

Main benefits for peer helpees

2. Social support and acceptance: It was unanimous that the main benefit for helpees was having an avenue to approach friends who offered a listening ear, friendship and support in times of difficulties as well as empathy and the assurance of just being there:

I think the main benefit for helpees was they were able to get a listening ear from someone who would not judge them at the first instance. (P07)

A lot of times we are there to provide a listening ear and to bring clarity to the situation. (P08)

An additional listening ear ... befriending those who were not part of a clique. (P02)

2.1. Free of stigmatisation and partiality (sub-theme): Next, approaching friends made the helpees feel less judged and observed under an official radar. Seeking help from a friend did not carry the stigma that seeing a university counsellor might:

They feel more comfortable talking about their issues to friends ... gave them an avenue to share, to offload any emotions they feel for whatever reasons they were going through. (P01)

3. Friendship and affiliation: Also, helpees confided in peer helpers because they were friends first. A personal relationship had to exist before the helpee opened up to trusted acquaintances:

Personally, I didn't have friends who approached me directly because I was a peer helper. (P05)

If I know my friend has some issues, my friend will open up more to me because I learned how to listen and how to be sensitive about their feelings. I can talk to them better and help. (P11)

Interestingly, if the peer helper tag featured too prominently, the same stigma that discouraged students from going to counsellors would also emerge (P09).

4. Guidance and accountability: While helpees perceived that they could seek advice, the peer helpers' training limited advising. Instead, the helpees were guided to clarify thoughts, explore options and be accountable. The training of facilitating an exchange was underscored where helpees were steered to consider a potential range of actions and consequences by the use of open-ended questions:

If they are facing some problems, I would naturally ask them more 'what they think of doing' or 'have they considered?' I would try to help them think but not to give advice. (P03)

The attending skills without solutions-directedness but guidance for deconstruction led to the secondary benefit of helpees feeling more responsible for the outcomes:

We are there to provide a listening ear and to bring clarity to the situation. People I have helped benefitted from the emotional support. They needed someone to listen to them, to better understand what they are going through. Peer helping is a long journey. After one or two sessions, you may not get to the crux of the matter. It may take a couple more meet ups but eventually most of them would see the light. (P08)

Sometimes refraining from advising was not as indubitable on the field, especially if the helpee was aware of the peer helper's personal and professional background and looking for advice based on that context. Despite applying the 'if I were you I would ...' technique, "there are a lot of different kinds of skills in peer helping and many different models but sometimes, in the right context, offering advice may be the way. It is the judgement of the peer helper" (P08).

In summary, the view that peer helpers were a group of allies or uncertified counsellors who could be depended upon, first for unconditional friendship and next support through presence, listening and enablement, without stigmatisation, offered the main benefit for helpees.

Main benefits of peer helping activities

The three activities cited were outreach events, weekly training sessions and retreats. The benefit associated with all three was internal bonding among the peer helping community and increased awareness among the university student population for outreach efforts.

Retreats

5. Belongingness and sense of community: Camaraderie during retreats was identified. Particularly during overseas retreats, new peer helpers discovered more about peer support through a community of like-minded people. Two main takeaways from the bonding were highlighted. One, they were advised to get to know themselves before attempting to brace others:

We were informed that this is the peer helpers' family. We have to know each other well before we get to help other people ... team building, bonding, that was the main part of the retreat. (P04)

5.1. Introduction to self-care (sub-theme): Two, the peer helpers discovered the concept of self-care. They learnt that they too had to ensure their own mental health and physical well-being. It was reassuring that the community reminded them of care amidst fellowship as "there are people here to support you no matter what" (P05).

Weekly training

6. Access to relationships and repose: Activities during Friday training developed internal bonding expressed by analogies of a close-knit group and illustrated by metaphors of 'family' (P04, P08, P10 & P11), 'community' (P01, P02, P04, P08, P09 & P10) and 'network' (P08 & P10). Besides, the wellness centre provided tranquillity and respite from the humdrum of studies:

To take our mind off school work and basically an environment for people to either take a nap or just to get things out of their heads, refresh their minds. (P04)

6.1. Mutual aid and extended support: Also on the affective level, the weekly training provided an avenue for peer helpers to look out for one other as it was described as a microcosm within a macrocosm:

Like a support network for a support network. We will be helping other people but there needs to be a group that we can reach out to as well. (P07)

The resultant mutual support helped sustain interest and enhanced their coping abilities. The undergirding in the centre offered a contrasting ambience from the go-getting classroom. The rapport built from a gathering of volunteers, far from the madding crowd and concerned about common good, was echoed in a quote on solace:

When people meet on Fridays, despite the busy schedule, to talk about non-work and non-school matters and are emotionally related, I think the friendship and bond is very different. In SMU, everybody is so competitive. You will not find many who will come on a Friday to talk about how we can help the rest of the school or how we can become better people. So, on Friday you will see people who are committed and know these people are different. They just want to do something good. (P07)

7. Confidence from subject matter and competency-based learning: The internal bonding during the weekly training was achieved on two levels. The training was eagerly anticipated and deemed important. Firstly, on the cognitive and skills levels, topics, approaches, tools and therapy were learnt formally giving the helpers confidence as “lessons were the most useful as we learnt the hard skills of peer helping (P05).

7.1. Community of practice through resource sharing and creation (sub-theme): Next, the platform allowed the peer helpers to tap on one another for general advice and additional resources even when they could not disclose presenting problems in detail because of confidentiality. Described as “ears for the school” (P11), sharing general personal experiences and discussing approaches in congenial and safe surroundings resulted in respondents feeling they were better supported and more equipped to deal with cases.

Hence, the weekly training session was perceived as a combined package infused with elements of fun, resources, games and interaction with people comfortable and engaged with one another. The amalgamation had the advantage of strengthening bonds and enhancing instruction. A respondent described the self-help energy as a shot in the arm: “an extra boost in getting us trained” (P08).

Outreach events

8. Building community cohesion through unity of purpose: The outreach events led to an increased awareness that there was a circle of social and mental well-being supporters “apart from the school counsellors or teachers or their professors” (P001). The main benefit was to alert students that they could count on a community ready to be significant others:

A group of fellow students who care to listen to them and happy to support them in whatever they are going through. I think outreach events is the main way people find out about peer helping. It helps to let people know there is a community of peer helpers and their role. (P04)

Furthermore, the event programming was a symbolic gesture of reaching out to spread positivity:

Whether direct or indirect, there was something positive going on. It was a measured and concerted effort to spread positivity in school, to alleviate the stress that people had and to promote wellness. (P09)

Besides, forming bonds during event organisation and being part of a band of peers with the same values also meant common understanding and meaningful participation in roles that contributed to others as “peer helping trained me to be more aware of society and built up my compassion levels” (P02).

9. Deepening engagement through touch points: Event marketing raised awareness of specific mental health issues such as depression and suicide as students dropped by. Handing out booklets, cards, pamphlets and balloons was cathartic for both the giver and the recipient. The paraphernalia heightened inner sensitivity and increased recognition of personal wellness:

Apart from the fluff, balloons, there was something deeper in giving out the cards, books and pamphlets that might have touched someone, made them aware that there was something that they wanted to talk about. (P01)

The random encounters and incidental conversations were fruitful for increasing visibility and growing understanding of “the hard truths” (P01) revealed by students’ sharing their personal predicaments or about their friends who had mental health problems.

Beyond upsides such as awareness and access, outreach event organisation was described as “the most stressful event that peer helpers can go through” (P006). The last minute changes and

the academic workload increased in tandem adding to the stress felt and the perception that the executive committee might be inward looking with “too much focused on bonding when they could be reaching out to more helpees” (P02).

Hence, the key benefits of peer helping activities in SMU were internal bonding, increased awareness of peer support and sharing knowledge, competency-based learning and best practices through a community of practice. However, a balance between spending an extensive amount of time on outreach vs peer helping was advised.

Innovative approaches to peer helping learning

10. Marrying academic learning with social assistance: When sharing examples of exciting approaches to peer helping learning, the responses correlated ‘module’ with ‘academic’, ‘role play’ and ‘Friday session’ in descending order. The co-occurrences were evident of the positive and long-term impact of the Peer Mentoring & Facilitation academic course, offered by the university from 2012 to 2015 and completed by the majority of the respondents:

The most impactful moments were during the academic module where there was a lot of role play ... I don't know if it is possible to revert to the academic module under General Education because I would say it shaped me. It was probably the most important thing that led me to become a peer helper. Having an actual module where we go through a structured 13-week class and incorporating all the important models e.g. Egan's model, into a curriculum and be evaluated, I would say, was the most important thing that started me on the peer helping journey. (P08)

The course began as a six-week half-credit non-examinable pass/fail elective and progressed to a one-credit unit module over 12 teaching weeks. The co-instructors were a faculty member and the head of the wellness centre then. The module was a pre-requisite for those who wished to be involved in the peer helping programme and recognised for experiential learning from actual cases and role play. The instructors' familiarity with the domain knowledge and real world experiences in supporting people impressed as “you are a student and you have not had the experience before, so you learn a lot from what people had experienced before you” (P06).

11. Exploring possibilities of learning: The module left an indelible impression for two reasons. One, structuring it as a pass/fail module was an innovative approach for innocuous exposure to peer helping. There was little barrier to entry and low risk of failing. Therefore, it took the pressure off learning. Furthermore, the humanistic approach to psychology and the social sciences oriented contents were a welcome relief from technical modules:

The module was a good way to open up (peer helping) to the general population. The course looked interesting and there was no harm in trying it out since I knew that I would likely pass. It was something that I could learn. It took away the monotony of finance or economics. It was completely different from business and technical modules. Even though it was a short four months of learning, I think it still made a difference. (P07)

11.1. Learning through collaboration and shared experiences (sub-theme): Two, instructional strategies contributed to innovative learning, in particular, scripted role play. The link between theory and practice was discernible as respondents engaged in direct application of skills through re-enactment. The facilitation of role play was powerful in re-presenting and reinforcing behaviour as the professor closed the loop with commentary and recovery. Students also chipped in to elicit “real emotions or questions that were relevant to everybody” (P08) during the discourse.

Rotational role playing allowed students to take turns being an imaginary “perpetrator/client/person in distress, a peer helper or just an observer” (P04). The pedagogy was appreciated for usefulness

and practicality with the re-creation of situations and the resultant intensification of learning considered most influential. The cruciality of the vital developmental segment was expressed to new peer helpers as “an Oscar winning segment” (P10).

Another teaching technique recounted was storytelling. The instructors’ narratives captivated students with insights into “the real cases that they handled either in SMU or in their previous jobs” (P04). The teaching method allowed students to connect across cognitive and affective domains while deepening their understanding of supporting based on the foundations of respect and accountability even in times of crises.

The role play scenarios were circumstances anyone could have confronted. The facilitation offered insights into how similar real-life scenarios could be attended to. Importantly, the professional reviews and peer inputs offered discussion on competencies (strengths and weakness) while the social and communal platform encouraged peer-to-peer learning, mutual information exchange and guidance on rendering hypothetical emotional and psychological support.

12. Delivering learning outcomes through external partners: Lastly, external speakers were esteemed for adding novelty to the training as well as discipline-relatedness to the helping service:

They would invite guest speakers on art therapy and hypnotherapy. It was fun because it was something new and related to counselling work. At the same time, it was something people did not get to experience often. (P03)

Collaboration between the university and external practitioners beyond the peer helping community enriched learning. The behind-the-scenes discussions provided opportunities for participants to ask and receive answers not normally found in standard texts or training curriculum. Over and above, the plenaries allowed them to review their personal interests and evaluate fit:

I remember an engaging guest speaker from SOS. I had positive feelings about the speaker as I was interested in being a SOS volunteer and the work they were doing. I think I also found out that I wasn’t a good fit or was too young and inexperienced then. (P04)

Hence, the innovative approaches to peer helping learning centred on teaching methods where participants were able to explore realistic situations by trialling different approaches in a safe environment. While adopting various roles that might have polar perspectives, the competency-based learning strategies built confidence in peer supporting and enriched understanding of diverse issues. Guest facilitators bridged learning in the classroom to field and complemented the training by university personnel.

Main arguments for engagement in peer helping

13. Acquisition of lifelong learning skills: The main argument for engaging in peer helping was the emphasis on psychosocial skills and abilities that enabled the development of personal agency, to help themselves and support others in dealing with everyday challenges, including general and mental wellness. The practical peer helping skills (namely facilitation, listening and counselling) could be applied to their personal lives and active vocations and were described as “life skills that were very useful and might be needed in the future” (P05).

13.1. Responding to sense of duty (sub-theme): Furthermore, motivation for peer helping was attributed to an inner urge to perform a service. The respondents believed that intrinsic motivation was necessary and referred to the driving force as “a calling on the part of individuals who want to contribute to common good and community wellness” (P06).

14. Supporting professional development: Others saw the worth of facilitation and person-centredness from reaping better workplace and relationship outcomes. Peer helping raised sensitivity, allowing for deeper interaction through augmented communication skills:

Facilitation is a core skill as it is a key enabler for interpersonal and workplace relationships ... being able to work in a team and achieving key outcomes ... awareness of how people are feeling and responding. It teaches you how to ask the right questions to get the responses you need. (P09)

The application of skills in meaningful supporting roles with positive outcomes could encourage more to become peer helpers. Inspired by personal experiences and circumstances, engaging in peer helping was also recognised as being in a state of agency that too developed and supported lifelong learning.

Main challenges for those considering peer helping and suggested solutions

While acknowledging the benefits and application of psychosocial skills, several challenges centred on:

- innate 'personality' and being able to adopt a flexible 'approach' (P01, P03 & P07);
- disposition to 'learn' and having an 'open mind' (P02, P04, P06 & P10);
- being 'aware' of what peer helping entailed (P02 & P11);
- prioritising 'time' and 'commitment' (P03, P05, P06, P08, P09 & P11); and
- understanding 'mental health' (P02, P04, P06, P09 & P11)

The respondents were confident the challenges could be met. They suggested key ideas for recruitment and selection, curriculum enhancement, training enhancement, expectation management and extending peer helping to the workplace.

15. Recruitment for desired personality traits: To address the first three aforementioned challenges, a proposal was for potential candidates to first know themselves before attempting to understand others. Another recommendation to ensure the right qualities for peer helping was by "testing for the right skills sets through personality tests" (P01). Thirdly, taster sessions were encouraged for candidates to top up pre-existing knowledge. The orientation sessions, where the skinny of actual cases could be experienced, could show how role play and reframing skills were applied and how different types of mental health problems were being handled (P02, P10 & P11).

16. Curriculum enhancement through certification: To generate buy-in, respondents advocated certification (P01, P02, P09 & P11) that could incentivise more to join peer helping that enhance the CV with transferable skills:

Outsource for a certification programme to help peer helpers be formally certified. (P02)

At the end of programme, become a certified coach or counsellor. The skill sets can be put in the CV. Maybe that might motivate more to be part of the programme in a professional capacity, rather than a student group. (P01)

In addition, certification could address the challenges of 'time' and 'commitment'. Previously, the academic module "was always fully subscribed" (P08) as completion contributed to graduation requirements. It was described as a "funnel" that provided a constant supply of potential peer helpers aiding recruitment even without outreach events (P08). As a CCA now, fence-sitters delayed commitment as they were spoiled for choice from a slew of diverse activities. The

proposed certification could overcome procrastination and offer equivalent advantages of the academic module.

Without certification, the usefulness of listing peer helping in the CV for a competitive advantage during job interviews was questioned candidly:

It gave me the chance to talk about the things I have learnt. I am not sure of the relevance to employability or the skill sets that employers are looking for. I don't know if it is a plus point in the corporate world or if it will advantage me. (P012)

Others focused on peer helping having some bearing on employment in services and less on commerce (P01, P03, P06 & P11). The uncertainty of peer helping having a direct impact on recruitment or industry preparedness was expressed:

Whether it helped me get a job, I am not sure as there could be many different factors. But, I was definitely not those star basketballers or swimmers, so peer helping played a part may be. (P07)

Peer helping as a CCA and its influence on hiring depended on “whether the potential employer valued skills such as active listening or mediation, which in HR would be more helpful” (P03). However, contrasting peer helping as a CCA vs attestation, the credentials might be a game-changer for “if it was formal certification, it would be different” (P02).

17. Appropriate and purposeful deployment: With regard to prioritising ‘time’ and ‘commitment’, two challenges were observed. Firstly, from anecdotal evidence, students regretted joining the CCA when they could not manage their peer helping commitments with academics. Secondly, outreach event planning was singled out as most time-consuming as there was no principled process. During a semester, there could be four hours of training and duty weekly and another four hours set aside for outreach totalling eight hours per week:

Two thirds (of time) will be involved in outreach. We cannot anticipate how much time we need to put in and there is no structure to the planning process because it varies from team to team. (P05)

17.1. Expectation management (sub-theme): A solution to address the time spent on outreach was to manage expectations and scale the event down. Organising through structure, controlling for efficiency and levelling commitment for equity were suggested:

I would think that putting structure to the outreach would help in reducing the number of hours that they have to put in and having an event template that could be replicated every year. We are sorted into different teams such as outreach, internal bonding, internal processes and community service. It would be helpful if the commitment levels of all the four teams were the same. If not, some might dread going to outreach. (P05)

18. Extending the value of peer supporting to the workplace: As for mental health, opinions pertained to extending peer helping in the university to the workplace. One training recommendation was to go beyond school-based scenarios, suicide prevention and mental health first aid to gambling, addiction and finance where family members and colleagues might be facing. The second was to organise a course or half day workshop on peer helping at work, for example, how to detect mental wellness issues at work where people were formal and less inclined to show their vulnerabilities. Topics such as mental health support for depression, abnormal stress behaviour, violent behaviour or violent tendencies and multiple personalities at work were suggested (P11). Another advocated training in “recovery, building resilience and supporting crises” (P07) that were portable skills useful for employability.

Discussion

Enabling personal and professional competencies that contribute to university life

The *appreciation* opinions expressed were positive reactions to specific helping skills acquisition and the influence of the acclaimed academic module. The chief benefit of the psychosocial skills development during peer helper training was self-growth and awareness in personal or professional capacities consistent with extant literature (Varenhorst, 1992; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Froh, 2004; Tan & Hsi, 2007; Aladağ & Tezer, 2009; Riggall, 2016; Eryilmaz, 2017; Andre, Deerin & Leykum, 2017). The quality facilitation, instructional adaptation and practical application were viewed as innovative approaches to collaborative and experiential peer helping learning. Varenhorst (1992, p. 13) had attested that “you teach by example and by providing opportunities to experience these values (of cooperation, acceptance of diversity, commitment, responsibility and service to others) in relationship to others in a context that is relevant”.

Another significant impact of the module was that it kick-started many on their peer helping journey of affiliation and support. Also, the criteria for selection of peer helpers was deemed a critical success factor as openness to behavioural learning and peer assisting besides pro-social characteristics were advantageous to the university community in the near term and workplaces in the long run (Lawson, 1989; Sharp, 1998; Tan & Hsi, 2005).

Besides, the positive effects of peer helping activities (outreach events, weekly training sessions and retreats) were internal bonding and proliferating mental wellness among the student population. The basis for engaging in peer helping was the supportive life skills learnt that developed deeper self-awareness, leading to doing more for individual and community wellbeing (Varenhorst, 1992; Egan, 2006; Tan & Hsi, 2007)

Expanding organisational capacities to enhance curriculum, training and employability

The *judgement* opinions concentrated on human capacity development to augment the peer helping programme. At the organisational level, suggestions to enhance curriculum and training include external partnerships, certification and internationalisation. Inviting supplementary external trainers and introducing varied and current topics add diversity and depth to peer helping education. While the introduction to the various forms of therapy by visiting affiliates were interesting, mediation was discovered to be particularly helpful for its extended application during employment (P03 & P05). Hence, peer helping knowledge, skills and competencies that could see through careers would be dually beneficial. The request for certification is supported by previous research that unveiled a motivation for being an age-based peer helper was an aspiration for a related helping career (Racz & Lacko, 2008) even though self-oriented and social support reasons might be primary. If the process of certification is not justifiable for organisational reasons, then recognition of prior learning leading to some form of affiliation, articulation or accreditation may bridge the gap. Another advocacy was for an online course to complement the existing curriculum that could lead to certification or a part of (P11). Next, connecting with peer helping communities not just locally but overseas to extend reach and promote exchange across geography was a recommendation for sharing practice and acquiring new learning in multicultural contexts (P04).

There is general acknowledgement of the existence of informal helping relationships online and physically in organisations. At the programme level, this presents an opportunity for the university to develop skills and expertise in online detection and peer helping in the age of new media. The trigger for a respondent was recognising patterns in “the written language and symbols” online that led to “a start of a conversation by text first and seeking an opportunity to meet face to face in

school to check out on him/her” (P10). Another looked out for “expression of negative thoughts on social media (Facebook and Instagram) ... and colour scheme” and used private messaging to inquire after and continued with the interaction offline eventually (P05). Respondents felt that being taught how to support peers online was useful as social media was a common avenue people used to express their distress. In addition, the curriculum could be expanded to include relevant behavioural strategies to resolve stress, tension, conflicts while promoting emotional health at the workplace (Burke, Weir & Duncan, 1976).

Other opinions concentrated on how peer helping skills training in SMU could be enriched in terms of future readiness and “how they can use the skills when facing career crises” (P02). Adopting relevant training material from career services, understanding models of engagement under exceptional situations at work and leveraging on the employability experiences of alumni peer helpers as mentors and facilitators were notions to relate peer helping to industry preparedness effectively.

On the ground, a proposal on improving the university peer support system included disclosure on the specialism and theoretical orientation of each university counsellor so that peer helpers could consult the counsellor most helpful to their cases (P08). This is consistent with university personnel contributing to establishing an ethos of caring (Naylor & Cowie, 1999) and cultivating a nurturing culture for peer helping to thrive (Tan & Hsi, 2005).

Conclusion

While the benefits to peer helpers and helpees are favourable and well-studied, the link between peer helping training to graduate well-being is less distinct and the correlation to employability less clear. Hence, the extension of supporting skills training to future readiness and workplace peer helping are recommended for curriculum enhancement. The significance of this study is that it adds to the scarce research on peer helping in Asia and contributes to qualitative work on the subject viewed through the experiences of alumni peer helpers.

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