Psychology Education and its Potential Role in Mental Health

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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

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.

Table 1. Perceived severity of problem

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

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.

References

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