

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

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The World Health Organisation has 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 particular confidentiality concerns about tertiary institutions' use of their mental health information.

Mend-A-Friend is a website resource 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 endeavours to shift the emphasis from the university as a therapeutic provider by placing emphasis on establishing peer support cultures. Mend-A-Friend provides content to young adults on how to help a friend or colleague in distress. Mend-A-Friend takes into consideration 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. In order to address these parameters Mend-A-Friend could not be branded as a mental health site, could not be sponsored by a tertiary institution and should not instruct young adults to behave in ways they do not respond to. Evidence suggests that a youth focussed model is much more likely to succeed and that young adults are willing to help each other if they know the strategies.

## **Key Words**

Student Distress, Mental Health, Peer Support