



Studying can be quite stressful. Time and performance pressure, financial worries, fears about the future – and on top of that, the normal madness of everyday life. In these cases, the Psychotherapeutic Counselling Centre of the Studierendenwerk can be a useful place to turn to. We talked to Stefan Balz, the head of the PCC, about how counselling works.

Mang: Time for a new episode of our My–StuWe podcast. I’m Philipp, press spokesperson for the Student Union, and today we’d like to introduce you to the counselling department. I know from my own experience – and anyone who has studied will be able to confirm it – studying can be quite stressful. Time and performance pressures, financial worries and fears about the future – and then there’s the normal madness of everyday life. It’s easy to fall into a hole. Although many people know the feeling, very few want to talk openly about it. Social prejudices are often too great and prevent people from seeking help. But why exactly that is so important is what we’ll be explaining in today’s episode. The PCC of the Studierendenwerk is the right place to go in such cases. Stefan Balz, the head of the centre, explains how it all works and I would like to welcome him warmly.

Hello Mr Balz, thank you for being with us today. Yes, there is no end to the crises at the moment. The Corona pandemic, the war in Ukraine and then the rising costs in almost all areas of life. You have a lot to do at PCC at the moment, don’t you?

Balz: Yes, that is indeed the case at the moment. During the first weeks of the winter semester, we actually have a peak in demand every year in terms of registrations, which unfortunately always has a somewhat negative effect on the waiting times for an initial interview.

Mang: I’m sure it’s not just me. When I first heard the abbreviation PCC, I had relatively little idea what it meant. So let’s start from the beginning. What do these three letters stand for and what is your institution supposed to do?

Balz: Yes, PCC stands for psychotherapeutic counselling

centre. Our institution has been around since 1971, for a good 50 years. And then, as now, the purpose was to provide psychological support for students in the life phase of their studies. Our counselling services are not limited to study–related topics, but students can and do come to us with all kinds of topics and counselling needs. The goal is to reduce psychological stress, to improve the ability to act and, indirectly and in the longer term, to promote academic success and improve personal resilience.

Mang: OK, so you are performing a very important task. The Studierendenwerk looks after more than 50.000 students at very different study locations – of course, as the head of the institution, you can’t look after all of them personally or help them yourself. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about it. How have you set up your staff in order to meet the demand?

Balz: We look after students at nine university locations and have two counselling centres in Tübingen and Hohenheim, which are the two largest university locations with one university each. And there are a total of six counsellors working there, two full–time, four part–time. And at the two own counselling centres in Tübingen and Hohenheim, we counseled almost 900 students last year, and at the other, smaller university locations, we have cooperative agreements. This means that we have signed contracts with counselling centres run by other organisations, where we cover the costs within a certain framework, namely for up to four sessions.

Mang: Now we know the set–up. Let’s talk about the counselling process next. Let’s go through it together. Everything usually starts with the registration for counselling. What do students have to consider here? What options do I have to make initial contact with the PCC?

Balz: Registration is possible in three ways. You can register in person at the secretariat by simply dropping by – during opening hours Monday to Thursday in the morning. Of course, you can also call the secretary's office, then make an appointment in person on the phone and, most recently, you can also make an appointment online for initial consultations via our website. This is already being used very, very actively and we now make considerably more than half of the initial consultations online.

Mang: Good, so now I have made my appointment with the PCC. And yes, now it comes to my first counselling appointment. Probably all of us have a stereotypical image of counselling in our minds. Often you imagine a therapist's couch on which you lie and pour your heart out to someone. Let's be honest: Is that really how it works? Or how can we imagine counselling in the PCC?

Balz: No, we really don't have it that cosy. The couch still exists in analytical psychotherapy, but we have more of an office character. You sit opposite each other or, in the meantime, you sit opposite each other on the screen. Many conversations are now, or still are, video-based.

Mang: You just mentioned it. I would like to talk a bit more about this somewhat newer instrument, namely digital counselling. This emerged from the Corona pandemic. How would you evaluate this new form of counselling now? Will it also be something that the Studierendenwerk will continue to work with?

Balz: We started video counselling during the pandemic, when we had to close the counselling centre for personal counselling for reasons of infection control. And a big advantage is actually the flexibility of the location. You are no longer bound to go somewhere. That is definitely something that students appreciate very much, something that we ourselves have learned to appreciate as counsellors. Of course, some impressions are missing. When you don't actually have someone physically sitting opposite you. But on the other hand, it is sometimes the case that impressions are almost more vivid. For example, when someone is sitting opposite you at the computer, at the desk, where they have their difficulties or have not been able to write their homework for weeks or months. So that is also an additional impression. And yes, we think it also deserves special respect that someone lets you look in on them virtually at home, so to speak, and share somewhere. For us, video counselling has proven very successful.

Mang: So advantages and disadvantages of this instrument. Next, I would like to talk a little about the reasons for counselling. As I said at the beginning, studying can be quite stressful. The pressure to perform, the stress of learning, yes, you have fears about the future. That has always been part of it somehow. But at the moment, one crisis is somehow following the next. First came the Corona pandemic, then the war in Ukraine and with it, somehow, worries about rising living costs in all areas. How are the students doing with that? Are these really the concerns that students are dealing with at the moment? Or are they the usual worries?

Balz: Actually, we have always had the same most frequent reasons for counselling for years. Depressive moods are usually at the top of the list, followed by general anxiety, problems with coping with stress, exhaustion, self-esteem problems and, last but not least, work disorders. The order of these causes changes from year to year. But these are always the top items when it comes to why someone asks for counselling. The Corona pandemic was not perceived by most people as very threatening for themselves, but rather for others in their environment: parents or other close people. But what was very stressful for many were of course the restrictions that went hand in hand with it, especially in the social sphere, where many things were not possible and where many people actually found it difficult to make social connections in their studies, especially if they started studying under Corona conditions. The topic of the Ukraine war. This is another issue that does not affect many people directly, but indirectly. We all notice that life is getting more expensive. Overall, it is also more of a feeling that the world is somehow coming apart at the seams, that everything is getting crazier and crazier. Of course, that's a real headache for many people.

Mang: So the challenges are also increasing in their field. Now it's like admitting problems to yourself. That is always difficult. And in some cases I might even manage to overcome challenges myself with the help of my friends and family. But how is it, at what point do I actually notice, at what point should I perhaps seek professional help?

Balz: Yes, if you feel a strong psychological burden over a longer period of time, if you can no longer manage your everyday life properly and if the subjective suffering is also high. These are actually all criteria where it seems to make sense to seek professional help, especially when these complaints occur repeatedly. What

we often have with depressive complaints is that the people affected have recurrent depressive episodes. And if this is a recurring problem, then it is of course important to take care of it.

Mang: Some students are perhaps ashamed to seek help in such an emergency situation. There is certainly always a certain social pressure that it is perhaps not so respectable to seek help. The issue of confidentiality plays a role. There are certainly many reasons why some students doubt professional counselling. How do you personally feel about these obstacles? Or how do you see it? What would you say to students who have such doubts?

Balz: That's true. So seeking professional help is always accompanied by a certain admission to oneself that one is no longer coping well with something. And of course that can be unpleasant at first. On the other hand, I think it's like many things in life that things don't work out the way they should. The sooner you take care of it and try to get things back on track, the easier it usually is, the shorter the time of suffering and the fewer the impairments and disadvantages you might experience. And so I think it's better not to set the threshold so high for seeking help and to realise, as in many other areas of life where you don't try to do everything yourself, that you can't cope with everything yourself.

Mang: Long waiting times can also put people off. How long does one currently have to wait for an appointment with you? Is there any information you can give? How long is the waiting time on average? And are there perhaps ways to shorten this waiting time?

Balz: Last year we had a waiting time of almost four weeks for an initial interview. It is true that in very urgent cases we try to find a more timely meeting if possible. For example, situations are also urgent when, for example, deadlines are involved. So it's not that rare. Someone contacts us and says, „I've lost my examination entitlement and I have to react quickly now. Otherwise my studies are over at this point.“ We also write statements relatively often for such purposes. So I can always recommend when registering that you always make it urgent. That goes some way, too. And then we see if we can find an earlier possibility, which of course is not always possible.

Mang: You just mentioned it, now there are sometimes crises in life that don't allow for waiting times. And in

such emergencies you have to act quickly. Are there any short-term offers, also here in the region, that you can recommend, where you can get help more quickly?

Balz: If the situation is very serious from a psychological point of view, then it is of course advisable to go to a psychiatric clinic in an emergency. Here in Tübingen, the first and best place to go is the psychiatric clinic of the university hospital, where you can actually go every day of the year, around the clock, even without an appointment, without a referral. You can also call the doctor on duty there at any time from home. That is what the clinic offers. I think that's very, very good. And otherwise you can also call the telephone counselling service if you are perhaps looking for someone to talk to first and foremost. And last but not least, in Tübingen and Reutlingen there is also the „Arbeitskreis Leben“, which you can contact in mental crises.

Mang: Very good. That brings us to the end of the conversation. Thank you, Mr Balz, for these interesting impressions from the PCC. And in the next few weeks we will certainly talk again about various crises in concrete terms. If you have any questions about psychotherapeutic counselling in the meantime, feel free to write to us on social media or by email. Otherwise, thank you for listening and see you next time. Ciao.

**Note: This transcription of the podcast was generated with the help of machine software. We apologise for any minor discrepancies or spelling mistakes.*