

Peer Counseling for College Students' Well-Being: A Brief Review

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Abstract: Negative emotions are inevitable for every college student, which can lead to psychological pressure and lack of confidence in study. Peer counseling, as an important supplement to college students' mental health education system, plays an active role in the process of psychological crisis intervention in colleges. In order to promote the development of peer counseling in campus, a scoping review methodology was used in this study, mainly focused on the advantages and disadvantages of peer counseling in colleges and universities. It puts forward suggestions to provide new ideas for the scholar to explore the conducive strategies.

Keywords: Peer Counseling; Peer Support; Well-being; Review

1. Introduction

The university stage is the key period of individual development, physical and mental growth, knowledge reserve and health literacy training. However, influenced by the uncertainty of life, employment and love issues, college students are prone to psychological problems. Some literature reveal that college students aged 18-29 often experience a great deal of financial, social and emotional stress (Matu et al., 2020; Richard et al., 2022). For example, due to the increasing economic pressure, the change of learning environment and learning methods, and the gradual increase in the difficulty of courses, students need to invest a lot of time and experience to constantly learn new knowledge and adapt to the new knowledge system, college students will feel the study pressure and worry about graduation and future employment. Emotionally, due to the less support from family and friends, they often feel depressed, lonely, and stressed, and some students even have anxiety and depression. At present, the frequency and severity of college students'

psychological and emotional problems are increasing. Richard et al (2022) demonstrated that the WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project surveyed 13,984 undergraduate freshman students across eight countries and found that one-third of students had an anxiety, mood or substance use disorder. For college students, a study from China shows that the detection rate of mental health problems among college students is most prominent in sleep problems, depression and self-harm (Yang, 2022). The scholar revealed that 45% - 65% students in university suffered from emotional problems even mental health problems, but rarely seek professional help (Richard et al 2022; Cooke, 2006). Barriers to college students seeking mental health help include lack of trust, rejection, embarrassment, lack of time and stigma (Vidourek et al, 2014; Richard et al., 2022). For this reason, students in campus are more likely to ask for help from their parents and friends. The researchers realized that there was a hidden precious natural resource in school, which could effectively stimulate students' inner drive and help them grow. That resource is peer relationships. Peer counseling was regarded as an important supplement to the counseling work of university psychology majors (Osborn et al., 2022; Suresh et al., 2021; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). Therefore, the need for better mutual support among people becomes important, especially in universities. One way to achieve this is through peer support from one person to another,

2. Methodology

A scoping review methodology was used to search the following databases: Google Scholar, Eric, Baidu Scholar, etc. By inputting the special topic, title, themes or authors and institution to found the suitable literature and studies. The search strategy includes all publications and research types and languages. The publication time was

not limited to this study. Keywords for searching articles in the above database include: peer counselling, peer psychological counseling, peer helping, peer education, peer support in university.

3. Results

Since the 1960s, there has been a general lack of professional counselors in psychological counseling institutions and schools in the United States, and some people who have received semi-professional training have gradually received attention. In order to cope with the increasing demand for campus psychological counseling, this form of letting students do counseling for students, focusing on talking, dealing with emotional problems came into being. Peer counseling is a kind of psychological help that can enhance students' learning confidence, improve interpersonal relationship and regulate behavior. It is designed to help students build a good social emotional support system and promote students to better this society. Although the history of peer counseling in Chinese colleges and universities is not long, before this, according to the actual work needs, the psychological association, the psychological committee and the dormitory director have been acting as the role of peer counseling. At the same time, colleges often encourage peer assistance in the form of group tutoring activities, study groups, and experience sharing. Since 2021, the form of peer help has been rapidly developed. Especially on college campuses. Peer counseling is effective in improving students' academic performance and negative emotions.

However, it also needs to be noted that although some peer counseling is encouraged, due to the lack of reasonable peer counselor selection system, training and tracking mechanisms, the capacity of some peer counselors is limited. To this end, the goal of this study was to find out the viability factors of peer counseling, but also to understand the current problems and challenges of peer counseling. Only by comprehensively understanding the advantages and disadvantages of peer counseling can we carry out the next empirical research more objectively.

As for the mechanism of peer counseling, due to the similar growth background, life

experience, ideology and other characteristics among peers, and the advantages of peer counseling such as rapid response, convenience and remarkable intervention effect, peer counseling can become an important complementary force in the process of psychological crisis intervention for college students. The rationale of peer counselling is based on the assumption that people who share similar characteristics and age tend to influence one another's behaviour significantly. Similarity can make both parties affirm and motivate each other in the process of communication. On the contrary, if the attitudes of both parties are very different, mutual negation is easy to form, increasing psychological pressure, making the communication unpleasant and psychologically unwilling to continue the communication (C. F. Jiang, 2018).

About the definition, peer counseling, also refer to peer helping, peer education, paracounseling, paraprofessional counseling. Peer has a twofold meaning. Generally speaking, it refers to a friend and a person of similar age. A peer friend is a trustworthy person with whom you interact in daily life. They are not only similar in age, learning, education, and cultural background, but also share common interests and values. Because there is no age gap between each other, it is easier to understand each other, easier to communicate and exchange. There are many definitions of peer counseling. But in general, peer counseling refers to the non-professional psychological workers or teachers, after certain selection and training, through listening, feedback, summary and other ways to provide solutions to the problem. It provides a kind of help with psychological counseling function. The process of seeking help from recipients of the same age, providing interpersonal help with a psychological counseling function." Peer psychological counseling meets the current situation of insufficient professional psychological counseling teachers in colleges and universities. As a supplementary resource, it makes more students become the main body of psychological counseling in colleges and universities, gives full play to the initiative of students' psychological education, and contributes to the growth of students' mentality (Nozawa et al., 2019; Salsabila et al., 2020; Topping, 2022).

Peer counseling, as an important form of psychological counseling, is that peers with similar ages, similar perspectives and similar values affect each other, and the similarity also creates the possibility of non-professional peer psychological counseling. In other words, peer tutoring is an activity in which students of similar learning and living environment, age and educational level provide help and service to students in need through verbal or non-verbal support, listening, communication and sharing under continuous professional training and supervision. Because it is a widely available and effective form of informal support, it makes it a valuable tool for colleges and universities to address emotional issues just like anxiety, depression, and stress among students.

3.1 Advantages of Peer Counselling

Compared with the restrictions and requirements of general psychological counseling on consulting places, consulting time, consulting mode, etc., peer counseling is free and flexible, and cannot be limited to the constraints of time, place, form, etc., starting from the needs of the supplicant, the first time to find the problem, and timely and rapid intervention and guidance. Peer counseling has the characteristics of spontaneity, obligation, convenience and flexibility. In addition, peer counseling can help counselors deal with simple problems in a timely manner. Peer psychological counseling is different from the general nature of the chat, but not as professional as psychological counseling. But it can produce results that professional counseling can't.

With regard to the positive role of peers, the findings of Elbulok-Charcape et al. (2019), Venegas-Muggli et al (2023) and Osborn et al (2022) believed that peer counseling was conducive to create a good learning environment, reduce vandalism, truancy and school drop-outs and improve the performance and grades of underachieving student.

For some students who already suffer from depression and anxiety, peer counselling is conducive to promote student' wellbeing, reduce the level of depression and anxiety. (Byrom, 2018; Osborn et al., 2022). It appeared to be positive changes to student's self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-management, and decreased the feelings

of loneliness and helplessness (White et al. , 2020; Osborn et al., 2022; Pandang & Umar 2021). Through peer counseling, it is beneficial to creating an atmosphere of sharing and acceptance and improve social and interpersonal skills. Richard et al (2022)

The literature found that common topics for peer counselors were interpersonal relationships, health, and career problems. In the school environment, students who feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others have a greater sense of belonging to their surroundings (Pedler et al., 2021; Langin, 2019). Intimacy is enhanced when students feel cared for and respected by their peers. Peer counseling plays an indispensable role in improving students' happiness, sense of belonging, and regulating cognition and mentality (Richard et al., 2022; Topping, 2022). The relationship between peer counseling and college students' emotions is mainly reflected in the following aspects. First, it cognitively lowers students' perception and evaluation of stressful events. Second, it reduces stress-induced physical discomfort and inappropriate behavior. In addition, he reduces the level of negative emotions such as fear and anxiety caused by stress (Wang, 2020).

3.2 Challenge of Peer Counselling

The literature finds that peer tutoring has many advantages, however, it also has many problems and challenges. Although peer counseling is usually free, the entry barrier is low, not everyone is suitable to be a peer counselor. The essential difference between peer counseling and general interpersonal interaction, that is, peer psychological counselors must go through relatively strict training and supervision, can understand and master the basic principles and norms of psychological counseling, and can scientifically and effectively carry out helping work in accordance with the principles of psychology. Peer assistance activities without training and supervision cannot be called peer psychological counseling, and its actual helping effect is difficult to guarantee. In fact, the phenomenon of human psychological mutual aid is very common in real life, but its effectiveness is not high, the main reason is that the helper often lacks the guidance of psychological theory, the lack of good

communication skills and helping skills, the lack of self-psychological quality improvement and self-psychological inspection ability. Therefore, scientific training and supervision is a necessary condition to promote the work of peer psychological counseling for college students. Its purpose is to train non-professional students to become peer counselors who can consult strangers and cope with suicide crises. Generally speaking, to become a regular peer counselor, you must first go through an interview and screening, and then accept tens to hundreds of hours of training, focusing on training active listening and questioning. In addition, peer counseling also needs to master the skills of empathy and acceptance. Peer counselor should good at interaction, empathy, reflection, referral ability (Jordan, 2022 ; Bett, 2013). According to Zhong (2013) psychological counselors need to have the ability to observe, understand, learn, think and judge, expression, interpersonal communication, self-control, self-psychological balance, communication and calculation skills.

Although peer counseling is not professional psychological counseling, it also has special ethical and moral constraints. Following these principles not only helps to protect the rights and interests of counselors, but also helps to enhance students' trust in peer counseling and improve its coverage. Generally speaking, it needs to go through recruitment and systematic skills training and assessment before it can be formally employed. These personnel should be selected carefully to ensure that these students are willing to accept moral and ethical principles. If confidentiality is strictly observed, the personal privacy of those involved in the consultation is protected. Information should be kept strictly confidential during the consultation process and should not be disclosed at will. Good learning and communication skills as well as positive, outgoing personality, ability to work within the project concept and objectives. Effective peer counseling techniques also have facilitative skills of empathy, sincerity, and respect for others. Therefore, peer counselors should receive interpersonal skills training, improve self-management skills, referral skills and so on (Gladding, 2004; Bett 2013). In addition, when it comes to peer counseling, the first reaction of many college students is distrust.

They worry that peer counselors are not professional and empathic enough to give away their secrets. At the same time, because of the identity of classmates feel embarrassed and so on, these are real doubts. Topping (2022) remind that people cannot counsel someone unless they want to be counselled. Therefore, in addition to reflective communication, Jordan (2022) demonstrated that universities are best complemented by supervision, intervention or case and team discussions, which are a safe basis for professional peer consultation in order to develop appropriate solutions with counselors. What's more, according to Chen (2024), whether it is psychological peer mutual-aid counselor, psychological committee members or dormitory leaders, their division of labor and positioning are not clear, their work content and work results are difficult to quantify, and the work in the class committee is often in a marginal state. At the same time, most of the psychological committee members said that their job responsibilities are mainly to report psychological emergencies, popularize mental health knowledge and convey the notice of the psychological center, take the initiative to carry out mental health education activities without positive response and feedback, and have a low sense of presence in the long-term work process. Peer psychological assistance workers are highly motivated at the beginning, but there is no assessment and reward mechanism in the long-term work, the sense of achievement is low, the enthusiasm for work is sharply reduced, and their identity recognition is reduced.

Previous literature had demonstrated peer counsellor had to face the challenge of stress, liability problem and risk and peer supporters are faced with in their roles, to this end peer counsellor would prioritize their own mental health issues. According to Zhong (2013), psychological counseling is a respectable and noble career, but it is also a job with professional risks. The so-called occupational risk refers to the physical and mental pressure borne by the consultant with a certain frequency in the consultation process. Including economic risk, legal risk, personal risk and psychological damage. Therefore, people who are too sentimental, or emotionally indifferent, and have an insincere attitude are not suitable for psychological counselors.

Some literature found that the effects of peer counseling were limited to certain areas. Although it can have a beneficial effect on people's emotional and social support, it is limited to daily life. Peer counseling doesn't prevent early mental health problems. In addition, it also cannot change the clinical effect. In other words, as a resource, peer counseling cannot replace the effect of professional psychological counseling. Although peer counseling can be applied to many fields, research has found that its quality is difficult to guarantee. It is feasible to extend peer counseling to more areas of activity, but difficult to manage, and control the quality, to this end the effectiveness of peer counseling needs to be further verified (Gidugu et al., 2015; White et al., 2020; Topping, 2022; Byrom, 2018).

4. Conclusion

Through literature review, this study confirmed the positive impact of peer counseling, which is one of the main channels of mental health education in college. Peer counseling cannot only reduce the pressure of school mental health education, but also play the effect of professional counseling to a certain extent. However, some of the findings also found that the challenges of peer counseling should not be ignored. Osborn et al (2022) and King & Simmons (2018) found that peer counseling in colleges has been characterized by difficulties in sustainable implementation, unclear intervention effects and limited coverage. There is still a lack of systematic research to assess the effectiveness of the services provided by these centers or the appropriateness of the various peer counseling training programs. This kind of work should be encouraged. Despite this, the vast majority of peer support research has not identified any clear adverse consequences for the recipient's mental health, so trained peer support appears to actually be a safe, feasible, and beneficial resource.

5. Limitations

The study was limited to a small number of databases. At the same time, there is no uniform terms for the subject of peer counseling, so there is confusion around the

subject and an extensive search is required. At present, there are many advantages of peer counseling in colleges and universities, but few disadvantages. Moreover, there is little evidence of the sustainability of these projects over time. Compared with the characteristics and advantages of peer counseling, the implementation obstacles of peer counseling and the effect of continuous intervention of peer counseling have rarely been deeply explored by scholars. This study is based mainly on a review of past research and literature on peer counseling. Therefore, the discussion lacks empirical research to verify it. Although this study has limitations, this paper is conducive to further research and exploration of peer counseling in colleges and universities.

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