The Relationship Between Peer Support and Psychological Distress among the Undergraduates in Hebei Province, China: A Concept Paper

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Abstract

The health care system relies heavily on peer assistance. Peer support's effects in a university setting, however, have reportedly been deemed inadequate. By analyzing the preview reviews, this study aims to examine how peer support affects psychological discomfort in an academic setting. Peer support, however, does not always have an impact on the psychological discomfort of college students. To undertake more research, the inner potential mechanism between psychological discomfort and peer support must be investigated. The Social Identity hypothesis, which looks at how people define themselves in social groups, is a good hypothesis. It was put forth by psychologists Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s. The Psychology Distress Scale, created by Kessler et al. (2003), and the Peer Support Scale, created by Kuo et al. (2007), were used to create and validate this instrument to have a deeper comprehension of this issue.

Keywords: Peer support, psychological distress, undergraduates

1. Introduction

The effects of peer support are wide-ranging and integrated into various fields, such as forensic peer support services, addiction, and mental health, as well as in different age groups and mental health condition severity (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020). This is even though numerous authors have stressed the critical importance of integrating peer support into the health care system to instill hope, improve engagement, quality of life, self-confidence, and integrity, as well as to lessen the burden on the health care system. Kerr (2020) reports that 75% of adults have a mental illness before the age of 25, and mental health issues are even more common among college students (Grasdalsmoen et al., 2020). Due to the numerous responsibilities, they have, college students are thought to be in a difficult stage of their lives, such as being away from home, having a rigorous curriculum, and having

insufficient health education and mentor-mentee programs. Unquestionably, peer assistance can help university students who don't have family support avoid mental health issues when they experience stress-related issues (Parra et al., 2018). A study in three Canadian universities reported that those who took part in the online peer support program self-reported reduced psychological inflexibility, stress, anxiety and depression, and increased psychological flexibility and well-being. The findings provide evidence that peer support may be a beneficial adjunct to mental health interventions offered to college and university students (Li et al., 2024).

2. Definition and Concept of Peer Support

Peer support was defined by Mead et al. (2001) as "a system of providing and receiving help centered on essential concepts of respect, shared accountability, and

mutual agreement of what is beneficial. The idea is like Solomon (2004) and Keyes et al. (2016) who also emphasized the value of both giving and receiving support as well as mutual respect and clear understanding. Similarly, peer support is a relationship between people who have had similar experiences with mental health challenges and who offer each other mutual support, understanding, and guidance to facilitate recovery and personal growth (Puschner et al., 2019). The term "peer support" has been used in this education study, though there are variations depending on the setting; for instance, "peer caring", "peer mentoring" or "peer attachment" have been used in health-care services and criminal justice.

The Social Identity hypothesis, put out by psychologists John Turner and Henri Tajfel in the 1970s, is suitable. It investigates how people define themselves in relation to social groups. Social categorization, identification, and comparison are key ideas in social identity theory. Individuals assign themselves to particular social groups, identifying with the traits that these groups have in common and assessing their group's standing, reputation, and relative status in relation to others. People improve their sense of value and self-esteem through these procedures. The Peer Support Scale (PSUSS), created by Taiwanese researcher Kuo et al. (2007), was a suitable framework for assessing college students' peer support level. It was the first to gauge the extent to which nursing students offer their peers academic, emotional, and physical support. The PPS is made up of 17 items that are scored on a 6-point Likert scale. Numerous research has revealed that PSUSS has strong validity and reliability (Dogan, 2017). For application with various people and environments, it has been modified. The PPS is a helpful tool for program assessment and quality improvement since it is simple to administer and interpret. According to this study, academic aid includes services like academic counseling, tutoring, and resource access that supports learning and education. The term "physical assistance" describes the provision of useful support, such as obtaining medical attention, attending to the demands of the business, and assisting in the resolution of issues. Providing the person in need of support with empathy, caring, and concern is known as emotional assistance. Activities like active listening, consoling, and encouraging are all parts of it. Researchers expected that it would be a helpful tool as a form of academic and mental health support during these trying times because it is an informal kind of support that is widely available and effective.

3. Definition and Concept of Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is a general term for psychological functioning that is disrupted in the face of stressful life circumstances. According to Arvidsdotter et al. (2016), psychological distress is a condition of emotional suffering that is frequently linked to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Internally, they are disintegrating and having a difficult time managing their emotional states, which adds to their poor well-being. While psychological distress is frequently mentioned in healthcare literature, it is rarely described as a separate concept. Kessler et al. (2003) defined psychological distress as emotional suffering brought on by the interaction of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which the same definition of Turner et al. (2019). In this study, psychological distress was defined as a uniform mixture of symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines depression as a disorder characterized by either a depressed mood or noticeably diminished pleasure in all activities, as well as at least four additional symptoms lasting at least two weeks, such as significant weight loss or gain, disturbed sleep, decreased concentration, fatigability, psychomotor agitation, or rumination. Meanwhile, Latiff et al. (2016) characterized depression as sadness, feelings of guilt, loss of interest, and low concentration. In other words, depression could appear as the feeling of low spirit or dejection, mental distress, deep disappointment, and failure in fulfilling specific goals in life, which may lead to a suicidal impression. Anxiety was explained by Bukhari & Afzal (2017) as tension and apprehension, which is a normal reaction to the impression of threat but is out of proportion to the seriousness of the situation and interferes with day-to-day functioning. It affects how someone functions emotionally, cognitively, physically, and behaviorally (Kiran et al., 2020).

4. Relationship between Peer Support and Psychological Distress in Previous Research

Results from 255 students at a public institution in Hong Kong revealed that depression symptoms were negatively impacted by the perceived availability of peer support (Sun et al., 2020). Likewise, Richard et al. (2022) claims that peer support appears to be a promising avenue towards improving the mental health of young adults, with lower barriers to accessing these services when compared with traditional mental health services. There was other evidence of peer support being a useful intervention for undergraduate students entering midwifery education in the Republic of Ireland, strengthening collegiality for the participants and enhancing the sense of belonging to higher education and the profession of midwifery (Carragher & McNeill, 2021). Another case study at a further education college in the UK analyses whether being involved in a peer support program impacts on the student's educational goals and social relations. The result is that a purposeful relationship between peers is formed, which is found to invert the usual dynamic of higher and lower capital (Whitehead, 2021).

In terms of special needs students, the results based on observations and a questionnaire from two groups of students in school Ndola district of Zambia indicated that special needs students benefit from having peer support from peers to help increase social interaction (Newa, 2022). Similarly, social support from family, friends, and

significant others was found to be influential in decreasing psychological distress and increasing satisfaction with life among Nepalese migrants in Tokyo. As stated by Grubic et al. (2020), student-centered support programs and methods are urgently required and particularly invaluable to create effective mental health services in low-resource environments (Puschner et al., 2019) and during the Covivirus-19 epidemic (Suresh et al., 2021). A study done from October 2019 to March 2021 during the pandemic also explained that receiving peer support generally had a positive impact on the mental health of many of the receivers (Suresh et al., 2021). Even Online peer support interventions for special people with mental health conditions were reviewed and identified as a promising therapeutic future and seem to be viable and acceptable (Fortuna et al., 2020; Kazerooni et al., 2020; Li et al., 2024).

Although many researchers showed positive evidence of the relationship between peer support and psychological distress, there are also some negative examples of effectiveness. As can be seen from a study in a black college, both family and peer support significantly moderate the relationship between distress tolerance and suicide risk, while peer support did not significantly correlate with a lower risk of suicide, family support did (Thomas & Brausch, 2022). According to Smit et al. (2023), the benefits of peer support interventions may be effective for the clinical and personal recovery of mental illness, but not for functional recovery. Evidence from 13 studies with 2479 participants is insufficient to either refute or support the use of peer-support interventions for people with schizophrenia and other mental illness (Chien et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to do further investigation into the relationship between peer support and psychological distress.

5. Conceptual Framework

Mental diseases like anxiety, stress, and depression are common among university students and can negatively impact both their emotional and academic well-being. This fact was highlighted by Milic et al. (2020), who pointed out that mental health illnesses are more common in schools. Their psychological suffering may lessen during their three or four years of education with the support of their university peers.

Fig. 1's conceptual framework illustrates the connection between peer support and psychological discomfort. The dimensions of psychological distress are anxiety and depression (Kessler et al., 2003). However, Kuo et al. (2007) states that peer support is mainly composed of three elements: physical assistance, academic assistance, and emotional assistance.
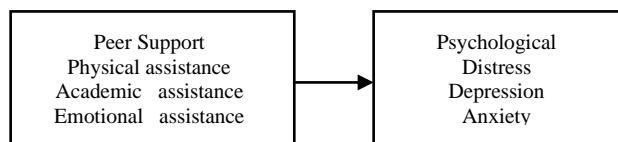

Fig.1. Conceptual framework

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite growing evidence supporting the benefits of peer support, it remains underutilized in educational settings. The study highlights the importance of peer support in mitigating psychological distress among college students. It can significantly enhance students' emotional and academic well-being. However, more comprehensive and rigorous studies are needed to fully understand its efficacy and effectiveness in addressing psychological distress among college students. Educational institutions and their support networks should allocate more resources to promote peer support initiatives. This will not only benefit students' psychological health but also contribute to their academic adjustment and future professional success. It also gives institutions crucial theoretical and practical support in preventing and addressing the psychological distress and peer support of college students.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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