

Peer Educators Role in Mental Health Awareness

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It seems no matter what higher education publication you read or what listserv you might subscribe to, there is increasing interest from campus health and safety professionals about how to best provide mental health services and support to students. Issues ranging from legal rights and medical leave policies, to 24-hour emergency services and online assessments, are in the headlines. Campuses are working toward coordinating efforts so that students are identified early, have professional support, and do not feel isolated as part of the community.

Today, faculty and staff members note that mental health issues are more prevalent among the students they teach and advise. Kadison and DiGeronimo in the book *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It*, confirm that a rising number of students are coping with depression, anxiety, and other major mental health challenges. Mental health disorders are part of our society and part of our campuses.

Whether students arrive on campus with pre-existing mental health conditions, or develop problems during the college years, prevention activities and support services can assist students in getting the help they need to stay in class. A common question posed by campuses, "Are today's students really more disturbed than those in years past?" Silverman (2004) suggests that improved diagnosis, assessment, earlier intervention, and decreased stigma toward mental illness account for some of the increases. These factors may bring students to college who might not previously have considered postsecondary education as an option.

For any student, college is a time of transition. Many students are away from home for the first time, academics become more rigorous and there are new financial pressures and extra-curricular activities. The pressure of college life can be overwhelming at times. As a result, depression and other associated disorders, such as eating disorders, substance abuse and anxiety disorders, may appear. Often these problems are disregarded as feelings of stress or being overwhelmed. No one fully understands how the brain works and why, at times, it works differently in different people. In general, people do not have the same acceptance about brain disorders as they do to other illnesses.

Because stereotypes are often attached to people with mental illness, many students allow fear, embarrassment and shame to stop them from seeking treatment. With more than 19 million Americans suffering from depression or anxiety disorders, campus professionals can reduce the stigma and use education and outreach to inform, dispel myths, and help those suffering to seek treatment. Peer educators can play a

major role in providing accurate information on the issues and removing barriers to getting professional help.

As with other health risks, a comprehensive and collaborative approach must be used in defining services for a wide range of mental health conditions. A first step is for campuses to assess where they are on mental health support. In *Safeguarding Your Students Against Suicide, Expanding the Safety Net* a checklist is provided for institutional review that addresses areas of the campus community such as: administrative policies, risk identification programs, on-campus support, and community-based services.

Walking through this checklist with an all-college committee on mental health can identify strengths and areas for improvement and help direct outreach and education efforts to all members of the campus community. What is clear is that many campus and community resources must work together to provide support. Part of a comprehensive approach also involves students. Student peer leadership can be a key to raising awareness of mental health issues on campus. Peer education and mentoring are very important parts of the college experience, and have proven to be effective outreach methods for many different issues including mental health and wellness. Peer educators are also the type of leaders needed on an all-college committee as they have good perspective on attitudes and previous experience in dealing with challenging health behaviors.

In the Fall 2006 *NASPA Leadership Exchange*, Gary Pavela, Director of Judicial Programs at the University of Maryland, College Park states, "The mental health issue opens a window on other aspects of student life—stress, fragmented care, lack of communication. It gives us an appropriate reason to re-examine the type of culture that exists on our campuses. We are missing the opportunity to re-evaluate other aspects of student life contributing to isolation and depression. Students need to be engaged in these discussions as well.

Those close to students need to be informed and know what to look for and where students can go for help. Campuses should broadly publicize on and off site counseling services with appropriately trained professionals, non-clinical student support networks, and emergency services.

Trained peer educators can conduct many activities and can be very effective in promoting key resources on and off campus involving other groups, such as the university mental health and wellness coalition, the local Mental Health Association, the university counseling service and/or the student health service.

If you are considering adding mental health to your prevention work consider the following:

- **Screenings:** Conduct screenings for depression, alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and/or anxiety disorders. (Your local



Mental Health Association can help conduct screenings.) Discuss mental illness and mental health as they relate to other high-risk behaviors (such as alcohol and substance abuse and eating disorders).

- **Speaker Series:** With the help of the local Mental Health America, or the National Mental Health Awareness Campaign, identify potential speakers to make presentations on mental health subjects. Be sure that support is provided at the event from professionals trained to deal with mental health issues.
- **Mental Health Education and Training for Key Groups:** Conduct mental health education and training for resident assistants and Greek leadership so campus leaders better understand mental illness. Educate faculty, staff, coaches, and others who spend time with students.
- **Bulletin Boards:** Create a bulletin board to educate residence halls/floors/houses about mental health and resources. Possible topics include defining depression, warning signs, stress reduction strategies, and how to support a friend in seeking help.
- **Student Press and Media:** Address the issues of campus mental health through articles and editorials in the student newspaper. Campus radio or TV stations can invite trained professionals and peer educators to appear on talk shows.

No matter what outreach is offered, be sure to collaborate with campus and local mental health providers, provide students with resource information such as contact information for local mental health providers and crisis hotlines (i.e., the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) and have trained professionals available at your programs.

Resources

Kadison, R. & DiGeronimo, T.F. (2004). *College of the overwhelmed: The campus mental health crisis and what to do about it*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Silverman, M.M. (2004). *College student suicide prevention: Background and blueprint for action*. Student Health Spectrum, pp. 13-20.

Safeguarding Your Students Against Suicide, Expanding the Safety Net. (2002). Proceedings from the National Mental Health Association and The Jed Foundation. An institutional checklist is provided, p. 12.

NASPA Leadership Exchange. (Fall 2006). Mental Health Interventions. An Interview with Gary Pavela.

Pavela, Gary. (2006) *Questions and answers on college student suicide: A law and policy perspective*. College Administrative Publications.

Harper, R. & Peterson, M. (2005). *Mental health issues and college students*. NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources.

American College Health Association. (2006). National College Health Assessment Web Summary. www.acha.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov

National Mental Health Awareness Campaign: www.nostigma.org

Mental Health America: www.nmha.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org

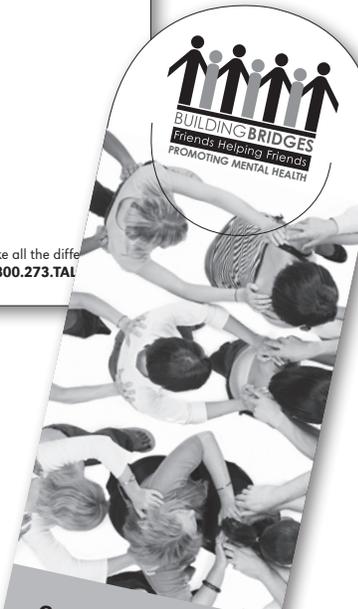
National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov

What's in your *Building Bridges – Friends Helping Friends* Campaign Kit?

One benefit of being an affiliate of The BACCHUS Network™ is that your peer education group receives this campaign kit free of charge. You have told us that giving you these campaigns helps your programming efforts.

The *Building Bridges Campaign* is the foundation to building a year-round program that promotes mental health at various times throughout the academic year and assists students in finding support. These campaign resources will assist you in creating an exceptional series of educational efforts will help you educate members of the community about mental health issues and remove the stigma around seeking help for mental health disorders.

We are dedicated to making campuses safer and more enjoyable places to learn and grow for everyone. From campus security to fraternities and sororities, athletics, residence halls, and peer education programs, we all have a vested interest in making mental health awareness a meaningful part of year-round prevention efforts.





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Your caring for a friend with a mental illness can make all the difference. If you or someone you know needs help, call 1.800.273.TALK

Caring for a Friend With a Mental Illness Can Make All the Difference

- Reach Out
- Listen
- Understand
- Support

1.800.273.TALK