

# Fall Showcase 2019

## Psychology Education and its Potential Role in Mental Health

Dr. Kristin Vespia, Psychology, Kailah Siggers, Samantha Alger-Feser, Nicholas Livingston

### Background

Research presented at the American Psychological Association convention in Chicago, IL, August, 2019.

Are students and staff prepared to recognize and assist those who are in need? Experts in mental health literacy suggest they are not (i.e., Jorm, 2012).

In this study, 869 undergraduates were randomly assigned to a vignette depicting a student who met criteria for major depressive disorder, alcohol abuse, or who had a significant stomach ailment.

Many students were able to correctly identify the person with depressive symptoms as suffering from a probable mental illness (73.5%), but they were also far more likely to indicate a “medium” or “large” concern about making the situation worse by trying to help the individual (47.9%) when compared to the assisting someone with a physical stomach illness (27.7%). Furthermore, students who had completed Abnormal Psychology ( $n=207$ ) were significantly more likely ( $p=.049$ ) than those who had not to indicate they would try to help the student should they be seen crying and distressed.

#### Vignette or Case Scenario\*

*Student B is a 21-year-old junior at \_\_\_\_\_. B has been feeling unusually sad and unable to have any fun for the last several weeks. B is also tired all the time and has trouble sleeping at night. B doesn't feel like eating and has lost weight. Because of the sadness, B often can't focus in class or even skips class, and so B's grades have dropped. Even basic day-to-day tasks can seem like too much to do. B's parents and friends are very concerned.*

Condition 2/Physical: *having stomach aches regularly for the last several weeks; stomach issues*

Condition 3/Alcohol: *regularly drinking a lot of alcohol and then craving it and drinking even more for the last several weeks; drinking issues*

*\*Please do not use vignette without first author's consent.*

### References

Jorm, A. (2012). Mental health literacy: Empowering the community to take action for better mental health. *American Psychologist*, 67, 231-243. doi:10.1037/a0025957

#### Participants & Procedure

- 869 undergraduates from a mid-size, Midwest university (14.2% of students)
- Participants were primarily White (87.2%), female (78.6%), and juniors or seniors (63.9%); mean age = 23.9 (SD=7.8)
- Recruited via email to student body from Dean of Students' Office
- Anonymous, voluntary participation with gift card drawing incentive
- Linked to online survey
  - Randomly assigned to 1 of 3 “Student B” vignettes (depression, stomach illness, or alcohol abuse)
  - Answered survey items on multiple topics from background and vignette-related questions to mental illness myths

Table 1. *Perceived severity of problem*

	Dep. n=294	Stom. n=297	Alc. n=319
Very Serious	215 (73.1%)	189 (94.0%)	275 (86.2%)
Somewhat serious	65 (22.1%)	79 (28.5%)	36 (11.3%)
A little serious	13 (4.4%)	8 (2.9%)	7 (2.2%)
Not serious at all	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.3%)

### Discussion & Implications

- College students have some demonstrable knowledge about mental illness.
- Students recognized the potential seriousness of physical and mental health concerns, including alcohol abuse, but they endorsed non-professional help-seeking strategies.
- Students were more concerned they would make things worse by helping someone with a mental illness (vs. physical), but those who had completed Abnormal Psychology were more likely to say they would help a distressed peer.
- There is a need for enhanced mental health literacy given students' expressed concerns about their ability to help, coupled with their likelihood of turning to peers when in distress.
- Mental health literacy is a potentially marketable knowledge/skill for psychology majors and could be identified and discussed as such in classes.



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