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Writing as Disclosure Therapy For Students: An Analysis of Technique

Jesse Wingate

In recent years, the mental health of students on college and university campuses has grown increasingly important to student affairs professionals and counselors. Unresolved mental health concerns such as stress, anxiety, and depression can develop into physical ailments, thus causing greater threat to students' health and wellbeing on college campuses. Students often lack the ability to cope healthily to stressors and mental health ailments that subsequently affect their overall well-being. This article will address the benefits of writing as a form of disclosure, while briefly introducing ways that students assuage symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety. Through the consideration of journaling techniques utilized by psychologists today, this article will introduce student affairs practitioners and counselors to techniques in which writing can be therapeutic in daily practices.

Over the past 10 years there have been numerous conversations pertaining to the mental health of students at colleges and universities across the United States. From depression to anxiety, back pain to nausea, the prevalence of mental health issues and their physical side effects are taking a front seat with students in the classroom. Many times, students who have mental health issues also suffer from physical ailments such as nausea, headaches, and back pains, which make mental health issues even more of a concern for student affairs professionals. In a survey conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA) in 2007, an astounding 64% of students surveyed declared that they had feelings of sadness in the previous 12 months, and 52% reported feeling hopeless as well. As these trends persist, it becomes increasingly apparent that counselors and student affairs professionals must adapt to these situations and explore new techniques and strategies to address mental health issues on campus. Though student affairs practitioners are not licensed counselors, they serve a primary purpose in receiving students' disclosure regarding relationships, anxiety, stress, depression, and myriad health-related issues. This article will survey various methods of disclo-

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sure in which students engage and further develop the case for prompted writing as a form of therapy in counseling college students.

The Call for Disclosure

Disclosure is simply defined as a way of revealing personal information that may be troublesome or stressful to an individual. Traditional-age college students (i.e., those between the age of 18 and 24 years old) endure a variety of stressors during the course of their college experience. Stress is known to increase levels of anxiety, create poor time-management skills, cause physical and mental exhaustion as well as the onset of depression. There is not one causal link that relates high levels of stress to maladaptive behavior, but it is popularly believed that it is a significant factor in the binge-drinking trends and other drug use activities adopted by students on college campuses.

Mental health issues are cumbersome and are comparable to the weight of heavy textbooks in students' bags. A bag with many textbooks will contribute to eventual back and shoulder problems. Nevertheless, college and university students today carry much more than books in their bags. Students are carrying issues and personal ailments that affect their health in a variety of ways. The American Psychiatric Association has reported that one in four people will experience a depressive episode before the age of 24 (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). Taking this into consideration, and coupling national mental health data with the concurrent stressors of daily collegiate life, students must be provided with an opportunity to empty their bags.

There remains a question as to how students can positively develop healthy habits that would enable them to unload their stressors in a productive way. For many years, students have sought out quick fixes to their problems. At such a formative time in their lives, it is common to see students experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sexual activity. These actions merely provide temporary relief from the onerous mental health issues that may be consuming them. The temporary satisfaction of engaging in such activities may lighten the heavy bag for many students, but they do not suggest promising health implications.

While there is no definitive link between the statistics and the prevalence of mental illness in college age students, it does raise questions regarding disclosure. Are students turning to alcohol and drugs to relieve themselves from stress, depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses because they are not comfortable seeking direct mental health assistance? In a report published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 41% of college students admitted to drinking heavily, which was defined as five or more consecutive drinks at one time in the 2 weeks prior to the survey (Johnson, O'Malley, Bachman & Schulenberg, 2008). The same

report listed that approximately 35% of college students also reported having used illicit drugs while in college. Although there may be many factors contributing to a student's use of drugs or alcohol, the belief that such behavior is a coping mechanism for mental health issues has been well-documented (Williams & Clark, 1998; Zaleski, Levey-Thors, Schiaffino, 1998).

Practicing Disclosure

There is an age-old stigma attached to seeking professional help for suspected mental illness. College students' schedules are undeniably overwhelming; therefore, the excuses for not seeking professional help are certainly justifiable. Much of students' stress comes as a result of being over-involved in extracurricular activities and academics. Student affairs professionals certainly notice this trend and agree that a response is absolutely necessary. A student affairs professional need not sift through literature in order to recall an instance in which a student has disclosed something personal or traumatic; this role, as a counselor of sorts, is a substantial function that individuals in the field already adopt. Students will often vent or relieve their stress through dialogue with a student affairs professional with whom they already have an established level of trust. Thus, these individuals are already on the receiving end when witnessing the disclosure of stressful events, or exposure of emotional conflict. Though student affairs professionals are assuming the role of make-shift counselors, it is imperative that students with significant mental health issues are referred to licensed counseling professionals on campuses.

Psychologists have found that there are distinct physiological, psychological, and emotional benefits to disclosing in counseling sessions (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999; Kerner & Fitzpatrick, 2007). One of the biggest obstacles that a student struggling with mental health issues has to overcome is establishing a level of comfort with his, her, or hir therapist. Sometimes this can be difficult, especially if the student is unwilling to attend counseling in the first place. Students may limit their level of disclosure in a counseling session with the fear that their thoughts or emotions may be critically viewed, even by a counselor. Therapists and counselors on college campuses can be wholly beneficial to students who are grappling with mental health issues, yet students must first be willing to acknowledge the fact that they may need professional help and establish an adequate level of trust that provides them with comfort in the counseling setting.

Pennebaker (1990), in the text, "Opening Up," described the benefits of disclosure and the immense value associated with writing. He spent years examining the positive health effects associated with disclosure, particularly through writing. Pennebaker stated, "translating events into language and writing them down can reduce cognitive work in another way" (p. 109). In 1997, he asked a group of

participants in a study to write for 15 to 30 minutes a day for three to five days a week. After analyzing the results, he concluded that “when individuals write or talk about personally upsetting experiences in a laboratory setting, consistent and significant health improvements are found” (p. 164).

Pennebaker’s work has set foundations in social psychology with alternative forms of counseling therapy techniques. With resounding success, the simple act of disclosing has transformed the way that people of all ages interact with secrets and traumatic life experiences. Many students believe the practice of simply keeping a journal is ineffective as a response to stress, anxiety, or depression because the results are not immediate; however, benefits do exist. Since the mid-1990s, scholars across disciplines have been experimenting with Pennebaker’s beliefs on expressive writing therapy. Smyth et al. (1999) conducted an experimental study to examine whether or not writing about stressful life events had an effect on patients with asthma and rheumatoid arthritis. They found that patients who engaged in writing activities for four months had notable positive changes in comparison to those in a control group who had not participated in writing exercises. Thus, if writing in a journal can be beneficial to patients with diagnosed physical ailments, it is likely that the effects on mental health would be similar.

As psychologists and medical professionals continue to practice counseling on the mind and body, college students are continuing to augment the percentage of 18 to 24 year olds suffering from mental health issues such as depression (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). Though many counseling centers already encourage students to journal or express themselves in positive and creative ways, there is still a population of students with mental health issues who do not seek help unless their physical health becomes jeopardized in some way. The following section will introduce alternative self-help techniques that involve disclosure as well as their benefits, many of which traditional-aged college students may not be aware.

Methods of Disclosure

Although some students wish to keep their secrets private, it is becoming apparent that there are some who desire to learn what causes them worry, stress, and sadness. A question that student affairs professionals may ask is: How often do students walk into the office and disclose something personal about their lives? Whether they speak nonchalantly of their stressful week or through tears in regard to a loved one or relationship, students confide in others around them and inadvertently participate in a form of disclosure that is purging and cathartic. Frequency of face-to-face disclosure is evident in student affairs practice, yet the barriers with which students guard themselves still remain. Men, for instance, are traditionally less likely to seek out counseling than women (Berger, Levant,

McMillan, Kelleher, & Sellers, 2005; Good & Wood, 1995) and may not feel as comfortable disclosing their stressors or mental health concerns with student affairs practitioners. Thus, the methods of disclosure are continuously changing and becoming more accessible to even the most reserved students.

Over the past decade, technological advances have changed colleges and universities in a unique way. In the late 1990s, the Internet entered the arena of media available for student disclosure. As the use of instant messaging programs, social networking sites, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and online journals became popular, students began to address their mental health woes in a technological universe. Anderson (2001) stated that one of the most common reasons students use the Internet in college is to communicate with friends and family from home. This is not surprising, as students who are in college often struggle to find a connection with individuals who are already familiar with their history, hence their inclination to keep in close contact with family and friends from home (Gemill & Peterson, 2006).

Another example of Internet disclosure is the online journal or blog. People from all over the world are updating online journals on a daily basis, many of whom disclose some of the darkest points of their lives. Participating students will share more about their lives in an online journal than they would in person to one of their closest family members or friends (Joinson, 2001). This is a phenomenon that can only be explored by analyzing the differences between online and face-to-face disclosure. For anyone who has written an angry or upsetting email, or found consolation from their woes by posting in a blog, this method of disclosure can be far easier than having to confront such issues face-to-face. Joinson found that it was less of a burden for individuals to disclose online because of the degree of visual anonymity and the text-based mode of communication. When considering the tenets of online disclosure, whether in an instant messaging program, online journal, or email message, it is important to examine the absence of emotion that usually comes with face-to-face interaction.

Student affairs practitioners and college counselors are witnessing the online disclosure phenomenon all over the world in a variety of ways. The text component of online communication permits students to control the situation and avoid any threatening response that may emerge from having disclosed personal information that is embarrassing or stigmatizing (Joinson, 2001). It is almost as though a person disclosing in an online journal is hoping for someone to read their most intimate thoughts and then respond to them in a non-threatening way, which is therapeutic in itself. The benefits of having an online journal are bountiful, in that the author reserves his/her/hir identity and manages the possibility of displaying personal information to those with whom they trust.

The role of technology on college campuses is essential, and student affairs practitioners can benefit from incorporating such methods of disclosure into their conversations with students. As technology becomes more interactive, student affairs practitioners and counselors have the ability to effectively acclimate themselves to the tech-savvy ways of traditional-age college students. It is particularly important to consider the actual act of disclosing to a person willing to receive and offer feedback on students' mental health concerns. As counseling centers experience annual increases in visits, it is important to consider the methods of therapy used beyond the realm of the closed door, 50-minute session. The following section will describe ways in which student affairs professionals and counseling centers can incorporate the practice of writing and disclosure therapy into meetings with students and will introduce benefits that can come from incorporating technology into general counseling practice.

Fusing Writing Techniques with Conversations

Student affairs professionals and counselors alike ask students to consider journaling or openly talking about their traumatic and stressful experiences. In some cases, a counselor or therapist may even ask to read over journal entries and offer constructive feedback to the student. Of course there is no definitive way of forcing a student to write in a journal, but there are some methods that can be employed in counseling sessions or conversations that will help students feel as though they are accomplishing something outside of the confines of their appointment or meeting.

Student affairs professionals who counsel students with mental health concerns should consider creating a plan to guide their conversations. Having a tangible product and mutual understanding of expectations in a meeting fosters an environment that is conducive to disclosure, which is why it is important to craft weekly goals or plans for the student to take with them as they leave a meeting. As the student prepares to leave, the student affairs professional or counselor should encourage them to write in a journal with a specific prompt. Professionals in the student affairs field should have the student write down a few questions that emerged from the counseling session and advise that he, she, or ze participate in at least 15 minutes of writing every day until the next session (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

The essential component of this technique is prompting the student to partake in writing about acutely traumatic experiences that he/she/ze has had. As previously mentioned, students are more likely to seek out help if the mental health ailment manifests itself through somatic symptoms. While writing about traumatic events, experiences, or stressors may be difficult for many students, the act of disclosing becomes important for unloading the weight of mental health

concerns, much like lightening a backpack will reduce back and shoulder pain. It is important for students to conjure up the disturbing and most challenging thoughts and disclose those in a journal format. Having engaged in this activity, students can relieve themselves of carrying the unnecessary weight of their stressors and emotional experiences and are more likely to improve their mental health through rationalization of their emotions in narrative form (Pennebaker, 1990). Pennebaker wrote:

Once we see the psychological basis for a particular health problem, we can then use the health problem as a signal of distress. By focusing our energy on reducing the cause of the distress, we more quickly resolve the underlying psychological issues that we may not have known were issues in the first place. (p. 19)

In other words, when students are able to realize the cause of their back pain, or headaches, or lack of sleep, they can consciously make an effort to address this on paper or in counseling rather than letting it recycle itself within their minds.

Conclusion

Students persist through their struggles in the collegiate environment and often partake in activities that are dangerous (e.g., binge drinking, drug abuse, and unsafe sex) as ways to cope with the daily stressors in their lives. Amidst these activities, students suffering from depression, anxiety, and stress are finding ways to disclose through the use of technology and in conversations on a daily basis. With the help of counseling centers, students can develop healthy disclosure techniques in order to better their health and coping mechanisms. By writing about deeply personal issues, traumatic experiences, or simple stresses, students are likely to experience improved clarity of mind and an understanding of the causes for their depressive episodes, anxiety, and stress. With mindful awareness of such issues, they can then begin to take proactive steps towards a more sustainable and healthy lifestyle for the remainder of the collegiate experience.

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