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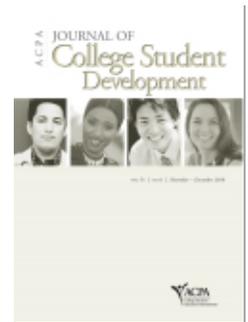
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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 51, Number 6, November/December
2010, pp. 723-727 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2010.0014>



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Transitions: A Mental Health Literacy Program for Postsecondary Students

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Enhancement of mental health literacy is a mental health promotion strategy that may be effective at destigmatizing mental illness and increasing self-seeking behavior. Transitions is a mental health literacy program intended to heighten students' awareness and discussion of mental health problems and promote help-seeking behaviors. Transitions was launched in Nova Scotia in 2007 and distributed to 8,000 students. Transitions has since been launched nationally and is in the process of launching internationally. A follow-up study indicated over 95% of students felt they could relate to Transitions and enjoyed reading it, and 40% discussed Transitions with a friend.

Mental illness is the most common medical condition to onset during adolescence with half of all mental disorders having their onset by age 14, and three-quarters having their onset by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005). It is estimated that by the year 2020, 15% of the burden of disease will be attributable to mental and behavior disorders (World Health Organization, 2001). In Canada, the prevalence of mental illness among youth ages 15 to 24 is

estimated to be about 15% (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2004, p. 86) with depression the most common (10.2%; Government of Canada, 2006). Mental disorders and stigma associated with mental disorders during adolescence may have a significant impact on a young person's life including impairment in self-seeking behaviors, day-to-day functioning, self-esteem, relationships (Corrigan & Lundin, 2001; Moses, 2009), learning outcomes, and academic retention, as well as putting them at higher risk of alcohol and drug use. Furthermore suicide, usually associated with mental disorders (Mann, 2002), is the second leading cause of death among youth (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2006).

The period of development during which many mental disorders have their onset correlates with the time young people may first be leaving home for prolonged periods of time, with many heading to postsecondary institutions. During this transition the young person often experiences a new level of freedom and independence, but in the absence of previously accessible support systems (e.g.,

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parents, friends, community). These new circumstances may be stressful, which is a concern given that stress and lack of social supports may exacerbate existing mental disorders or increase the risk of development of mental disorders (Government of Canada, 2006; Mayo Clinic, 2008). During this time young people may not realize that the difficulties that they are experiencing could be due to a mental disorder rather than simply a reaction to life changes and, as a result, may not seek appropriate assistance, with the result that early intervention and effective treatment do not occur expeditiously (Coles, Coleman, & Heimberg, 2008). Increasing mental health literacy in the context of this transition period may not only enhance support to young people at this critical time but may also improve their ability to cope with these stresses, identify a mental disorder if it is on-setting, and seek help if they become overwhelmed (Coles et al.).

Enhancement of mental health literacy is a mental health promotion strategy that may be effective at destigmatizing mental illness and increasing self-seeking behavior (Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, 2004/2007). It has been shown to have positive results in reducing stigma and empowering young people in a school environment (Waring, Hazell, Hazell, & Adams, 2000). In the context of postsecondary school-based programming, mental health literacy means providing students with the information, support, skills, and resources that will help them cope with the pressures and challenges they face during the transition from high school life to postsecondary school life. It also means increasing knowledge about mental illness, including how to identify risk factors, signs, and symptoms of mental illnesses, which essentially may help young people realize that not all problems can be solved alone and it is sometimes necessary to seek professional help (Coles et al., 2008).

Transitions: Student Reality Check is a mental health literacy program designed to improve awareness of mental health and mental disorders, increase help-seeking behaviors, increase supports and awareness of help resources, decrease stigma associated with mental health and mental illness, and decrease feelings of isolation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The fundamental idea behind Transitions is that improving mental health literacy may improve students' awareness of mental health problems, increase their knowledge about mental disorders, encourage discussion about mental health among their peers, and facilitate early identification of mental disorders and promote help-seeking behaviors. Theoretically, student mental health would be improved through use of Transitions by increased awareness of mental health and mental disorders, increased awareness of resources (student) and associated increased help-seeking behavior, increased peer support, decreased feelings of isolation, and decreased stigma. Concurrently, active participation of the institution (high school, university, college or other postsecondary institution) in the transitions process should serve to raise the importance of this issue in the administration and student support services domains. This may serve to encourage consideration of enhanced mental health supports to students that could be delivered through already existing health and counseling services.

The Transitions materials present topics on mental health and mental disorders alongside information on sexual health, physical health, peer pressure, time management, study tips, alcohol and drug use, financial responsibilities, and suicide. The presentation of these important issues through a holistic approach may result in education and increased awareness about

mental disorders in a destigmatizing context. The Transitions materials also include contact information for websites and organizations relevant to the problems discussed and provide information on how to recognize signs of mental illness in oneself as well as in friends, thus promoting discussion of mental health problems among students and encouraging help-seeking behaviors and peer support. The Transitions materials can also be customized by each institution to include contact information for student services and/or community services, further enabling help-seeking behaviors (particularly self-referral). The goal of the publication is not only to provide students with the tools and empowerment to make smart choices about their health and well-being but also to help institutions better address the needs of their students' needs and in doing so improve students' mental health and learning outcomes.

DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSITIONS: STUDENT REALITY CHECK

Planning and Development

Transitions was initiated by one of this article's co-authors in partnership with IWK Health Centre (Dalhousie University), Saint Mary's University, Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia Community College, and NSCAD University (all in Halifax, NS) in 2007. A first draft was created by the lead author of this article with input from mental health professionals, education professionals, and students. Three focus groups consisting of students, ages 17–26, were held over a period of 6 months to elicit input from young people regarding relevant topics and to identify the style, tone, and format favored by students.

Although Transitions was initially distributed to postsecondary institutes, it also has potential to be used in high schools. Providing Transitions to students in their senior year

of high school may help better prepare them for the upcoming move to postsecondary education.

Dissemination

The Transitions materials consisted of two parts, a larger broad version and a condensed pocket-sized passport version. The large version (100 pages) encompasses a variety of topics such as mental health, sexual health, physical health, peer pressure, time management, study tips, alcohol and drug use, financial responsibilities, and suicide, among others. This version was distributed to counseling services, health services, and/or student services offices for interested students to obtain at their will. The condensed pocket-sized passport version (30 pages) was distributed to first year students in their orientation frosh kits across Halifax, Nova Scotia in the fall of 2007. Contact information for counseling services and/or student services offices were located at the back of each Transitions passport along with an invitation to participate in an online survey regarding the passport. It is estimated that over 8,000 students in five institutions received a copy of the Transitions passport. Participating institutions also received 100 copies of the more comprehensive Transitions book as described above.

Following initial distribution, Transitions was promoted by this article's coauthors on local television and radio stations. Due to demand from other provincial postsecondary institutions, Transitions materials were disseminated to Acadia University (Wolfville, NS), Nova Scotia Agriculture College (Truro, NS), St. Francis Xavier University (Antigonish, NS), and all Nova Scotia Community College campuses. This was made possible due to a grant from the IWK Health Center Mental Health Program. Demand for the *Transition* from francophone institutions resulted in translation of the materials into French in the winter of 2008.

Preliminary Evaluation of Materials

Upon initial dissemination across the province of Nova Scotia, Transitions was evaluated through the use of an online survey (SurveyMonkey), accessible to all recipients of the Transitions passports. Participants were recruited through an invitation located on the back page of the passport. The invitation included an incentive to participate in the survey (inclusion in a draw for a Nintendo Wii™). The survey consisted of 14 questions related to different aspects of the content and tone of the passport. One hundred twelve students and staff members from five postsecondary institutions responded to the survey including individuals from Dalhousie University, NSCAD University, Nova Scotia Community College, Saint Mary's University, St. Francis Xavier University, and Acadia University. The respondents included 50 males and 62 females with the age of 56.3% of respondents ranging from 18–21, 17.0% ranging from 22–24, and 26.8% of respondents ages 25 and older. All respondents thought the Transitions passport layout was user-friendly and the tone was youth-friendly. Over 95% of respondents felt they could relate to Transitions and enjoyed reading it, and over 40% of respondents discussed Transitions with a friend. Similarly, over 40% of respondents had read or planned to read the Transitions book located in counseling services or student services offices, and 16% had or planned to visit counseling services offices because of Transitions. In general, respondents provided positive feedback regarding Transitions. Others gave useful insight on some of the points that they thought were important, and provided input for future editions.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the Transitions was to improve mental health literacy among young people in order to help them address their mental health through improved awareness of mental health and mental disorders, increased help-seeking behaviors, increased supports and awareness of help resources, decreased stigma associated with mental health and mental illness, and decreased feelings of isolation. Currently over 25 postsecondary institutions and community organizations across Canada currently use Transitions through various means including printed distribution of the materials in frosh packages as well as making them available electronically through e-mail, website format, and on CD. Many institutions are also making it available in printed and CD format in counseling and student service centers on various campuses. The feedback and interest received about this project suggests that it has filled a knowledge and resource gap experienced by postsecondary institutions and postsecondary students. The significant positive responses received in the preliminary evaluation after 1 year of Transitions indicates that it is well-received and understood by students and that it may be achieving its goal of increasing peer support and decreasing feelings of isolation and stigma through enhancing dialogue about the issues among students. Furthermore, it may also be improving awareness of support services and help-seeking behavior. However, this is a limited preliminary evaluation, and more comprehensive evaluations are required before we can determine the extent to which Transitions contributes to mental health

literacy, addresses stigma, improves self- and peer-identification of mental disorders, and enhances help-seeking behaviors on university and college campuses. Further systematic evaluation of the Transitions project is currently in development.

For information on how to acquire Transitions visit www.teenmentalhealth.org

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