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Ikdip Kaur Brar
McMaster University, brari@mcmaster.ca

Jae Eun Ryu
McMaster University

Kamran Shaikh
McMaster University

Ashlie Altman
McMaster University

Jeremy Ng
McMaster University

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CRITICAL REVIEW

University Campus Peer Support Centres: Benefits for Student Emotional and Mental Well-Being

Ikdip Kaur Brar[1]*, **Jae Eun Ryu**[2]*, **Kamran Shaikh**[3]*, **Ashlie Altman**[4], **Jeremy Ng**[5]
Motivation for McMaster

[1]Life Sciences, Class of 2012; [2]Arts and Science, Class of 2014; [3]Life Sciences, Class of 2013;
[4]Biology and Pharmacology Co-Op, Class of 2012; [5]Biology, Class of 2013
*Authors with equal contributions

Within undergraduate student populations, there has been a rise in the incidence of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These problems have been shown to negatively impact emotional wellbeing and academic success.[1] Many elements of the undergraduate experience, including stressful transitions from high school to first year, contribute to mental health problems amongst this student body. Peer support is a relatively recent resource for universities to address growing mental health concerns on campus. Peer support, which involves trained students who voluntarily provide emotional support to peers, offers a unique function to student mental health. It can be useful throughout a student's undergraduate career and is also beneficial to those who provide the support. While it may not replace professional mental health services, it may be a significant addition to the existing student wellness support systems on university campuses today.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Students in university and college, especially those in first year, face many hardships throughout their studies. They may have difficulty dealing with numerous issues, including relationships with friends, family, and significant others, as well as academic stress that develops as their term progresses (Figure 1). These issues make them vulnerable to mental health issues and range from mild, with students feeling anxious or lonely, to severe, in the form of clinical depression.[1,2] These feelings often have a negative impact on academic performance, retention, and graduation rates.[3] Additionally, depression and anxiety have been linked to higher rates of suicide, substance abuse, troubled relationships, and difficulties with sexual identity.[1] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the suicide rate for young adults to be on the rise, specifically for the 15–19 year age group and the 20–24 year age group.[4] This implies that risk for suicide is a significant problem during high school and persists among young adults in university and college.[5] Among adults, those aged 18-24 have the highest reported suicidal tendencies.[6] Researchers with the World Health Organization's world mental health survey initiative have shown that identifying and treating depression early may reduce the serious consequences of depression and prevent the consideration of suicide.[7] Most alarming of all, an epidemiological study by Mackenzie et al. through the College Health Intervention Projects involving 1,622 Canadian post-secondary students found that the 15-21 age category had the highest past-year prevalence rate of mental illness at 39% in 2011.[1] With up to 25% of students in university or college reporting symptoms of depression, and approximately 10% of students having suicidal thoughts, interventions should be considered to improve emotional wellbeing on campuses.[1]

A survey asking questions relating to perceived stress, internal resources, and social support provided to 2000 university students found a strong positive correlation between perceived feelings of stress and low mental health.[8] A lack of proper services to help alleviate such stress and emphasis on developing protective factors such as mastery and self-esteem among the student population can have a negative impact on the overall mental health of students on campus.[8] Services that can help to reduce the stress that students experience, and to increase mental and emotional wellbeing, include professional counsellors, psychiatrists, and peer support centres. Professional counsellors and psychologists are powerful resources students can use to improve and maintain their mental health. Researchers used a questionnaire to survey undergraduate students at the University of Birmingham.[9] They allowed students considered as high-risk for dropping out to undergo professional counselling and found that 15 out of 16 high risk students who underwent counselling successfully completed their first year.[9] Their results suggest that students who reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed were less likely to drop out of university or college after having received professional support.[9] Thus, professional counselling can be an effective tool in increasing student retention rates (Figure 1).

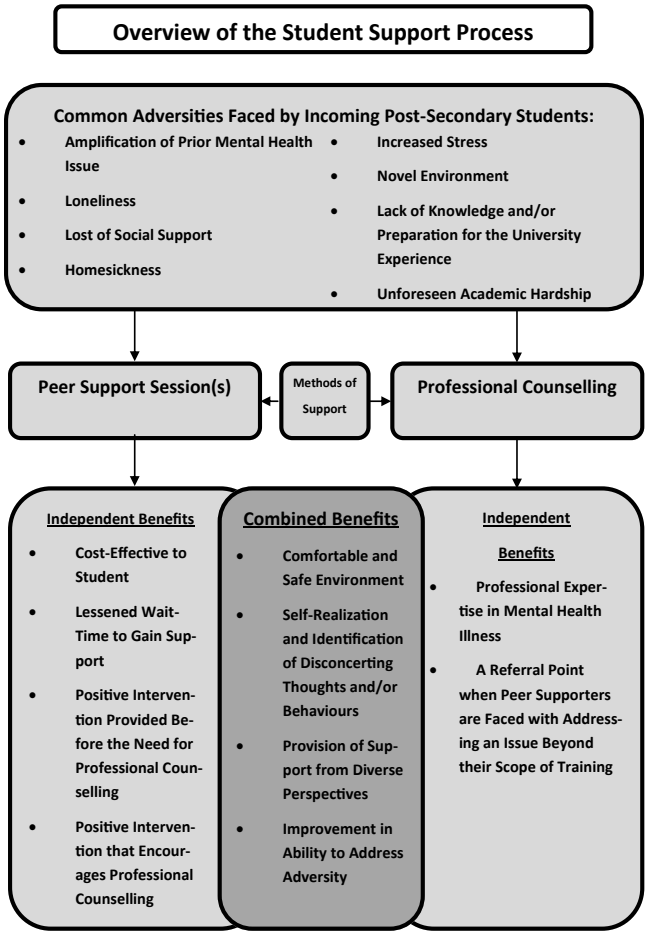

FIGURE 1: An Overview of the Student Support Process. The transition into post-secondary education is often filled with various adversities, and yet, any one or combination of factors may require students to seek external support.[1,2] In the post-secondary setting, students generally have two institution-established options: peer support session(s) and professional counseling. Student-to-student peer support is unique in that it has the ability to both provide intervention to the supported student so that they may never require professional counselling, as well as encourage those that require professional counseling to identify the need and take that initiative.[17, 23] Should these resources be made successfully available to students in need, both options are able to provide the support-seeking student with various benefits to assist them with their successful transition to the university experience.[12]

However, professional counselling services are also accompanied by high service costs and wait times. Institutional budget cuts and administrative adjustments have put professional counselling services under financial scrutiny.[10] Additionally, it has been shown that students will refrain from seeking professional assistance when wait times and appointments are involved.[11] While providing professionally trained counsellors for all students who require such services would be ideal, the reality is that this cannot always be met from a logistical point of view. As a result, peer support centres have recently been explored as a potentially flexible and inexpensive adjunct to professional counselling. A report that investigates this sought to explore a particular model of peer support, recent academic research on its effectiveness, and how these initiatives can be expanded or improved upon to better address the needs of mental health in university settings.[12] The report suggests that *both* peer support and professional services are beneficial to emotional wellbeing, but peer support may be more feasible when professional services cannot be utilized (Figure 1).[12]

DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF PEER SUPPORT

Peer support can be divided into several categories based on three criteria: the medium in which it is conducted; the individuals running the service; and the administration in control of the service.[13] One of the major benefits of peer support is that it offers a comfortable environment for the student seeking support. This is due to the fact that the students providing support may have encountered similar life experiences and can relate to them.[14] Students providing peer support on university and college campuses have endured many of the stressors that accompany being an undergraduate student. As a result, peer supporters can offer authentic empathy and validation to fellow peers, which can make students feel more comfortable and receptive to the advice and suggestions presented.[15] Furthermore, peer support establishes a foundation for an open conversation or discussion aimed at facilitating a desirable change.[13] The council of Higher Education Quality concluded that the effectiveness of peer support lies in the fact that students are ultimately in the best position to recognize the problems of their peers.[16] This kind of support received by the students can bring a positive change to the emotions that are currently experienced, since it can reduce the sense of loneliness, frustration and other negative feelings. If necessary, the desirable change may involve seeking professional help.[13] This is shown in a report that suggests peer support is most successful when diverse perspectives and competencies of supporting students, as well as those of academic and guidance staff, are brought together to take on the complex, multi-dimensional issues encountered by students (Figure 1).[17]

THE DIFFICULTY OF TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

A longitudinal study examining university expectations in freshmen followed 226 Canadian undergraduates before and half-way through their first-year.[18] The researchers found that the most effective peer programs aim to prepare students for the challenges that they may face throughout university or college.[18] At the same time, they provide students with effective strategies that can be employed to overcome these challenges.[18] Considering these facts, it is vital to establish a peer support system that could provide guidance to help students overcome problems.[19,20]

Major life transitions, such as changing schools, can be stressful since they physically sever existing sources of social support, including family and friends.[2] These changes may lead to homesickness, which is one of the most frequently reported concerns of first year college and university students (Figure 1). Homesickness can be problematic if experienced for prolonged periods of time.[21] Students who are homesick find it difficult to adapt and perform in new situations because they are far from familiar environments

such as their family setting or community.[22] Depression and recurrent thoughts about death or suicide have most often been associated with students suffering from homesickness.[21] Researchers have found that most first year university students who display signs of insecurity and poor social skills before starting their undergraduate education have a greater tendency to exhibit signs of homesickness during the first few weeks of their first term.[22] Counselling or peer support may be an effective way to help students adjust to the university environment since it is capable of relieving some of the anxiety, depression and stress experienced by first year students. Peer support can provide students with the skills necessary to manage stress independently. This is done so by discussing strategies that are specific to the problem the student is encountering (Figure 1).[23]

THE EFFECT OF PEER SUPPORT SERVICES ON CAMPUS THROUGHOUT STUDENTS' UNDERGRADUATE CAREERS

Not only is peer support an effective way to combat the stress and depression that can accompany the transition from high school to university, it can also be useful throughout a student's undergraduate career.[2] Researchers conducted a web-based survey at a large university in 2005 and 2007 and screened the results for symptoms of mental disorders.[23] Their results indicated that 60% of students suffering from at least one mental health issue remain afflicted by the same issue two years later.[23] This suggests that mental health problems can be long-lasting and may persist throughout one's academic career. Additionally, the study revealed that less than half of those with a mental health problem received effective treatment within the two-year time span.[23] Only 32.9% of those surveyed in 2005 and 42.9% in 2007 had a perceived need to receive professional treatment.[23] However, those who visit peer support may benefit because peer supporters can help identify disconcerting thoughts and behaviours and urge those without a perceived need to receive professional help.[20,24] In this case, peer support can be a beneficial addition to student campuses alongside professional services.

Interestingly, peer support has shown to be beneficial for both those providing and those receiving support.[24] One study trained lay people to be peer supporters and used statistical analysis based on questionnaires to determine benefits of peer support on the supporters.[25] Their research showed that after one- and two-year periods of providing support, the volunteer peer supporters reported increased psychosocial performance and well-being.[25] Furthermore, individuals who became peer supporters reported feeling more self-aware.[25] Another study used a questionnaire survey to peer supporters in UK schools.[19] The students noted that peer supporters had acquired useful skills and were pleased to show that they cared presumably about their peers.[19] Researchers also noted that peer supporters experienced a "gratifying sense of responsibility" associated with their roles.[24] They also identified qualitative research conducted by another researcher indicating peer supporters show increased self-esteem and confidence.[13]

THE POTENTIAL OF PEER SUPPORT

In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of university students reporting mental illnesses, indicating a greater need for institutions to expand their mental health support services.[11] Peer support centres can be beneficial in improving the emotional well-being of the student population. However, the issue is that many students with mental health issues do not seek professional counselling or peer support services even if they are available on campus.[11] The lack of interest in using such professional services may be explained by a lack of student knowledge about their existence or about the services provided.[11] A peer support service offering both drop-in, immediate support, and the ability to book appointments would ensure that students can access peer support services when they need them, without conflicting with their schedules. Through careful steps taken to design, develop, and establish a student-based peer support program, peer support has the potential to be a valuable addition to mental health support services on university campuses.[12] ▪

Reviewed by Dr. Debbie Nifakis, Ed.D., C.Psych
Dr. Debbie Nifakis is a Psychologist and the Clinical Director of the Student Wellness Centre. She has practiced psychotherapy at university counselling centres for over thirty years. At McMaster, she co-developed and ran the first Peer Helper Program for over twenty years and has presented at conferences as an invited speaker on the benefits of Peer Helping in post-secondary institutions.

About Motivation for McMaster
Motivation for McMaster (MFM) was founded in January 2011 to provide motivational lectures free of charge to all McMaster undergraduate students. Believing that more could be offered to students, MFM designed and developed a student-to-student peer support program that was implemented in September 2011. After recruiting and training student peer supporters, MFM officially began providing peer support in October 2011. MFM's volunteer team provides monthly motivational lectures and up to 25 hours of student peer support every school-week, and has logged more than 2000 hours since January 2011. Authors Ikdip Brar, Jae Eun Ryn, Kamran Shaikh, and Ashlie Altman are peer supporters at MFM. Jeremy Ng is MFM's co-founder and director of the MFM peer support program. MFM may be contacted at macmfm@mcmaster.ca.

Other Resources
Other peer-based student support groups on campus include the following: The Student Success Centre, the Chaplaincy Centre, the Student Health Education Centre (SHEC), and the Queer Students Community Centre (QSCC). Professional counselling on campus is provided at the Student Wellness Centre (SWC).

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