Student psychological helpline – challenges and (non)professional practice at the University of Szczecin

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Abstract

The article presents a case study on the launch and operation of an online psychological help line administered by psychology students for other students and other young people. This initiative was created in response to the challenging pandemic situation in 2020 and was continued in the following years due to the demand for this type of assistance.

The people reaching out for support expressed emotional difficulties, increased anxiety, feelings of isolation, loneliness or problems in interpersonal relationships. The online nature of the project allowed young people to obtain an easily accessible, flexible form of help in a modern tech environment. Students reported that the project provided them with substantial professional experience, development of practical skills, and satisfaction from offering peer support.

The biggest challenges of the support line included the instability of contacts with those in need, the difficulty of setting a framework for support and the ethical aspects of the support offered. A limitation of this type of initiatives is the need to make every effort to ensure the safety and quality of the support provided through regular supervision and attention to the confidentiality of the platforms used.

psychological help; peer support; online support

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article is to present, in the form of a case study, the context of the launch, the principles of operation and the effects achieved by the online support line created at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Szczecin. The line is run by psychology students for other students and other young people, and the sup-

port providers are supervised by specialists, psychologists and psychotherapists. This initiative aims to support young people in coping with problems through psychoeducation and emotional support. Using the case study method, which examines a phenomenon in its natural context [1], we would like to present the emergence, development and results of the launched support line.

The line started operating in the pandemic year 2020. The year began with an epidemic caused by the acute respiratory syndrome COV-ID-19, which is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 cor-

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onavirus. In March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic [2]. The situation changed for people all over the world. It exposed the weaknesses of healthcare systems, caused emotional distress and slowed the economy down [3]. In Poland, the first case was recorded on 4 March 2020, and as of 20 March, according to the regulation of the Minister of Health, Poland was in a state of epidemic. The restrictions, which were imposed and lifted, caused changes in lifestyle.

Many psychological consequences and health problems have emerged gradually, the most common being anxiety, depression and stress [4, 5]. The restrictions that people had to adhere to contributed to the increased social unrest and generalized anxiety. An analysis of studies on the psychological impact of the restrictions caused by the experienced global infections indicates that the most common psychological consequences are: acute post-traumatic stress, moderate stress, depression, experiencing negative emotions such as fear, nervousness, sadness and guilt, as well as a tendency to abuse alcohol and other psychoactive substances [6]. Further overview data on the consequences of a lockdown due to the epidemiological restrictions indicate that, in addition to anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and addiction, there is an increased risk of suicidal behavior and domestic violence [7]. A review of more than a dozen studies on the consequences of the COVID-19 quarantine showed negative psychosocial outcomes including symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger, stress, post-traumatic stress, increased feelings of social isolation, loneliness and stigmatization [8]. It is emphasized that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a series of symptoms which, despite not meeting the criteria for a clinical diagnosis, are indeed symptoms, yet they are symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress and sleep disorders, which, depending on individual variables, can have different consequences [4].

Young people are one of the groups particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic in terms of mental health [9, 10]. During the pandemic, children and young people took part in global distance learning, which did not go without consequences. A review of studies on teenagers in Poland indicated that more than ten

percent of children and teenagers experienced serious negative consequences, and a few percent experienced a positive change [11]. The research indicates changes in mood towards depression, an increase in psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. difficulty sleeping, headaches and stomach aches), lack of digital hygiene, a change in lifestyle mainly towards an unhealthy one, and changes in friendships and relationships at home. These changes mainly affected high school students and girls [11], women and non-heterosexual people [9].

Project main objectives

The changes which have occurred in education during the pandemic have also affected the academic community. Some studies examine the negative effects of the pandemic, pointing to an increase in anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, as well as changes in students' learning, health and lifestyle [12]. There are also studies that analyze positive consequences and protective factors, such as sense of self-efficacy [13]. The pandemic triggered a global stress response, the course of which can be described using the phases of stress described by [14]. Initial reactions to the changes resulting from the pandemic took the form of an alert response, followed by a phase of shock and mobilization characterized by defensive efforts. These took various forms, from changes introduced by the government to those resulting from individual initiatives. The latter include a student initiative that emerged in the psychology department at the University of Szczecin.

The project "Students during the Pandemic. Psychology Students for High School Students" lasted from 1 April to 2 June 2020. The initiative was a response to the difficult situation of the pandemic in the country and was primarily aimed at high school students from across Poland, struggling with various difficulties. Fourth – and fifth-year psychology students provided online psychological support daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. via the project email and a specially prepared platform. Only students who had already completed psychological aid courses and voluntarily expressed interest were eligible to participate in the project. The students' work

was supervised by professionals (licensed psychotherapists) from the Institute of Psychology, so that the students could feel safe in their support work. The initiative exceeded the expectations of the organizers, and thanks to it, many people in need were reached.

After the first edition was finalized, the next editions were launched together with the next academic semesters, and so the second edition lasted from 3 January to 13 June 2021, and the third – from 6 November 2021 to 17 June 2022. In the third edition, the project was enriched by preparing a website and an online chat. People in need of support could reach information about our activities through the website and then choose a form of contact that was convenient for them - chat, email or online meeting. The subsequent fourth edition (2 November 2022) – 15 June 2023) was launched after the pandemic, due to the continuing need for psychological support. The student support line has continued its activities, building upon the work initiated by Inter Verba, the student research group specializing in psychological help and psychotherapy, which was established to address these needs. The transition to a more permanent structure was prompted by the conclusion of the pandemic period, coupled with the persistent need for psychological support among high school and university students. Consequently, the decision was made to conclude the initial project and formalize Inter Verba as a student research group, enabling it to provide continuous online support. The psychological help line continues and is aimed at students and high school graduates. However, people who are not studying, but want to seek advice on the psychological support they are in need of, and have heard about the line, also reach out.

The spectrum of reported issues

In the first edition, people who requested support were often confused, insecure, lonely, and signaled concerns about their upcoming final examinations and their future. There were also reports regarding difficulties and problems that started before the pandemic and were further reinforced as a result of it. These problems were related to romantic relationships, relationships within the family, as well as peer and friend-

ship-based relationships. The problems reported were mainly in the scope of the psychosocial factors determining mental health problems [15]. Young people reported feelings of isolation, different types of fears, e.g. of being judged, and of taking responsibility. This is in line with research on the specificity of problems and difficulties experienced by young people at this time [16] and may be related to the experience of blocking the development of natural needs for this period of life [17].

The attempts to evaluate, in the first and second edition, the support provided showed that persons reaching for support were most often in the age range 19-23 years, more often women than men in the proportion 10:2. Notably, consistent patterns were observed in later editions, with similar age and gender distributions among individuals seeking support. Persons who were willing to share their feelings after having benefited from the support, assessed the support as beneficial and valuable for them. There was feedback such as: "I think this form of contact helped me get through this time before the final exams and various problems that appeared", or "I felt very bad about myself, thanks to the support I started to feel much better".

Subsequent editions revealed the full spectrum of problems experienced by young people. There were specific questions relating to doubts about their health, the seriousness of their problem, the specifics of psychotherapy, e.g.: "I don't know whether to go to therapy, whether the problem I have is serious enough" or "what is wrong with me?", "can I go to a doctor with this and won't I be laughed at?", "will therapy help me?", etc. People seeking support reported problems concerning daily functioning related, for example, to insecurity in financial, educational or relational areas. They wrote and spoke about emotional difficulties and moods experienced, as well as somatic complaints that they associated with stress, e.g.: "I worry about everything all the time", "I have no strength for anything", "I feel tired". They reported family difficulties, e.g. addiction of one parent, conflicts in the family, illness of loved ones and feeling overly responsible for a parent or the whole family. Young people also focused on difficulties in partner or peer relationships. Issues of social anxiety and feeling lonely, e.g.: "I don't know how to talk to people", "I feel I have no one I can tell about my difficulties", "I feel lonely", were relatively common. Those seeking help had difficulties with self-acceptance, identity, sexual orientation, feelings of not fitting in with the group, being different, feeling inferior. They described negative comparison with others, as well as perfectionism or procrastination. Among those reaching the line, there were also those who were experiencing a crisis related to the loss of someone important, or the loss of a significant goal, or a crisis as a result of a break-up. The problems raised as important for young people are consistent with the developmental period experienced [16], and with the typical conditions enabling the search for help. We know that young people are more likely to seek help when they need more information about mental health, about how to express emotions, or when they feel safe in a helping relation [18].

Reflections and challenges of students on duty

In addition to its support value, the project benefited the organizers themselves. Students providing support had the opportunity to practice helping competences in real-life situations. Following the first edition only, students providing support were asked two questions: 'What did participation in the 'Students during the pandemic' project give you? and "What skills have you gained and developed through the project?" Two dominant themes emerged in the answers to the first question: (1) the development of helping skills, including personal development, and (2) the experience of helping; the answers to the second question detailed these themes.

(1) Within the first theme concerning the development of helping skills, students who took on the role of a helper and support provider talked about being given "the chance to develop their skills in working with young people", being able to "test their skills", "test the theoretical skills acquired in the course of their studies in practice", "develop their existing skills", as well as improving them, e.g. statements: participation in the project "improved my personal practical skills", "improved my professional competences". There were also more specific in-

dications of skills gained, e.g. participation in the project "taught me how to interact with a person in need of support" or directions for future development, e.g. "showed me what I need to work on next".

The skills development theme, focusing on personal development, included reflection on oneself in a supportive role, as well as an appreciation of participation in the initiative itself. Examples include participants' statements, such as: "above all, the project is a fascinating adventure and a lot of self-development", "it will last in my memory for a long time". In the course of helping, participants experienced anxiety and doubts about the helping process. There were doubts about their own competences and skills. As a result of participating in the project, some perceived that their anxiety levels had decreased, e.g.: "I am no longer afraid of interacting with a person in need of help". Being a support person on the line involved waiting for calls which could evoke a range of emotions. For some it was a chance to "learn patience while waiting for emails", for others to interact with other helpers. An important outcome for personal development was experiencing satisfaction from taking the action, an example being the statement: "the action brought me (...) a lot of satisfaction because of the possibility to give support to the people reaching out". Participation in the project allowed participants to recognize areas of their own interests, e.g. "being part of this project was a great lesson for me on what career direction I would like to take in the future".

Within the first theme, there were statements indicating the opportunity to practice making and planning a supportive contact, e.g.: "I have developed skills in relationship and trust building, strategy planning and active listening", "I have gained more flexibility in creating and entering into a contract". Some statements referred to learning specific aspects of active listening, e.g.: "I developed the ability to paraphrase and reflect emotions". Participants also indicated and appreciated the opportunity to work on their own emotional experiences related to the helping process, e.g. "I developed empathy and patience with other people's problems", "I had to deal with a certain helplessness arising in the case of people who needed longer psychotherapy". Participants saw the benefits of peer supervision, e.g.: "I learned a lot from the mutual conversation (...) where the others discussed their more difficult cases", and professional supervision, e.g.: "the discussions on the best way to help the so-called "difficult cases" were more educational than many classes", discussions with professionals "brought a lot of interesting tips from the life of a practicing psychologist" and "I learned how important supervision is".

(2) The second theme relating to experience was linked to increased awareness of and knowledge about the helping process. One participant wrote "I was able to see what it is more or less like to provide psychological support, what situations psychologists face and what fears high school students often face". There was a sense of increased insight into the problems young people face, e.g. one statement says: "participating in the project (...) gave me an overview of the situation related to the mental condition of young people and the problems and difficulties they face". There were repeated statements referring to the very possibility of experiencing being a helper and so, for example, it was written that participation in the project brought "valuable experience and reflections related to the work of a helping nature", "gaining experience that I badly need in order to increase the sense of my own competence", or "it will provide some basis in my future professional work". It may be concluded based on the above that those who chose to participate in the project gained more insight into the process itself, were able to start a psychological practice, as well as experienced and had the chance to see their own resources and start working on personal limitations.

The theme related to the experience was expressed in the statements referring to the possibility to learn and practice different psychological conversational skills, e.g.: "I worked on interviewing techniques", "I had the opportunity to use in practice all the basic communication skills I learned during my studies", "I had the opportunity to experience in practice how to create a mutually satisfactory contract and how to build a relationship and

trust with a person in need of support". Some participants emphasized the changes they experienced during their support work, e.g.: "I became more attentive and started to see the needs of the other person more easily", "I experienced first-hand what resistance is and the masking of real problems in a helping relation". There were also statements indicating the experience of the nature and diversity of the support contact, e.g.: "I learned that young people sometimes don't know how to start a conversation and they do it in a way that may seem like a joke", "I realized that there are situations where the real problem is somehow masked and we find out about it in the following meetings". The observed changes also concerned attitudes towards one's own skills after the experience, e.g.: "first of all I started to trust my competence more", "I strengthened my sense of competence". Female students who engaged in the help line emphasized changes in their perception of the helping situation. An example showing a change in insight is the statement: "After five years of studying psychology, it can be said that I came back down to earth and realized again how many aspects in human functioning, which are obvious to me, are not so obvious at all to people who are not exposed to such knowledge on a daily basis - especially to people in adolescence. So you could say that I discovered the power of psychoeducation".

Strengths and weaknesses of the initiative

The psychological support line that has been initiated, which is of e-support nature, has many advantages relating not only to the pandemic situation. An important advantage of such a form of support is the adaptation of psychological services to the needs of the younger generation, who function naturally in the world of information technology [19]. Analyses point to the advantages of online interventions and, among them, accessibility. Individuals can request help when they wish. They also emphasize flexibility or cost-effectiveness [20]. For young people, it is a viable and accessible form of seeking help and support, consistent with the specificity of the disorders of young people, whose motivation is more fragile and less resistant to deferring help. Online interventions are characterized by low barriers for treatment and high effectiveness. The research shows that the most important factor for reducing the risk of mental disorders in children and adolescents, by increasing mental resilience, is family and peer support [21]. The form of support offered is in the form of peer support, which also serves as support being prepared by individuals training to provide assistance. This can reduce distance, trigger a sense of shared experience and greater interest among helpers. Available studies demonstrate that teenagers are more likely to talk to relatives, while young adults to their peers, as well as the people they trust [18]. The studies on peer support most commonly address the help given to students by students, in the areas of learning, experienced stress, self-esteem, etc. An overview of the research indicates that peer support can provide benefits to both the helper and the recipient of support, although the results are not conclusive [22]. The line we are running is of a slightly different nature due to the fact that it is being run by fourth and fifth year psychology students, i.e. people who are already in advanced preparation for psychological support. They are additionally under constant supervision, and can later analyze the interventions they choose, as well as the doubts they experience and the changes they observe at the level of personal emotions and thoughts. The help provided may constitute a smooth transition to seeking fully professional support.

Online help has its limitations. According to psychotherapists, it is more difficult to tailor the help to the needs of patients, particularly those with comorbidities or acute crisis. Low engagement of those who seek help and high rates of treatment discontinuation are indicated [20]. In the context of psychotherapy, therapists point to the difficulty in assessing the patient's condition and the therapy process due to the reduced perception of non-verbal cues, as well as a higher rate of treatment interruption [23]. In the cited studies, psychotherapists tend to prefer a mixed form of help [20, 23]. In the example described, of peer psychological support, interruption of contact in particular proved to be a limitation. Some people receiving support, without prior notice, stopped responding to contact, despite previous satisfactory interventions. Support providers also reported difficulties in establishing an adequate contact framework for some interventions. A significant limitation of the provided support may be the low helping competencies of the student peer supporters.

An online form of psychological support cannot replace medical treatment, but it is a form that can be supportive in the decision-making process regarding seeking help, as well as providing the interest and understanding that is often needed.

Ethical aspects of the students' counseling line

The operation of the peer support helpline is an ethically demanding initiative. The helpline is staffed by advanced students in their final years of study who are involved on a voluntary basis, motivated by the opportunity to gain practical skills.

Before launching the helpline, potential challenges and ethical conditions were analyzed to ensure the safety of both those seeking support and student helpers. The students are guided by the ethical principles contained in the code of ethics for psychologists [24]. The student helpline is run under the supervision of specialists and aims to provide training. Students can consult their activities related to support and other situations that may raise ethical concerns. Student helpers regularly undergo supervision, where they can receive support from experienced specialists. Additionally, they are informed about the form and conditions of the helpline before it is launched.

The aim of the initiative is to provide psychological support, including help in identifying and defining problems, analysis and emotional processing of difficult experiences. As part of the preparatory meetings for peer support, the students are reminded of the objectives, principles and ethical standards that they should follow. In the first editions of the program, student helpers could participate in workshops developing basic helping skills.

Information about the people receiving support is anonymized and protected as confidential, in accordance with the rules of psychological practice. In previous editions, we used certified, secure online platforms to further protect

data and the content of communication. One of the priorities of the helpline is to ensure a sense of security for both those seeking support and student helpers.

CONCLUSIONS

More and more young people are seeking psychological and psychotherapeutic help [25, 26]. Due to the growing demand and the limited availability of psychological support, it is necessary to create new opportunities to access this type of support [27]. The student peer support line initiative is such a response. The suggested formula meets the needs of young people, is safe, accessible, and allows them to recognize their own problems and guide their actions. Peers, who at the same time have more knowledge and helping skills, are often a reliable group that is easier to trust and feel understood by [18].

The article concentrates on describing the foundation and operation of an online psychological support line for high school graduates and other students, which is run by students. The helpline has been operating since 2020 and was initiated in connection with the pandemic crisis. The initiative is run by psychology students under the supervision of specialists, which ensures both support for those in need and an opportunity for students to develop. The problems reported by those seeking help revolve around such issues as feelings of isolation, anxiety, relationship difficulties, family problems, and difficulties with self-acceptance and identity. Students providing help can safely develop their helping skills, gain practical experience, and understand the specifics of issues related to providing psychological assistance.

The strengths of the helpline are its accessibility, flexibility, anonymity, peer support and the fact that it meets the needs of the younger generation. What is more challenging is the limitations of the online form of support, such as lower engagement and quicker discontinuation of the help. Peer support is not a substitute for psychotherapy, but it can help in deciding whether to seek or continue it. The line is run in accordance with ethical standards and ensures the safety of those seeking support and student helpers.

The student psychological support line is an important initiative that addresses the growing need for psychological support and care. It also allows for the safe development of helping skills. In the future, it is worth further improving the line's operation and monitoring its effectiveness.

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