PEER COUNSELING IN COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH

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Survey Background

• Results based on a nationwide survey of 2,011 undergraduate college students in the U.S.

• Conducted online from October 6-20, 2021.

• Data was weighted to estimated demographics of the U.S. population of undergraduate college students.
2/3 have faced mental health challenges

- A majority of college students have felt they needed help for mental/emotional health problems over the past 12 months.

- At the same time, 85% agree that mental health is important to overall well-being.

Q: Over the past 12 months, have you felt like you needed help for emotional or mental health problems or challenges such as feeling sad, anxious, or nervous?

Q: How strongly do you agree with each of the following statements? Mental health is important to our overall well-being.

% of college students who needed help over the past year: 67%

% of college students who agree: 67%

Somewhat agree: 18%

Strongly agree: 67%
Peer Counseling Definition

“The process of confiding in trained peers (fellow students, not friends) for mental health support.”
Familiarity with peer counseling

• Peer counseling is familiar to college students – half have heard of it while 20% have personally used it.

% of college students who ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have heard of peer counseling</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say peer counseling is available at their school</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used peer counseling</td>
<td>20</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interest in peer counseling

% of college students who have not used peer counseling who are ____ to try it

- Among students who have not used peer counseling, 62% are interested to do so.

Q: You mentioned you have not used peer counseling services in the past. If peer counseling services were available at your school, how interested would you be in using them?
Impact of COVID on peer counseling

• Nearly half of students say the disruptions caused by COVID have made them more likely to seek out peer counseling.

• Students from certain historically marginalized groups are more likely to say COVID has increased their interest.

Q: Thinking about the past 18 months and the disruptions caused by COVID-19, are you more or less likely to seek out peer counseling, or has it made no difference?
Who uses peer counseling?

- Certain groups are more likely to use peer counseling, such as Black students, transgender students, and first-generation college students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>% of College Students Who Use Peer Counseling</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black students</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender students</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation college students</td>
<td>29%</td>
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</table>
Shared identity key appeal of peer counseling

• Students from certain historically marginalized groups are more likely to say finding a peer counselor with similar identities or life experiences is very important to them.

% of college students who say it is "very important" to find a peer counselor with similar identities or life experiences

- Transgender Students: 59%
- LGBTQIA+ Students: 42%
- First-Generation College Students: 42%
- Black Students: 40%
- Latinx Students: 36%
- Overall: 32%

Q: If you were to use peer counseling, how important would it be to find someone with similar identities or life experiences to yourself? (Race, age, gender identity, LGBTQIA+, etc.)
Positive impressions of peer counseling

• Among students who use peer counseling, 58% call it helpful, including 23% who say it is “very helpful.”

• Where available, students agree peer counseling is able to serve a variety of students, among other positive attributes.

Among college students who say peer counseling is available on their campus, % who say it is...

- Able to serve students of various backgrounds: 82%
- Easily available: 79%
- Confidential: 79%
- Respected: 76%
- Free: 75%
- Competent: 69%
- Widely used: 55%

Q: To the best of your knowledge, is peer counseling on your campus...?
Students turn to peers first

• Over a third of students (36%) turn either to a friend or romantic partner when they need to talk about a serious mental health issue.

• This reinforces the importance of peers who can relate directly to students’ problems.

% of students who ranked ___ as who they would be most likely to talk to about a serious mental health issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A friend</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A significant other / romantic partner</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mental health professional</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A parent</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A family member other than a parent</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A peer counselor</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A school staff member (e.g., professor, coach)</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A religious leader</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone else</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>4%</td>
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</table>

Q: If you were experiencing a serious mental health issue while on campus, whom would you be most likely to talk to about this? Please rank your top three.
Students wary of becoming a burden

• While students rely on their friends, they are concerned that their problems may be too difficult or not relatable.

• 83% of students who use peer counseling agree it “lets me talk to someone who can understand but is not directly involved in my personal life.”

% of college students who strongly / somewhat agree that _____

- Some of my problems feel too big for my friends to handle: 37% Strongly agree, 28% Somewhat agree
- My friends can’t always relate to my problems: 32% Strongly agree, 32% Somewhat agree
- Sometimes I feel like a burden to my friends: 31% Strongly agree, 27% Somewhat agree

Q: How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
Peer counselors motivated to help others

- Peer counselors serve because it makes them feel good to help others and many want to “pay it forward” after Using peer counseling themselves.

- Nearly all peer counselors (92%) are satisfied with their experience.

% of peer counselors who say each is a reason they serve

- It makes me feel good to help other students: 45%
- Peer counseling has been helpful to me, and I am paying it forward: 40%
- I have experienced mental health issues and know how it feels: 36%
- I want to work in the mental health field: 34%
- I want to help a specific group on campus (e.g., students of color, LGBTQIA+ students): 28%
- Other mental health resources on campus are not satisfactory: 19%
- Other: 1%
- Unsure: 5%
Peer counselors report a higher sense of well-being

- A “well-being score” was calculated based on a series of questions assessing outlook and self-regard.
- Those who use or provide peer counseling are more likely to have a positive well-being score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of college students who do / do not use / provide peer counseling who have a positive wellbeing score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not use peer counseling</td>
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<tr>
<td>42%</td>
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Please see report for full question language and scale methodology.
Peer counselor training is common, but not universal

Most peer counselors (93%) have received at least “a little” training, including nearly half (48%) with “a great deal” of training.

While a majority of peer counselors say there is a clear protocol in place for safety concerns, 16% say there is not one or are unsure.

Q: In your experience, is there a clear protocol of what you should do if you are working with a student and are concerned about their safety?
IMPLICATIONS
Positive view of students’ beliefs and behaviors around peer counseling

• Students are utilizing the service

• Satisfaction is high

• Peer counselors score high on the Well-Being scale

“STUDENTS WHO PROVIDE PEER COUNSELING ARE LARGELY MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY STRONG AND DO SO WITH APPROPRIATE MOTIVATIONS—MAINLY A SENSE OF ALTRUISM.”
Some Cause for Caution

• Students turning to friends for help – indicating a need for universal mental health training

• Peer counseling training not universal and emergency protocols not foolproof; clearer guidance on crisis situations may be needed

• Important to recognize the emotional burden placed on peer counselors, themselves students

• Considerations around compensation
Promise of Peer Counseling

*Providing support to students who would not otherwise be reached through traditional counseling*

- Students represent an untapped resource
- College student body is often more diverse than faculty and staff
- Students are already relying on their peers for emotional support

“EVERY STUDENT SHOULD HAVE SOMEONE ON CAMPUS THEY CAN TALK TO WHEN THEY NEED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.”
THANK YOU!

The report is available online at:

bornthisway.foundation/research/peer-counseling-in-college/

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marychristieinstitute.org/reports/peer-counseling-in-college-mental-health/

Please email any questions or comments to dhumphrey@marychristieinstitute.org