

Building an empathetic peer community on campus

Across our country, our college students are increasingly struggling with stress, anxiety, addiction, depression and relational difficulties. It's a phenomenon more widespread than we realise! With the rise of mental health issues faced by students, supervised peer mentoring or peer educator programs on campuses are becoming an increasingly important need.

Peer mentoring refers to peerled or peer-assisted programs, where peers serve as agents of change in attitudes, norms, and behaviours. Peer mentors are selected, trained, sensitized and supervised by professional mental health experts in planning, operating and implementing programs. Peer mentoring programs on campuses can increase reach out and promote awareness about mental health issues.

WHY DOES IT WORK?

It's easier for us to reach out to our peers than to the significant "know it all" older adults in our life. Each of us has at some point in our lives, shared our positive and negative experiences with our peers without hesitation or fear of condemnation.

We have poured our hearts out, shared stories of love, accomplishments, happiness, and secret desires.

We have disclosed our reasons and experiences of fear, despair, worry, desperation, and disappointments.

We have also offered words of wisdom and in turn, have received advice from our peers who have gone through similar life experiences.

Peers are able to break down barriers, which well-intentioned, significant adults in our lives at times fail to. Peer-mentoring programs proactively create spaces for open discussions and facilitate long term engagements in well-being among peers. In young adults, peer mentoring nurtures a sense of empathy for others, respect for freedom with responsibility, and informs young adults about tolerance towards different perspectives.

WHY IS IT USEFUL?

Peer mentoring programs on campuses benefit both, the mentee and the peer mentor. For the mentee, the benefits often show up as a significant improvement in the academic performance. It also helps in actively addressing socio-emotional issues of students. It can help freshmen students' in transition and navigation of social and personal difficulties. Such programs often help reduce substance abuse on campus.

Awareness is created about important issues such as healthy lifestyle and coping with stress. They are beneficial in promoting suicide prevention, removing the stigma about seeking professional help for depression, addiction (cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs), and relationship difficulties.

For the peer mentors, there is a growth in meaningful experiences, enjoyment, and satisfaction from helping others. It helps in developing communication and leadership skills. Peer mentors become knowledgeable about the resources of the university. Engaging in such mentoring activities improves self-awareness through self-learning experiences. Mentors also develop a sense of pride, empathy, and confidence.

In other countries, such programs have proven useful, such as University of California's (United States) Wellness Peer Education Program targeted towards bringing awareness about wellness and mental health, has helped decrease stigma and improve understanding about the Counselling and Psychological Services provided on campus.

In India, very few college campuses have peer mentoring programs for promoting mental health and well-being. Erik Erikson, a famous developmental psychologist once said "Life doesn't make any sense without interdependence. We need each other and the sooner we learn that, the better for all of us".

We need more colleges and universities to acknowledge the need for, and proactively provide these supervised peer mentoring programs.

They are needed to provide support, remove ignorance about mental health

needs on college campuses, and promote active and long-term engagement. We will need to help each other to lessen stress, improve coping skills and form caring relationships.

Interconnections and interinfluences are an inevitable part of our development.

Therefore, mobilizing resources such as peer groups in maintaining and sustaining mental health on campuses will need to be a crucial bedrock in enabling the development of our country's youth.

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