

Mend-A-Friend: Building a Peer Support Culture to Help Tertiary Students in Distress

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The World Health Organisation indicated that mental health problems are the main health burden in 10-24 year olds globally. The lifetime risk for mental disorders is one in two. Evidence tells us that tertiary students and young adults are most likely to: notice changes in their friends, turn to friends or peers when they have a mental health or distress problem, do more for a friend with a mental health problem than they would do for themselves and they avoid formal health services or clinics. Tertiary students have confidentiality concerns about tertiary institutions' use of their mental health information.

Mend-A-Friend is a website for young adults. The aim was to develop an alternative approach for supporting tertiary students to help a friend in psychological distress. Mend-A-Friend shifts the emphasis from the university as a therapeutic provider to establishing peer support cultures. Mend-A-Friend provides content to young adults to help a friend or colleague in distress. Mend-A-Friend considers young adults' preferences and behaviours, particularly those focussing on the peer relationship which often provides the first instance of mental health help for this age group.

Tertiary student focus groups in Australia and Malaysia identified the parameters for the development of a youth friendly website which addresses preferred delivery style, access methods and confidentiality concerns. To address these parameters Mend-A-Friend could not be branded as a mental health site, or be sponsored by a tertiary institution, and should not instruct young adults to behave in ways they do not respond to. Evidence indicates a youth focussed model is more likely to succeed and that young adults will help each other if they know the strategies. Mend-A-Friend provides readily accessible information for international students and the sector on issues associated with mental health, and the strategies for addressing these concerns in a tertiary environment.

Key Words

Student Distress, Mental Health, Peer Support