

Preparing Peer Leaders for Encounters with Student Mental Health Concerns

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National Background Information

Research over the past 5-10 has confirmed that 1 in 4 college students has a diagnosable mental disorder

According to the *2013 National College Health Assessment*:

- 1 in 3 college students experienced depression to the degree that it impaired their academic functioning
- 50% of students experienced significant anxiety
- 1 in 3 students reported that stress had significantly impacted their academic performance
- Students with psychiatric disorders are the largest group of individuals seeking accommodations in higher education

The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2012-13) reports that:

- 30.3% of students reported seriously considering suicide
- 23.2% have engaged in self-injurious behavior
- 48.7% had previously attended counseling
- 32.9% had previously taken medication for mental health concerns

A few Important Implications

- Students with emotional difficulties have the largest drop out rates of any disability category (Wessel et al, 2001)
- 86% of students with psychiatric disorders withdraw from college before finishing their degree (Collins et al, 2005)

First-Year Students and BYU Data

First-Year Students appear to be reporting psychological distress at increasing numbers (2012 National College Health Assessment).

Most common concerns for first-year students presenting at BYU's Counseling Center from 2010-2014 (n=1901, females= 1276)

- Adjustment to university life
- Body Image
- Religious values
- Romantic relationships
- Academic abilities
- Depression/suicidal ideation
- Social Relationships
- Anxiety/stress

Most of the concerns began within 1-4 weeks before initiating counseling (for most this means it began while on campus)

First-year students report significantly higher levels of distress than advanced standing students seeking counseling

Peers are an effective referral source to college counseling centers and students list peer to peer support and mentoring as critical to helping students with mental health concerns on campus

- Adapted from *College Students Speak (NAMI 2012)*



Mentor Training and Supervision

Mental health content is **embedded throughout our training process** and not consolidated in one event or at one time. There is a **“rhythm” to an academic year** and **common concerns tend to surface at predictable times.**

Most of the **skills we teach** mentors are **used in all conversations** and not exclusively with students struggling with mental health concerns.

Crisis and emergency response training is provided at the beginning of the academic year (fall semester) along with information on student mental health concerns provided by our **Counseling and Psychological Services department.**

It is necessary **to provide comprehensive supervision and support** to mentors. Mentors need to be allowed to **process** their experiences, **ask questions, generate ideas** for interventions, and keep supervisors abreast of student challenges.

Mentors meet individually with either a staff supervisor or a student supervisor each week, they also meet weekly with a group of 3-4 peer mentors, and in a weekly professional development (staff) meeting.

Relevant Skills and Information

- Empathic Listening
- Noticing and Observing
- Asking Questions
- Reflection
- Managing Personal and Work Boundaries and Stress
- Learning Skills
- Common Mental Health Concerns (Depression, OCD, Anxiety)
- How to Talk About Those Concerns with Students
- Referral Resources
- When to Ask For Help (Seek Supervision)
- When and How to Intervene in an Emergency/Crisis

Critical Relationships to Develop and Foster

- Residence Life
- University/College Counseling Center
- University Accessibility Office
- Academic Advisors
- Faculty
- Support Organizations for Special Populations

BYU First-Year Mentoring Program

- All first-years students are assigned a peer mentor according to their enrollment in a high-demand, general education course
- We employ between 80-90 paid peer mentors (20 hours/week)
- Mentors are supervised by a staff of 4 full-time employees and 2 part-time employees
- The primary focus of our mentoring is on welcoming students, assisting with their adjustment to university life, helping students access needed resources and providing them with a forum to discuss their academic growth, goals, and challenges
- We do not see our role as that of mental health paraprofessional, but we do meet regularly with students, and build relationships of trust

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