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ABSTRACT

This document presents a discussion of how to set up an on-campus peer support system designed to help college students cope with stress. The possible functions of a peer support center are outlined and features of a proposal for such a center are listed, including a clear mandate of the center, a rationale for the services to be provided, a list of services, and a proposed budget for the first year of operation. How to structure a peer support center is discussed and staffing, funding, location, volunteers, and confidentiality are considered. It is noted that the key to establishing a successful peer support center is to consider all factors in advance and to pre-plan, be prepared, and approach the project with professionalism. A summary on starting a college peer support center is included which provides succinct guidelines under the headings of: (1) introduction; (2) for more information; (3) what is a peer support center? (4) values; (5) gathering support; (6) proposal; (7) structure; (8) training; (9) budget; (10) location; (11) recruitment; (12) size of volunteer group; (13) selection of volunteers; (14) referrals; (15) confidentiality; and (16) summary.
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STARTING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY PEER SUPPORT CENTRE

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Did you ever stop to consider how hard it would be to find even one person who felt they were under no pressure of stress? As suicide prevention professionals we know it would be difficult to find many. And on a college or university campus, with exam pressures, assignment deadlines, relationship complications, financial strains; it would be essentially impossible! College and university students do face a variety of challenging social and academic pressures. Those of us who work with one of the many crisis lines across North America know first hand that sometimes a support system is all that is needed to enable a person to cope.

Today I will discuss how to set up an on campus support system, offered by students to other students.

As our time together today is limited I will only briefly discuss the issues and steps involved in setting up an on campus peer support centre. If you want more detail I can refer you to a publication I co-authored in 1985 called "Helping Ourselves" and it is available through Health and Welfare Canada.

First, what is a peer support centre? Also known as peer counseling centres, they are on campus listening, support and referral services run by and for students. The areas the peer support centre deals with could be very specific. For example, a centre could only deal with one issue, like birth control, addictions or sexual assault. Or, it could offer a broad range of areas like stress, personal problems, relationships, loneliness plus all the others I previously mentioned.

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...2

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Campus needs, existing services and available resources can help you determine how broad to make your terms of reference. Remember that it is vital that your training program reflects all the areas that the Centre claims to deal with.

The values of a peer support service are many. The concept of peer counselling is one that is gaining both credibility and popularity across North America today. Since college and university students are involved in an academic process that teaches them not only how to learn, but also how to prepare for life in the work world, what better place to integrate the concept of maintaining your own good mental health?

In itself, the campus is a community with the students as its members. Like in any other community, specialized services can be tailored to meet its specific needs. While a student in distress can be served by the city crisis line, a peer support centre on campus can foster the notions of stress management and mental health before pressures build to the point where a call to the crisis line is necessary.

As is the case with every other self-help group or service, students feel their pressures and problems can best be understood by other students.

Let me mention the idea that; "a peer support service duplicates the services of an on campus professional counselling service" and isn't necessary if a professional service exists. A peer support centre is complementary to that of professionals, not in competition. In fact, the peer support centre can act as a link between the troubled student who feels wary of going to a real counsellor, and the professional on-campus counsellors who seek ways to reach the students and be seen as accessible.

...3

So, how do you get started? First, one individual or even a small group of students can't start a peer support centre by themselves. If it is to serve the needs of the campus community best, it should be supported by as many parts of that community as possible. Once you have answered your own questions about the viability of establishing a peer support centre on your campus, it is time to seek support for your plan.

Consider the university itself and approach the professional mental and physical health services, the student advisory services or the Dean of Student Services. The faculty and departments in related academic areas like: counselling, social work or psychology might want to help. Of course, you think right away of the student run services too. The student government is a natural starting place. You could be funded by them to be established as a new student service, you could piggy back with an existing student service to share space or you could try being granted status as a club and operating your service that way. But in a small college or university, the student government could be no more than a loose affiliation with little or no budget. Remember, in all these instances support alone can help to establish your credibility.

Finally, there may be grant money available from your local or federal governments to establish a program like this one. Leave no stone unturned.

Approach all potential supporters with a proposal. Most likely it will be submitted to your student government but who ever you show it to, the proposal should include these things:

- ° a clear mandate of your peer support centre,
- ° a rational for the services you want to provide,
- ° services (drop in counselling, a telephone line too, pick up table for related pamphlets and information),
- ° budget for first year,

...4

Remember, keep it comprehensive and business-like. Look organized! Be prepared to answer any tough questions or objections that potential detractors could voice about your centre. In your proposal however, list only the positives! You are selling your idea.

When you set up the peer support centre, the structure will have something to do with who supports it, funds it and offers you a location. If the student government wants to help you might be located in the student union building with a students council representative as your link. If an interested faculty member from the department of social work wants to help, they may set up a faculty-student advisory panel and locate the peer support centre near their departmental offices. The peer support centre I ran at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada several years ago was run independently by students, was funded by the student government, was located in the student union building and had a full time paid student coordinator on staff year round. The professional health services acted in a supportive, advisory capacity only.

I do feel the college or university student population has the necessary administrative and academic qualifications to be trained to run their centre independently. So, even if the student government is not playing a major role and the university administration is supporting the centre, a large degree of autonomy is necessary to ensure that your peer counselling service really reflects the concerns of "peers".

When establishing a structure, there is one potential problem a peer support centre should guard against. Graduation! Of course this is the reason students attend college or university. But if a hierarchy is used and there are only one or two key students who know how to run the centre, all could be lost when they graduate and leave those planning for the next year both un-informed and inexperienced.

Most effective is a collective system, where ALL volunteers at the Centre have a say in decisions and an area of responsibility in its operations. This is the best way to allow all to participate and learn. You might require all volunteers to work in at least one area of the centre's operation, be it advertizing, budgeting, writing Public Service Announcements or setting up training for the volunteers. Spread both the work and opportunities for experience around.

Even in a collective, one person should be selected, elected or hired to act as a coordinator since the rest of the campus will want a contact person. But, that coordinator can then go on to delegate in-centre work to other volunteers.

Funding for the centre has been mentioned several times, but the budget does not have to be a large one for a fledgeling service. By using free pamphlets and information given out by the health department or local community services, you can keep costs down. The training program for your volunteers is vital, yet by requesting community professionals to speak to your group, costs here can be minimal too.

For example, a psychology professor could teach active listening skills, the city crisis line could instruct on suicide and telephone counselling, the local Alcoholics Anonymous branch could talk about alcoholism, and the city's Rape Crisis service could train you on how to help victims of sexual assault. All of these services are usually eager to help you provide the solid training background you need and will often help for free or for a small donation to their service. The training will likely total up to 12 hours and will take place on weekends right after selection of volunteers is done.

So, your budget. For around \$1,000. your budget could include charges for a telephone line, office supplies, printing for advertizing posters and pamphlets and a small budget for honoraria for community trainees.

The physical space of the centre and where it is located is very important. While recognizing that beggars can't be choosers, keep in mind these facts. While a busy spot by the campus bar will make your peer support centre visible, students might feel a little self conscious using an anonymous and confidential service in such a conspicuous spot.

Try for a compromise location that is both convenient and a little private.

There must be one small room with a door to shut for counselling. If there is a long cord on your telephone, it could be dragged into this room for telephone counselling. The rest of the centre should be kept neat and comfortable, with a volunteer in the reception area to help passers by. If space allows a pamphlet library or displays can be set up. Remember you do need some comfortable chairs in the counselling room, along with a table and some kleenex. Don't over look the walls in the centre. Even posters can add lots of warmth to cold concrete walls. And the wall just outside the door of the centre can be used to create displays about subjects related to your service.

Now the centre is set up, you still need student volunteers to be trained as listeners. The best timing would be to establish the peer support centre at the end of an academic year or over the summer. Then, be all ready to hit students returning in the fall with an advertizing campaign to advertize the peer support centre's impending opening and your recruitment of volunteers.

To decide how many volunteers you will require, decide the number of days per week you'll be open and what your hours of operation will be. Let's say you will open Monday to Friday from 9 am - 4 pm. That means you could divide your day into two 3½ hour shifts

...7

and you need two volunteers per shift. That's 4 volunteers per day or 20 per week. If they all do one 3½ hour shift per week you'll need 20 volunteers, and so on.

Nothing could be more important than selecting the right student volunteers. You are seeking students who are non-judgemental, good listeners and who are really committed to staying with your service for the whole academic year. You should never select people who are unable to attend your volunteer training program. Untrained volunteers undermine the credibility of the whole service and could be harmful.

A simple application form should be filled out by the applicants. Since communication skills are so important to your volunteers, by all means base your final decision on an interview where you discuss their attitudes and the peer support centre in detail. The profile of the volunteer team should be as diverse as your campus' population. Not only psychology students can be trained to listen to and support other students!

There are instances where the listening service offered by the peer support centre will not be enough and referrals must be made. By all means make sure that the training program familiarizes the student volunteers with the range of on and off campus services that are available. The peer counsellors can really become aware of the signs of depression, of addictions or of suicidal thoughts and can direct the student client to the professional who can best help.

Finally, a word about confidentiality. While a very small campus may have trouble keeping their service anonymous, it can certainly keep it confidential. No personal information on the clients is necessary to provide a listening and referral service. While some statistics on usership and the general nature of problems presented is good to record, no client files or identifying information about

the clients should be hanging around the Centre. All the student volunteers must be trained that any small breach in confidentiality could undermine the credibility of the service for the whole campus.

In summary, the key to establishing a successful peer support centre is to consider all these factors in advance! Pre-plan, be prepared and approach this project with the degree of professionalism it deserves. Peer counselling is earning so many believers that you will doubtless find yourself supporters. Your combined efforts will pay off in a rewarding experience of allowing students to learn to help both others, and themselves through a peer support centre.

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SUMMARY

1. Introduction

- everyone experiences stress and college/university students face a variety of unique pressures like exam stress, relationship problems and financial strains.
- a support system on campus can help them to cope.
- this paper will outline some of the factors involved in setting up a peer support centre at a college or university.

2. For More Information

- a detailed account is contained in a manual published by Health and Welfare Canada called Helping Ourselves, 1985.

3. What is a Peer Support Centre?

- an on-campus listening, support and referral service run by trained students to serve other students.
- also known as peer counselling centres.
- could deal with only a specific issue (birth control) or a range of mental health concerns.
- decide mandate based on existing services and your resources.

4. Values

- provides a link between students and the professional services.
- involves students - teaches them to help themselves.

5. Gathering Support

- university: professional counselling services, Dean of Student Services, student advisory centre, physical health services.
- Faculty in social work, psychology or counselling.
- student government: you could be a new service, add on to an existing service or become a club.
- community, federal or local grant money.
- moral support can be as important as offers of space or money.

6. Proposal

- should be well thought out, organized, concise.

6.

- include A) clear mandate
B) rationale for establishing a PSC.
C) list of services you will provide.
D) budget for first year of operation.
- be prepared to answer negative questions but remember, you are selling your idea, so don't include them in your proposal.

7. Structure

- might depend upon who helps start the PSC.
- link will be with supporters, administration or student government.
- students running PSC need some autonomy from administration of university so it is truly a "peer support centre".
- collective system ensures all student volunteers share work, decision making and opportunities for experience.
- have one person as coordinator for simplicity in communicating with with the rest of the campus.

8. Training

- is vital, community and on campus professionals can offer to speak to your volunteers to provide solid training.
- listening skills, mental health, other social issues you deal with, referral skills should be covered in training.
- training will likely take place on weekends, will take 12 hours minimum.

9. Budget

- \$1000 for first year covers phone line, office supplies, printing of posters and pamphlets to advertize your PSC.
- many pamphlets and other information can be obtained free from community services.

10. Location

- keep in mind a central location is good but if too public, privacy becomes a concern for potential student clients, try for a place that is convenient but still private.

Physical Space

- need one small room with door for counselling.
- telephone on long cord can be taken into small room for telephone counselling if desired.
- one volunteer always on duty in neat and comfortable reception area, size depends on space available.
- posters etc add warmth - make sure posters reflect the themes and attitudes of the PSC.

11. Recruitment

- advertizing ready for fall when students arrive on campus; advertize the impending opening of the PSC and your need for student volunteers.

12. Size of Volunteer Group

- decide hours of operation, number of days per week to be open; start with half days if necessary.
- staff 2 volunteers per shift, each 9-4 day could be divided into two 3½ hour shifts = 20 volunteers needed @ one 3½ hour shift per week.

13. Selection of Volunteers

- non-judgemental, good listeners, committed to stay with PSC all academic year, not too busy with courses etc.
- can't select students who can not attend the training program, a training program for all volunteers is vital.
- application form plus interview can help you assess the communication skills, attitudes and commitment of each applicant.

14. Referrals

- know of services available on and off campus.
- peer counsellors can be trained to recognize telltale signs of depression, addictions, suicidal thoughts and direct student to professional services.
- the PSC acts as a bridge between students and services.

15. Confidentiality

- vital to maintain the credibility of the PSC through strict confidentiality at all times.
- no information on clients should be hanging around the PSC, it is not necessary to provide a listening service.
- all statistics should be free of identifying information.

16. Summary

- peer counselling gaining more and more support.
- you'll be rewarded when you establish a PSC because you're helping students to help themselves.