed, but it's not just me - it's a representation of what my team has been doing.

"I'm a single parent of three children and a woman from a working class background, and I want my children to see what they can do in life, regardless of where they have come from. It was such an honour to be able to take my daughter with me, as my kids put up with me and the crazy hours I work supporting everyone else's kids," she says.

With an MBE to her name, what's next for the psychologist? Besides still working fulltime for NSFT, Beth is currently writing a book for parents, which she describes as a simple guide to help them better understand their children's mental health and how to support them navigate the challenges of growing up in the current climate.

"I have also just become the trustee of a charity in Suffolk called The Nest, which is going to provide young people struggling with their mental health time on a farm, allowing them to have a sense of belonging and become part of a community. It will also allow them to develop their skills around animal care, agriculture, and husbandry as well as mental health," she explains.

TOP RIGHT:
Dr Beth at her investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace earlier this month

LEFT:
Beth on her two sons on holiday

Pictures:
DR BETH MOSLEY

