Lean on Me: Establishing a Grassroots Peer Support Program on Campus and the Meaning

Volunteers Experienced – *A Community Approach*

by

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Introduction

The focus of the current honours project was to comprehend the experiences of student volunteers engaged in peer-support training workshops in the fall of 2023. The intention of the training was to provide peer-support volunteers with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in on-campus peer support at Capilano University in North Vancouver. Twelve undergraduate psychology students volunteered to take part in the training, which was planned and coordinated by five psychology faculty members and myself, an honours student facilitator of the program. The training involved attendance at two workshop/lecture/seminars that involved brainstorming and active role-playing. Some participants also attended a less formal workshop in the previous summer before the fall semester as an introduction to the practice of active listening. Amongst this group – which included both students and faculty – there was an immediate feeling of community, comradery, and safety, which helped create a special, supportive atmosphere during the sessions. There was a sense that something special was transpiring with the formation of this group. A sense that we were applying what we were learning from our curriculum towards a real-world goal. To gain insight into the experiences of the students involved, my co-investigator, Dr. Douglas Alards-Tomalin, and I conducted qualitative interviews in a semi-structured, conversational, and collaborative format.

Background & Rationale

The current data on the prevalence of anxiety disorders, in addition to a host of other various psychological disorders amongst university students is staggering. WHO survey data representing students aged 18-22 from 21 countries indicated that 20.3% were suffering from a twelve-month minimum psychological disorder, and 14.7% were experiencing some degree of anxiety (Auerbach et al., 2018). It has further been reported that 10.1% of Canadian students in this

age cohort reported a lifelong anxiety disorder (Weins et al., 2019). Perhaps the most troubling finding is that this age cohort are the least likely to seek professional support but are highly in need of it (Sazler et al., 2008). Long-term negative outcomes included lower grades, and diminished graduation rates due to higher drop out. Previous research has shown that early intervention for students experiencing distress is crucial (Gregoire et al., 2022). Despite many Universities having robust counselling services available, most students needing professional support in managing distress do not seek it in a timely and appropriate manner (Gulliver & Byrom, 2014). Some barriers that students report for using counselling services include lack of resources at their home institutions, funding, and fear of stigmatization (Jaworska et al., 2016; Schwenk et al., 2010). Peer support has shown to be an excellent intermediary step in remedying these barriers (Byrom, 2017). Additionally, the personally validating experiences behind receiving peer support, leads to increased positive coping (Crisp et al., 2020), sense of hope, empowerment, and self-efficacy (Johnson & Riley, 2019). The goal of the project is to examine the perceptions of student volunteers in a peer-support program about what peer-support is, why it's important in the context of post-secondary education, and how our peer-support training program impacted them (personally and professionally). The longer-term goal of the project is to present data that will assist in establishing a peer-support program that is reflective of the needs and values of the student population at Capilano University.

Participants and Researchers Positionality

Participants of the peer support program volunteered through their participation with the University's official student-led psychology club: *We're PSYCHED!* for which I served in the role of President from 2022-2024. We had a very diverse group which included students across different years of the psychology degree program, and of different countries of origin including Russia, China, Italy, Peru, India, and England. Students in the club also have a variety of different

identifications including domestic, international, and Indigenous. There were also some members of the lgbtqai+2s and non-binary community, myself included as a queer cis male. I am of Canadian born, Asian and European ancestry. My co-investigator psychology faculty member Douglas Alards-Tomalin uses he/him pronouns and identifies as "cishet" and is of Canadian born, European ancestry.

Methods

We engaged in semi-structured interviews with volunteers to build an understanding of the meaning they experienced through the workshops. The interviews we conducted were semi-structured with an interview guide of 10 questions that were used to spur informal conversations. The participants were 12 undergraduate psychology students attending Capilano University who were interested in volunteering to be trained to act in the role of peer-supporter. They completed two to three workshops covering the following topics: personal growth and clinical skill development, ethical responsibilities, active listening, the importance of empathy, suicide ideation/prevention. At the end of each session, active listening role-playing exercises were conducted in pairs followed by a short group debriefing session. The interviews were conducted approximately two-three weeks following the training. They were recorded, and audio files were transcribed.

Analysis Methods & Methodologies

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a method – a set of specific procedures for analyzing data – rather than methodology (a more general approach to collecting and organizing data) as it has concrete steps to follow in *generating* themes. This is an important distinction that themes are not identified but rather actively generated by the researcher through a specific systematic process.

This method was popularized by Virgina Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexible nature of RTA makes it well suited to addressing qualitative research questions. Braun and Clarke (2020) recommend RTA for comparing across individual responses, when the sample is greater than 10. RTA is especially useful when the goal of the research is the application of actionable outcomes that can inform program implementation and practice. Braun and Clarke (2020) specifically note the applicability of the approach towards understanding the broader socio-cultural context of a phenomenon, which was the goal of this current study. In addition to this, we applied a phenomenological lens to the data, which involved identifying the unique and specific experiences of the individual volunteers. Phenomenology is a general methodology that is appropriate for smaller, highly unique, and experiential datasets which is further discussed in the next section. As we spent more time with the data co-coding, we realized that both tactics were necessary to comprehend the content breadth *and* emotional depth of the dataset.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The theoretical lens used to analyze the data was hermeneutic phenomenology, an interpretive framework developed by German philosopher Martin Heidegger – a man that provided much inspirational thought and controversy (Heidegger, 1927). Hermeneutics is well suited to counselling psychology and mental health research as it provides a framework for which empirical and rational based methodologies concerned with "hard" facts and quantifiable outcomes may tend to be overlooked (Benner, 1994). It is not only a way of interpreting language, both written and verbal, but a philosophy as well (Zimmerman, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the philosophy of existentialism, the meaning of life as experienced by individuals, and how that is influenced by the concept of *thrownness.* Heidegger used this term to describe how human beings are *thrown* at birth into worlds of social constructs – nationality, gender, social class – over which there is no control over and must be learned to reconcile with (Withy, 2011). The goal of this

approach is to arrive at an insight on *being* that is both authentic and cognizant of these external influences, and then to begin the interpretive process anew. In other words, there is no final attainment of knowledge, but rather a continuous interpretive process that spirals much like the helix of a DNA strand, resulting in new insights and revisions of those insights as iterations from the dataset is contrasted and compared with that of the researcher(s). The emphasis of this approach is on the uniqueness of each human being's lived experience, the contexts within which they occur – the *lifeworlds* as coined by Heidegger (1927). The purpose of utilizing this methodology is to take a departure from drawing inferences from objectivity, psychometrics, and labeling of characteristics of a participant, to put the subject back in focus (Benner, 1994). We saw this as a particularly fitting approach for analyzing the data from this project as the goal of the study was to understand the volunteers' experiences with the topic of peer-support. Subjective interpretation and the rich depth that comes with those participant accounts is the focal point of the study is best understood through a qualitative approach.

Reflexivity

The peer-support project is community-based in nature and the focus of the study was to investigate the significance of the context in which it was experienced by the participants, on the university campus. I am a member of the population impacted by the study (undergraduate students) and my co-investigator is a faculty member which is symbiotically intertwined with this population. Furthermore, we actively developed and facilitated the workshop training sessions. Having different roles in the study has provided us with a variety of different perspectives, which is inclusive of the *lifeworlds* of the participants. The resulting rapport with the participants provided access into the sensitive, vulnerable, and authentic nature of the content in the interviews. We became intimately familiar with each of the transcripts and having known all the participants from the contexts of shared classrooms and through extracurricular activities with the psychology club,

we were able to understand and grasp the deeper meaning behind the insights that they each shared.

Research Question

How did the workshop attendees make sense of the role of being a peer-supporter? How is the peer-support role distinct from other similar "support" roles they have encountered (family member, friend, counselor, psychologist, lawyer)? What is the significance of having this kind of role fulfilled within the postsecondary context? And lastly, what was the value experienced from participating in the peer-support workshops?

Results: Themes Generated

Subjective impact of peer-support workshops

The context that the workshops provided was of particular significance. The emotional experiences of the attendees were highly positive, ranging from fun, enjoyment, making new friends, and connecting with a larger group. There was a transformative nature to the learning experienced through the participatory and experiential nature of the workshops. Of particular note by the attendees was the active listening role-playing exercises in which they engaged in one-on-one conversational sessions with the emphasis on truly listening without interjection and holding space for one another with genuine presence. Being a "listening ear" to someone with no expectations nor directives, and simply being there together had a profound impact on the participants.

I think there's a healing aspect in just the workshop in itself. The people who did come, they came one, because they have like a desire to listen and be there for other people but also because they've had their own struggles. And I feel like just talking about things and

hearing ways that you can respect other people and their differences, like it's very healing

in itself to just like, yeah, be in that atmosphere of training.

The shift of context from providing everyday peer-support to friends and family to the *intentional* act of holding space and being present for the peer they were engaging in a supportive role with, was an experience that many had not had before. Because there was no evaluation nor a concept of doing it right or wrong, the experiences were organic, free-flowing, and conversational. The goal for the role-playing was to be present, make eye contact, and express body language that was open and free of judgment. It was an opportunity to strip away the mask of being a student. Where the only objective was to listen and the magic that occurs as a result. What made the space of the workshops feel so special was the diminishment of hierarchy and social roles.

I think peer-to-peer support is you just can't judge anybody for anything. And like, why

should you? Why are you better like? We're not, you know. That's another thing. A lot of the

time, I don't even think people recognize that they are judging. And you can be judging with

your body language.

The vulnerability that occurred between participants was made possible through cultivating a space of being present in the moment, maintaining openness to a variety of opinions, the need to interject, or offer advice. The resulting personal disclosure between participants was more purposeful and validating because no peer-supporters weighed in with their opinions about what they were actively listening to, they simply listened, supported, and validated what their peer was expressing. The presence of non-judgment and rapport resulted in a better space between the peers.

I think what helps a lot is just constantly reminding us that we are not immune from our

own biases, first of all. And that sometimes we have to, like, remind ourselves to be open

to listen. I think empathetic listening should be literally used every single day for,

obviously, social interaction if it's possible. I think that is the major takeaway that I would

have.

The cultivation of this space between peers that is characterized by non-judgemental empathy and truly being present was one of the most significant experiences that the workshop attendees reported. The informal nature of the training in the workshops provided a sense of structure to offering support that would ordinarily come naturally and intuitively. It infused this support with more intention and presence. It provided structure to the act of supporting within the context of spontaneity in the moment.

It's nice to adjust that perspective of what a blend between a stranger you meet on the

plane you talk to, a friend you talk to about things, who's good at something, and then also

a little bit of that. Someone who's trained to talk about this. That blend is nice. The

perspective is nice.

This quote aptly captures the essence of peer-support. The participant noted that the approach of peer-support combines the benefits of anonymity experienced with strangers, the formal training of therapy, and the warmth experienced from sharing with friends. Their statement accurately conveys the nuanced nature of how peer-support was experienced during the active-listening exercises.

Delineation between peer-support and counselling

The participants reported that the highly personal and subjective nature of offering peer-support was refreshing as an experience. This contrasts with the rigor of being a counselor: the need for confidentiality, documentation, directives, and professional conduct. Being emphatic and expressive as you might be in a less structured context may not necessarily fit the role of counselor.

"So as a counselor, you have your duties, you're like, no, your free will is slightly lessened

in this situation because I have to perform a series of things. Because you don't get to act

like a friend as a counselor. As much as you might want to, because you look at this

person and go, 'You just need a friend so bad.'"

Warmth and humour are both tenets of peer-support whereas the use of which in

counseling may be employed as more of a stylistic choice. The professional nature of counseling

requires a more conservative personal conduct and presentation which contrasts with peer-

support where individuality is embraced. The participant quoted below had experience with

counselling in a semi-professional setting and spoke of modifying her appearance to fit the dress

code more suited to proper conduct.

"Making sure that my bright, bright purple hair was all tucked underneath the dark color at

the time, for the older clients who didn't like that, and making sure that my shirt wasn't, I

think I'm wearing a band t-shirt, but who's on it right now?"

Impression management of portraying a capable professional is paramount to the persona

of a formally trained therapist. Instilling faith and trust in their clients is one of their main objectives.

The impression that a peer-supporter portrays to be successful in their efforts is less dependent on

their superficial presentation but rather the quality of how they show up to session. The value of

peer support was reported to come from being yourself and from being authentic. Exhibiting basic

qualities for being a good human, showing up and listening were reported to be the only necessary

requirements to being an effective peer-supporter.

"Sometimes being human is all you need to be. We're not playing counselors. We're being

ourselves. Active listening, empathy, non-judgment. The baseline for being a good person.

You literally don't even have to be a psychologist. You just have to be a decent human being."

The formal training of a clinical psychologist is as extensive as one of a medical doctor. This formal nature conducted by a psychologist could perhaps be one of the obstacles that young people face in seeking professional help. Establishing a rapport and common ground can be much easier amongst peers as compared to a client-professional relationship. Peer-support was reported to be a good intermediary step to seeking professional help, especially when the issue wasn't severe. There was a desire for the peer-supporter to provide the appropriate and right type of support and refer to professional resources if necessary. The following response highlights the desire to want to be of service for those that are in distress.

"I want to be there if someone needs help, and I want to be there to provide the right kind of help as well. Sometimes there's no need for a counselor. Sometimes you just need for someone to be there to talk. Sometimes there will actually be a need for a counselor, so we want to also help to establish that as well. Be that bridge between someone who's not sure if they need counseling."

This account is an excellent example of peer-support being complimentary to counselling. In some cases, it may be all the support that is required. In more severe cases, a referral to professional services would be necessary. That is the aim of the training for the volunteers to know the limitations of the support that they can offer and when to suggest further resources.

Stigma around seeking professional help from a counselor or psychologist

The other main difference from peer-support is the presence of hierarchy or power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship with a professional counselor or psychologist that comes from their extensive formal training and gatekeeping of knowledge. The use of assessment tools can

be quite daunting for young clients seeking help. They can feel judged as "less than" and can be left grappling with unpacking any diagnosis that they may receive.

>*"Not everyone wants to go talk to a psychiatrist or something. Like, sometimes they just want a quick listening ear or like someone who's on the same level as them, like without the hierarchy."*

The social status and class of a therapist or psychologist may dissuade younger people from seeking their help for fear of judgment. This stigmatization of professional therapy that can impede young people in distress from seeking the help that they need. Peer support can provide an intermediary step in finding the appropriate level of help and resources. Peer-support was not seen as a replacement for professional therapy but rather a step in seeking the right support and serves the purpose of destigmatizing the act of seeking help.

>*"They feel fear that most people think that counseling is just because you're crazy or like you're really, really like feeling bad about something or you have a mental illness. But it's not only because of that. It's also because you need to take some thoughts out of your mind. And I believe therapists have the tools to help you. But the first step is peer support as a helpful, helpful resource."*

Previous negative experiences with therapists or doctors can add to the stigma and negative perceptions surrounding these professionals. Being judged, turned away, or talked down to by therapists has a lasting negative impact and can often happen to young people seeking help.

>*"We can be so pervasive about self-stigmas, too, and just how you're like, no, I can't be that person [who seeks counselling] because then what would I think of myself?*

This quote highlights how judgment of the self can occur. How if they sought a counselor, how they would perceive themselves negatively and internalize the judgment that they fear from others. Talking with a peer-supporter can therefore help to reduce this stigma and aversion.

Another layer that can add to the stigmatization of professional counselling is culture. Some cultures have an inherently negative view of counselling. Parents may judge that if their child must seek professional help then there is something seriously wrong with them.

"I do think that the students who come from cultural backgrounds that have really high stigmas who would like to see a counselor but cannot because of that [stigma] would potentially have the most relief in some cases from having this program offered for them. Like, 'Oh, they're not a counselor. This isn't a session. This isn't something that I have to ask my parents for money for.'"

Capilano University has a vibrant and burgeoning international student community that may face additional barriers to help-seeking behaviours including fear, stigma and negative beliefs (Cogan et al., 2023). These barriers are experienced with the compounded challenges of adapting and acculturation. Disconnection from home institution and social integration can add to feelings of distress and loneliness. Further research on the implementation of offering effective emotional support to international students is needed. For the purpose of this study, the anticipated value and impact of peer-support is that engagement with such a program will reduce barriers and increase social integration.

Peer-support skill development and steps required

With the help of the psychology faculty at Capilano University, including the former head of the department who has over 40 years of clinical experience, the workshops provided an essential foundation to the basics of serving in an emotionally supportive role. Despite the informal and

casual nature of the intended support of the program, preparation and adequate training for the volunteers was paramount to both the safety of the peers and supporters. As many undergraduate psychology students have the goal of attending graduate school for counselling, the volunteers explicitly noted how the transferrable skills from the peer-support workshops provided a good foundation for their career development.

> *"This is like a great place to start and start like working on these skills practically and not just like from taking classes and stuff. So that's kind of like for me, the most important part of it is just like getting practical, like practice doing these things in a sort of like safe, confined environment before like moving up and doing it in a bigger way."*

The concrete hands-on experience of serving in the peer-support role provides invaluable experience in developing the skills to serve in a professional capacity. One of the essential preparations before entering the role is a bracketing of personal biases or prejudgments in providing a safe environment for personal disclosure from the peer seeking support. The following participant shared his experience in preparing to act in the role of peer-supporter and the importance of compartmentalizing presuppositions and keeping them separate from interactions in the peer-support context.

> *"We've got to put ourselves in a mindset where we're listening. And we're trying not to cover the person's experience with our own biases. And that's something that we should be very careful about. Because biases are there whether we like it or not. I think it would be a better role if more people kind of took that to heart as well."*

He highlights the potential harm that could come from sharing opinions based on personal biases and the self-awareness and sensitivity involved to do so. It is not to say that no form of personal disclosure can be shared from the peer-supporter, but rather prudence must be taken

when deciding when and how to share with the support-seeking peer. The more informal nature of peer-support can benefit from an appropriate amount of personal disclosure on the part of the supporter. This sharing can help the peer seeking support feel validated in their cause of distress and how they may have experienced it. The following account illustrates the tenuous line of how much sharing is appropriate so that it is beneficial to the support-seeking peer and doesn't pull focus from their story.

> *"Sometimes they want to hear that, a little bit of sharing, because they want to feel like they are not the only ones that have that. Of course, you are not going to say, like, oh, that happened to me and it was worse. Like, you are not going to tell them that. So I have to be careful sometimes with, like, what I have to ask when I'm talking with my peer support. There's a few things that I have to maintain a little bit away from it."*

This participant had prior experience with offering peer-support within an eating disorder context with a local organization. The sensitive nature of living with an eating disorder requires more rigorous safety training. The personal disclosure of accounts shared from the supporter role may be triggering. Consent to share must be gained and sensitivity in how much detail to disclose is a top priority. Having peer-support volunteers from a variety of backgrounds, including surviving eating disorders, provides a diverse range of experiences on the team of volunteers to better meet the anticipated needs of the students seeking support from the program.

The ability of the volunteer to shelve any problems they may be preoccupied with on that particular day to be more present for the peers they are supporting is the first essential step in entering the role. It was expressed by a participant that she had to shelve her experiences of feeling overwhelmed by everyday problems. She reported the need to bracket suppositions and expectations of how others should behave to effectively listen in a more supportive way than might

usually have been offered to friends and family. This intentionality is at the core of being an effective peer-supporter.

"I have to be not overwhelmed with life first of all. I have to remove all my feelings about kind of the world to some extent and other people and how they are and how they should … how I think that they that they should be, my expectations of them I guess. And I just … it's a lot of just reminding myself that like, I don't know everything and that's not my job and I may not understand what they're going through or have any background. And that's also okay. And so then it's just about like listening."

She further talks about the value of being a good peer-supporter is not in having any answers or solutions but rather to be present, listen and validate with genuine sincerity.

There may be a situation where a support-seeking peer would like some advice or a bit of guidance. It is reiterated in the training that offering advice is not a directive or value of peer support and should generally be avoided. Since the context of peer-support is informal and conversational, sometimes some opinion sharing is okay. If this is ever the case, asking permission first and gaining consent before sharing was noted as being essential. The following highlights the need for asking first before sharing opinions. And to only do so when it is predicted to be helpful and beneficial to the peer and not cause any harm.

"With someone who you may not know and who could be a stranger but is looking for support, you would want to have active listening and maybe not give advice or maybe ask in advance if they would like advice or if they just want, like, a listening ear."

The beauty of peer-support is that there is no one-size-fits-all for treatment. Each exchange between peer and supporter is unique. The needs of the peer can be tailored to, but most of all it's a safe space to be heard without any substantial or weighty input from the listener. Finding an active

listener with no expectation in return is a rare commodity that leaves the recipient feeling appreciated and validated for their own unique experience. It is a deeply humanizing experience that we do not get often enough in our day-to-day lives. What is exceptional about peer-support is that the benefits of uplifting are experienced bidirectionally by both the peer and supporter.

How offering peer-support is much like being a friend... ***but not quite***

Peer support is an excellent intermediary form of help as it can be more immediate and less formal, like asking a friend or colleague for advice. It is characterized by being *friendly* but not necessarily from a friend capacity. It provides the anonymity that many younger people feel more comfortable with in disclosing more personal issues yet is offered in such a way that is imbued with warmth.

"I don't want to talk to a counselor, but I'll talk to you because you're acting like a friend."

This quote illustrates that the peer-supporter *acts* in a manner similar to a friend within the session. Acting like a friend can help establish the rapport more immediately and can help the peer seeking support to feel more comfortable. It would seem that peer-support bridges the gap between friends and helping professionals.

"I think there is a gap with mental health from counseling to just having a friend. There is that gap. And I think having a peer support program will help fill that gap and it will help everyone's wellbeing."

This quote makes an important distinction that peer-support is beneficial in promoting wellbeing and *can* have a positive impact on mental health. Peer-support however is not a substitute for the treatment of mental illness. This distinction establishes the niche of peer-support

as a way to foster more connection within the student community, increase social integration, and improve mental health literacy amongst undergraduate students and reduces social stigma associated with mental illness. The support provided can be an essential anchor to newcomers to university when mental and emotional challenges must be balanced with the new stressful challenges of academic pressures. The sharing of experience can be all that is needed to help ameliorate new student distress as shown by the quote below.

> *"It is not like we are friends, but we are like a guidance, something like a guide there beside them. They know they are not alone, but they also know that there are these boundaries that they have to follow in order to have a better space between peer support and participant."*

Boundary setting is an essential skill for peer supporters. As people that have a propensity for helping others it is all too common to cross their own boundaries and overstep their own limitations in giving too much. Knowing the limitations of the peer-support role and having the self-awareness to know when the boundary is being crossed by the peer or themselves, and having he assertiveness skills to maintain that boundary is essential for all the volunteers of the program. Preparedness for challenging situations is paramount to building the confidence of the volunteers as well the success of the program.

Emotional preparation for challenging situations or heavy disclosure

Building that confidence in the peer-support volunteers to navigate and be in control of the session during challenging scenarios is essential to the successful operation of the program. Workshopping, brainstorming, and role-playing are all tools that we utilized to prepare for crisis management, effective boundary setting, and how to respond when encountering suicide ideation. The following quote exemplifies the ideal confidence of a volunteer.

"I feel like having that mindset of, I am in charge, and just, like, you know, reminding yourself that, yes, you are in charge. You have free will, you know, you have self-determination."

The main goal of the program training is for the peer-supporters to feel empowered in navigating emotional challenges. Increasing their confidence in positive coping serves as a model for behaviour to the peers that they are supporting. Showing the peers seeking support that they as volunteers are not afraid of big emotions can have a big impact in itself. But because the volunteers have a propensity for being more empathetic, we want to make sure that they always feel safe. Being able to sit with uncomfortable emotions is a skill to develop but we would never want our volunteers to cross that line where it makes them feel uncomfortable.

"Because even for ourselves, as peer supporters, we are putting ourselves in a more vulnerable position than we otherwise would because you are sharing with another person, well, not necessarily if you're sharing, but you are receiving those energies from another person. And yeah, perhaps the other person may not be at the same state that you are at. So, you do have to be in this place where you can take that and just let it sit with you and not have it impact you, for example, in a negative way."

This is a very high level of emotional skill to be able to receive the *energy*, or state, that the peer seeking support may be in. Whether that may be deep sadness, animosity, or anger, there is a potential that these states may arise occasionally in the peer-supporter exchange. That is why support for the volunteers is essential. Debriefing sessions with the team and facilitators can help address any emotional distress experienced by volunteers from acting in the role of peer-supporter. Sharing experiences within the community of volunteers creates an atmosphere of mutual support

and a culture of care. Encouragement of self-care is crucial and to not volunteer if their own emotional needs have not been met.

> *"Sometimes it can be a bit burdensome when if somebody, well, that's the other thing, because I'm a very, I guess you could say empathetic person, I can really, like, if somebody's disclosing something that's very sad or very heavy, I do find that it does impact me."*

Helping peer-supporters cope with the emotional impacts they experience in the one-on-one sessions with students requires further development of the program. As it stands, the strength of the program is in the coming together for workshops and the resulting sense of community and comradery experienced by the volunteers and faculty alike. Supporting one another on the team with the added benefit of the more professional and experienced advice of the faculty sponsors is a strength of the program.

Emotional value and strength of the program

The phenomenon that occurred within the walls of the psychology lab at Capilano University for the peer-support workshops was a sense of uplifting, and of collective relief. The source of that feeling was a result of coming together as like-minded, caring individuals that all had the common goal of improving the atmosphere on campus through being of service. There was much enthusiasm reported by the participants. A feeling of being a part of something special and seeing the instructors in a different light, where the learning is collaborative and more reciprocal in nature.

> *"So, when we're pooling, everyone's pooling together their ideas and all of that stuff, that's a very big exchange of energy that's happening, and it's positive energy because everyone's there for a common purpose and everybody already has that element of*

themselves where they want to help others, and it's just a nice positive exchange of

energy."

The reciprocal nature of the learning from one another's experiences were not just between faculty and students, but between faculty as well. When the students engaged in the active listening role-playing, so too did the faculty, and were able to offer some much-needed peer support to each other. The culmination of the energy in the room resulting from the workshopping engagement combined with the impactful exercise of doing one-on-one active listening sessions resulted in an uplifting form of emotional skill development that had a lasting affect.

"It makes you feel validated, it makes you feel that you are doing something good, you're

amongst other like-minded people, and it just helps."

The building community of peer-supporters along with the sponsoring faculty members took the form of a collective actualization. The enthusiasm, zeal and fun that transpired gave some much needed boost that tends to be absent from formal lectures and curriculum. Having a common goal of applying a passion for psychology with actionable implementation on campus had the affect of motivation and momentum. The sense of being a part of a grassroots initiative that will potentially be the first of its kind at Capilano University had a palpable positive resonance amongst the group.

There was sense that the space created during the workshops was a safe haven for those that are perhaps more sensitive or not inclined to share in a traditional classroom setting. The absence of judgement, embracing of ideas and personal anecdotes had a personally validating experience for many of the participants.

"It's just nice to be in an environment with my peers. Which I feel like I'm not saying

different opinions are wrong or bad, but it's just nice to be kind of on the same level. In

terms of like personal understanding too. And we all want is to be here and we all are

doing it and want to learn. I think it just reminded me that social interaction is good, and I

need to push myself. It just made me feel more comfortable interacting with my peers in a

group setting."

It was particularly encouraging for the participant quoted above because she often struggled with being misunderstood by her peers and family members. The coming together as a group to work towards the development of the program was in a sense, healing in itself.

Need for a community-based approach to supporting mental health on campus

Psychology students have a propensity for higher levels of sensitivity which fuels their fascination for human behaviour. This proclivity for sensitivity is hypothesized to be a result of a higher rate of psychopathological life experiences in psychology students as compared to other cohorts (Werz & Buechner, 2017). These sensitive individuals do not often get the opportunity to shine in a group setting. Having the opportunity to harness their unique talents and capabilities has proven to be a context that has been embraced wholeheartedly by the entire team. There is an earnest motivation to participate in further skill development workshops so that this peer-support program can get off the ground. Here are some of their accounts on the potential impact of the program and the need for a community-based approach to mental health on campus.

"I think definitely what makes me feel the most supported is being seen. And that's like,

community support. It's like feeling supported. It's not just being supported. It's just

amazing. Like, that's so cool. Just being seen man, that changes your life, even if it's for 20

minutes."

The quote above highlights how the experience of *feeling* supported is very different from *being* supported. There is a nuanced difference that requires engagement with alternative

communication styles that perhaps may be judged by others resulting in the validating

phenomenon of *feeling* seen. The difference is noticeable, and this participant has the intuitive

insight to discern when she is being tolerated, or paid lip-service versus genuine appreciation for

the uniqueness that she is. This is a main tenet of peer-support, unconditional positive regard for

self and others. This offering of acceptance provides the foundation for helping others to not feel

alone in their experience of distress.

> *"It's just nice to hear that from people younger than you and inspire them to feel better*
>
> *and to be better and to seek for feeling better and sometimes those moments of distress*
>
> *are just moments that we have to have in order to heal. And I wish I had somebody when I*
>
> *was 20 years old telling me those things, because I didn't."*

The above quote highlights how there is a sense of collective human experience,

particularly in this case of the specific population of undergraduate students, that the challenges

and distress experienced along the way are opportunities to heal. The burden of these challenges

need not be shouldered alone. The sense of belonging that comes from interacting with other

students they would normally never talk to cultivates a sense of familiarity and comfort on campus.

There is an urgent need, especially following the isolation and resulting loneliness experienced by

students starting their studies during the pandemic (Phillips et al., 2022), to come together in

person and build connectedness.

> *"I think so, yeah, like having a community and having like a sense of belonging, like us*
>
> *humans do have the need to feel like we belong somewhere, so like having that sense of*
>
> *community, like it's definitely helps my well-being a ton, so I think having, implementing*
>
> *that in CapU would help a lot of students."*

The task of building a community falls on those that make up the community. That is why this peer-support program is a student-led initiative. As students, self-regulation is an important skill to develop both individually and collectively (as a community). Having a diverse range of volunteers on the peer-support team from different backgrounds will ensure that the emotional needs of students can be met from an array of cultural origins.

"I couldn't even imagine being an international student, like being away from home, whole new different country, different cultural norms, different social norms, like it's probably a culture shock for a lot of them. So, I think having that relatability of someone who also went through that culture shock would be super helpful for them."

Supporting international students through the peer-support program has the potential to help them with any feelings of distress stemming from cultural differences. The hope is that they can increase their sense of social integration and belonging here on campus within the vibrant diversity present on campus. Relatability and bridging the gap are the goals. The result is building communities that are more cohesive, integrated, and symbiotic for the future.

General Discussion

It remains undisputed that the value of peer-support, especially within the postsecondary context, has a tremendous impact on not only the students seeking support, but the ones offering it as well (Johnson & Riley, 2019). In a time when young peoples' anxiety rates have never been higher (Goodwin et al., 2020) and medicating of these disorders is becoming the norm, there is an imminent need to ease the distress of this sensitive cohort of students. Mental health literacy is on the rise due to the proliferation of "wellness influencers" on social media and the increased availability of health literature online through Google and YouTube (Lim et al., 2022). But how impactful is being well versed in pop psychology "buzzwords" if that awareness cannot be put into

practice? Student-driven leadership is needed on behalf of this cohort to meet their own wellness needs. The reason behind this is that the students' voices must be heard in speaking up and mobilizing their own agency to build an informed, proficient, and caring community. The articulation of student needs and values must come from the source. The pandemic has left many young students accustomed to working online (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021), and as the work from home hybrid model is becoming the norm (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023), in-person interaction is lacking. Social integration hinges on getting involved, meeting new people, and bridging the gap to build vibrant communities.

Empowering students (that have the desire to do so) in developing specialized skills to offer peer-support, results in an increased sense of agency and self-efficacy (Crips et al., 2020). The participants of this study demonstrated a clear interest in being part of a broader community with the common goal of creating a student-led peer-support program. The value of launching such a program is in the harnessing of each volunteer's unique skillset to improve the wellbeing of the student body on campus. The experience for them was noted as fulfilling, rewarding, and transformative. The takeaway is that a purely student-led initiative (with the support of faculty) provides the context for hierarchy and social barriers to be left behind.

Developing a grassroots peer-support program from the ground up allows for a spirit of collaboration, reciprocal learning, and collective actualization (the seeing through and advancement of a community-based identity). The skills learned to be a good peer-supporter – greater ability to work towards collaborative problem solving, general leadership and communication skills, building confidence for community-engagement and cultural proficiency – have a far-reaching impact not just occupationally, but have relevance to one's life as well. The result is an increase in relational intelligence, being more present with others, both within a

professional context and in general life (Caporale-Berkowitz,2022), as well as improving their effectiveness as aspiring psychology scholars and practitioners.

Putting theory to practice at the undergraduate level is not an opportunity often offered to psychology students. The hope is that implementing such a peer-support program will be a legacy project that can continue to nurture budding psychology scholars to contribute their unique insights to the science and art of increasing levels of wellbeing on the community level. Harnessing the invaluable resource of each participant's lived experience to inform and improve the program's implementation.

The accounts of the participants illuminate the general philosophy and benefit of peer-support, that it is much like being a friend... *but not quite*. The nuanced nature of the peer-support role requires balance on the part of the volunteer, between professionalism and casual interactions, between boundary setting and relationality. The organic and reciprocal nature of the therapeutic relationship within the peer-support context is its greatest strength. This study has shown that training for the peer-support role fosters development of "soft skills" with much potential value. The extracurricular activity of the peer-support workshops was noted to be a good complement to the psychology curriculum of the participants. The result was a sense of strengthening the foundation for entering the helping profession that is characterized by authenticity, warmth, genuine curiosity, and sincerity that can only be gained through in-person interaction on the community level.

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