

A Christian Alternative to a Peer Counseling Training Program

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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"There are those who travel and those who are going nowhere. They are different and yet they are the same. The success has this over his rivals: he knows where he is going."

Mark Caine.

Finding a path to follow can be a confusing task for a young person. The problems that continuously assail students can easily blow them off the course they have planned. With the aid of counseling, a student, or anyone else, can more easily isolate problems and learned how to overcome and solve them. Just being able to talk about their problems with someone who will not judge them allows the students to realize that they have the ability to solve their own problems. Unfortunately, too often the needed counseling either is not available or is way beyond the student's means. For these reasons, many schools are beginning to create counseling programs which are not only inexpensive (usually free) but that also employ fellow students in order to put the "clients" at ease. It is my belief that such programs do work and will continue to work if implemented correctly. One such peer counseling training program has been established here at Ball State. In order to get a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of such programs, a review of the course is in order. Following the review will be a brief encapsulation of the recent literature dealing with peer counseling. Finally, after a clear understanding of the effectiveness of a peer counseling program has been established, I will offer an outline of a usable version of my idea for a course on peer counseling with a Christian base.

"As smooth as . . . sandpaper" was how one of the members of Grace Mims' CPSY 491 class described her first presentation. But even though her first experience at presenting before an audience was rough, she was still excited to continue on her way in the peer counseling program put together by Mims. This program, listed in the catalogue as Counseling Psychology 491, was created to form an organization of students to facilitate counseling among other students. By examining the prerequisites of the course and then the structure and content of the class itself, some critical conclusions about the success and failures of the course can be drawn. Thereby, we can decide whether or not the class achieved its purpose.

As an upper-level class, Counseling Psychology 491 has several prerequisites which must be taken in order to be admitted. Classes focusing on topics like interpersonal relations or cross-cultural counseling are among the necessary courses a student must take in order to even be considered for the peer counseling training course. These classes allow the student to have a thorough counseling background from which to work when dealing with peers. Rudimentary counseling techniques such as reflection, or mirroring the client's intentions back in open-ended questions are all a part of the course work of such prerequisite classes. Only with a clear understanding of techniques and styles such as those can an effective training program for counseling peers be established.

The central goals of Counseling Psychology 491 are to establish a faction of the student body who would not only be able to serve as counseling agents for their fellow students, but also give insightful presentations to organizations on a variety of topics. These

presentations were the main reason I first became involved with this class. I belong to an organization called the Student Leadership Development Board. In it, we give presentations, called consultant services, which are tailored to the needs of the organization which requested the service. Grace Mims attended one of our meetings in order to request a consultant service dealing with how to give a consultant service. After volunteering to work on this task, I began talking with Grace about the specifics of the class. The class members were beginning to learn how to give presentations which was why my organization was presenting for them. Student Leadership Development Board was able to set up the basic structure on which the students based their presentations.

The first set of presentations were scheduled and I was prepared to evaluate them. The topics ranged from combating apathy to enhancing your own self esteem. The presentations lasted anywhere from ten to thirty minutes and were meant to inspire audiences and listeners into either being able to handle their problems better or to know that there are places to go for help. Being new, and relatively inexperienced at presenting to crowds, the students were fairly poised while speaking. Each set of students showed a clear understanding of the topic with which they were dealing and they really got the other students who were listening involved. By not only speaking "at" their audience, the presenters were able to let the other students know that by actively participating, change can occur. Along with the comfortable presentational style came the helpful topics. Combining the two

provided the class the ability to put audiences at ease, which facilitated learning in a relaxed atmosphere.

The basic structure of the students' presentations was the same for all of them. An icebreaker would introduce the program. An icebreaker can be any sort of activity that gets the audience interested and involved. A typical icebreaker involves an instruction by the speakers, some type of game (e.g. "Red Rover"), and then an explanation about how the activity ties in with the presentation's topic.

Following the icebreaker is the main structure of the service. Similar to a well-structured speech, the presentation has an introduction, body, and conclusion with clear transitions. Effective aids to communicating the intended message include handouts, visual aids, overhead projections, videos, and music. These add variety and help the listener stay interested. By giving handouts, the presenters also allow the audience members to have something physical to take home with them and remind them of the point of the program.

Finally, after the conclusion, the presenters open up for questions and pass out evaluation sheets. Questions can range from the very broad, like how the topic was chosen, to extremely narrow, like whether or not the icebreaker could apply to another topic. The evaluation sheets passed out to the audience cover areas such as organization, apparent preparation, and appropriateness of topic, as well as having a space for additional comments. Upon filling out the evaluations, the papers are collected and the presentation ends.

Subsequent peer counseling presentations were performed for the public to attend. By first presenting their services to their own

class, the students in the peer counseling class were able to become more comfortable speaking in front of a group. Later groups attending the presentations were not as receptive to the presenters as the class members were. The first of those public programs was a bit shaky, with the presenters obviously being nervous. But as the presentation progressed, audience interest grew and the students speaking became more comfortable. The following presentations went well and it was apparent that the speakers were becoming more familiar with the style and manner of speaking necessary for an effective program.

The faults of this peer counseling class are few and very difficult to correct. Grace Mims taught the class with the skill and concern of an instructor who had been teaching for years. However, because the subject matter did not have as clearly set goals as it could have, some of the topics covered were a bit ambiguous. This ambiguity was effective in some ways, such as adding to the casual atmosphere of the class and allowing for increased flexibility. Unfortunately, this lack of goals kept the class from knowing specifically where the class was headed and what they personally were to do. But although there were faults with this program, the good points, such as learned organization and improved speaking ability outweighed them. Overall, Grace Mims' training program for peer counselors seems to be a success. The members of the class continue to hone their presentations abilities and will stay on call to give presentations even after the class itself has officially ended.

Now that a basic understanding of the facets of a typical peer counseling training course has been reached, it is necessary to briefly examine some of the current literature in the field. By reviewing three recent studies in the area of peer counseling, it is evident that training programs specializing in peer counseling are very effective at giving young people the ability to help people of their own age deal with their problems.

Researching in the area of adult peer counseling was Dr. Marc Galanter. An organization which attempts to help former psychiatric patients assimilate into society more easily was asked to nominate several of their clients to serve as peer counselors. This group, known as Recovery, chose 366 clients who agreed to become part of a peer counseling training program. These 366 people first filled out a 216-item multiple-choice questionnaire with questions in the categories of mental health, neurotic distress, social cohesiveness, commitment to Recovery, and psychiatric treatment. Mental health was a section to determine basic well-being. The neurotic distress was to see whether the client was under any undue stress. The social cohesiveness and commitment to Recovery were linked in that these categories both deal with how the person is assimilating into not only society, but also the Recovery program. Finally, the psychiatric treatment section was only to evaluate the level of treatment the clients had received previously.

After filling out the questionnaires, the 366 volunteers were separated into 24 factions with an average of 15 people per group. A group leader was chosen for each section by the counselors of Recovery, to serve as facilitator to change. Each section was also

over-seen by a registered counselor to ensure healthy development of counseling methods. The chosen group leaders received a week-long intensive training session to improve their listening skills as well as their rational thought processes. Following these organizational details was a three-month period of counseling in which the volunteers worked through any difficulties they were having dealing with their lifestyles outside of psychiatric care. These issues varied from dealing with finding a parking space to getting over the death of a loved one.

After the three month period, the 216-item questionnaire was again given in order to check for improvements. Significantly higher scores were recorded by nearly all 366 volunteers after the counseling sessions. These scores indicate that the clients had improved their abilities to cope as well as boosted their self esteem. These results show that a peer counseling program unquestionably aids in an adults' ability to cope with life's difficulties. The following two pieces of research both deal with the effects of a peer counseling training course on young people.

The primary goal of the peer counseling program studied by Richard E. Morey and his associates was to address the needs and concerns of high school students. This study addressed four basic aspects of high school peer counseling programs. First, the research sought to define the personal characteristics of a student who would choose to meet with a peer counselor. Then, it wanted to identify the types of problems a student would encounter that would lead to seeking peer counseling. Third, the study attempted to evaluate the students' personal satisfaction from the peer counseling experience.

Finally, the perceived helpfulness would be evaluated by means of a questionnaire.

Students in grades ten through twelve in the Rocky Mountain region participated by filling out a two-part questionnaire. 893 students turned in the first part of the questionnaires, which measure students concerns about their lives in general. Those students, 126 of them, who had visited a peer counselor previously were instructed to fill out the second part of the questionnaire which measured the students' satisfaction from the peer counseling experience. From these, 126 students, fourteen were then chosen by trained counselors to volunteer for a peer counseling training program and asked to become peer counselors for the 1986-1987 academic year.

Throughout the year, these 14 students met twice a week for one hour in order to receive further training and discussion of present cases. The training consisted of activities and exercises aimed at improving and honing the students' listening skills while at the same time discouraging the students from giving advice. Topics such as sexuality, difficulties with friends or parents, and basic value problems were touched on so that the students would be prepared to help deal with them. Throughout the entirety of the training sessions, however, the adult consultants who helped supervise the group stresses forming supportive and empathetic friendships with the clients, instead of just listening to their problems.

In order to measure whether this year-long project was a success, Morey and his fellow researcher, C. Dean Miller, created the Peer Counseling Consumer Satisfaction Questionnaire (PCCSQ). Until

this device was created, no tool for evaluating the success of a peer counselor training program was in existence. Consisting of 23 questions, the PCCSQ measures both the students' satisfaction with the program and their ideas about how helpful it was for them and others. The questionnaire was distributed to any student who had attended two or more peer counseling sessions.

The results of the questionnaire showed some predictable outcomes. As expected by the researchers, females were more apt to seek counseling than males. In the first meeting with the counselors, 50% of the students reported that they had shared significant problems that were troubling them. Among these problems were boy/girlfriend problems, grade difficulties, and alcohol or drug-related problems. The questionnaire measured the students' satisfaction on a number scale from one, being the lowest, to five, being the highest. The average score of students' overall satisfaction gained from the counseling experience was 3.22. Unlike the major difference between the number of males seeking counseling to the number of females, there were no significant differences between the male and female satisfaction ratings. Problems such as substance abuse received the lowest satisfaction ratings, indicating that there were definite weaknesses in the limited time for the training sessions. But the incredibly high ratings in areas dealing with family and school problems showed significant improvement in coping skills which cannot be ignored.

Taking a more long term approach to studying peer counseling was a study done by David A. deRosenroll and Cal Dey. Their three-year program started off by identifying the counselor's impact on a

school. By first exposing the three major ways a counselor affects a school, the researchers are setting up their study; a study which again proves the effectiveness of a peer counseling program.

The three intervention techniques listed by deRosenroll and Dey show the important ways which peer counselors help the regular professional counselors do their jobs. The three most obvious ways in which the peer counselors affect the school include the ability to help resolve minor problems before they become major ones. Next, the peer counselors can provide support and friendship in order to help the client make it through the day. Finally, peer counselors are available to help those who have already been through a severe crisis. In order to better study those three areas, deRosenroll and Dey set up a three-year long study that introduced peer counselors into high schools.

A three-part process was set up to train prospective counselors. However, instead of limiting this program to merely one school, the researchers set up a centralized training base to enable students from all around the Greater Victoria School District to be involved. This three-part training procedure would remain constant so that everyone involved would have the same sort of preparation.

First, there would be a pretraining session, which weeded out any students who proved to be unprepared for the responsibility. The pretraining would also set up a stable basis of knowledge each peer counselor needed to know. Pretraining sessions lasted for two weeks. Following the pretraining was the training mode. Each one of these sessions, lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour, would stress different issues and counseling skills. These sessions would be

held at each prospective school every day. Finally, there would be the post-training sessions. These final meetings included activities designed to sharpen and heighten the students' abilities as well as being times when the counselor could ask questions if they were having trouble.

Since this program had a centralized base, more schools had opportunities to take advantage of what it had to offer. The first year this was implemented, only three schools and 28 students were involved. Split up into two groups, the 28 students were to spend their last few weeks of summer vacation training to be peer counselors. They were trained in areas such as drugs, depression, suicide, and family concerns. At the end of the training, the 28 students returned to their prospective schools and prepared themselves for the 1985-1986 school year. Unfortunately, the response wasn't as favorable as expected. Only approximately fifteen students sought out the peer counselors during that school year.

The next year, though, 88 students from eight schools decided to participate in the centralized program. Improvements to the training program were implemented, so even more of a broad base of issues was covered. Also added to the sessions this year were programs to inspire recruitment of new members and sessions to ensure adequate follow-up programs in order to keep each individual school's peer counselor going even after the three year research was finished.

With the coming of the third year, some other changes were created. Now, the former peer counseling students were acting as

trainers and assistant trainers. In this way, the new students interested in the program could directly see the training they would receive in action. 150 students from twelve schools appeared for the 1987-1988 school year, so these extra trainers and assistant trainers were necessary. This year, not only did the number of students seeking help multiply, but the program offered what was called "a peer counseling theatre" in which people would present to an audience a situation and how to deal with the situation. The program also opened up a conference, free to the public, so that even people who had not been through the training procedure could learn how to deal with problems which may arise with themselves or others around them.

The findings of this study prove something a bit different than before. This research shows that centralized training is very beneficial in reaching a multitude of young people. But through the other two studies, it can clearly be seen that by setting up individual school peer counseling programs, the students of each school can be sufficiently helped. However, how early do you start the training?

This research tends to emphasize a structured training program starting at the high school level or above. In my opinion, a peer counseling training program should start earlier so that the skills may be implemented upon the transition between junior and senior high school. Using a study done by Ron Garman, Don Martin, and Maggie Martin as a structure resource, I have decided to put together my own peer counseling training program as a plan to start the training in the seventh grade. My plan would differ from others in

that it would have a significant Christian backing as a basis for some of the counseling.

Peer Advising Cooperative Team  
P.A.C.T.

Objective:

Educating students and allowing them the opportunity to realize the amount of impact they can have on other students is the main objective of the peer counseling training program. By participating in this program, students would have a few goals already set out for them:

1. Assist cooperative orientation of any new students
2. Create lasting friendships which involved listening, accepting, and sharing instead of just giving advice.
3. Emphasize students' capabilities to solve those everyday problems through Christ.
4. Stand as a role model of leadership, optimism, and fellowship.

Each student would be able to learn, in-depth, about each of these areas in a variety of ways. Not only would this training program allow students to help other students, but it would also promote students helping themselves through Christian faith.

## Promoting PACT:

Like any other school organization, the Peer Advising Coordinating Team (PACT) would have a series of promotional campaigns to increase students' interest and participation. The normal modes of advertisement, such as posters, booklets, and leaflets, would be distributed among elementary schools in the test city (Seymour, IN). Information such as the name of the organization, the goals, the first meeting times, and contact persons would be listed on these advertisements. Along with that information would be the insight that PACT would be a Christian-based program and that participation would be only on a voluntary basis.

A presentation, including all the specifics and some short exercises, would be given to the sixth graders of each of the participating schools. Those individual sessions would be held each day, for one hour, spanning over a five-day period, including all of the schools willing to participate. These presentations would be given two weeks prior to the sign-up date for the peer counseling program and would serve each school independently, stressing the importance of a centralized training base.

As well as the advertisements and the presentations, the sixth grade teachers for each school would be informed about the program so that not only would they be able to promote PACT, but they would also be able to answer any questions that the children or their parents would have.

### Selection of PACT Members:

Students in the sixth grade who sign up and show interest in the peer counseling training program would be asked to fill out a questionnaire with questions such as "Why would you like to become a member of PACT?" Additional information would include such items as interest, hobbies and religious background, as well as their parent's signature of consent. Other than the questionnaire, the students would need to go through brief interviews in which the children would be asked their feelings about what they wanted to get out of the program, what they could give back to PACT, and how they feel about their own Christianity. Prior to the interviews, the teachers of the interested students would be asked to evaluate the abilities and potential of each student. The children's parents would be interviewed as well to find out any additional information.

Only ten students would be selected due to the small number of community schools in the test area. Any more than ten students and the group would become too large to adequately control. One week after the interviews, the students would have letters sent to their parents informing them of whom was chosen to be PACT counselors. The parents would be asked to address any concerns with the program to me or the pastors in charge of the training procedure. As well as the pastors (volunteering from Immanuel Lutheran Church), three graduate assistants studying Christian counseling (from any Christian university) would be aiding PACT by acting as supervisors or observers.

## Training for PACT Members:

The pastors and graduate assistants would work together during the two weeks of training to encourage discussion and participation during the sessions. Using the text Equipped to Care (Rowley 1990), the pastors and graduate assistants would use a mixture of exercises, discussions, and role playing. The main theme of all of these facets of the training would be to insure that these students, even though they are young, would be able to handle the responsibility of listening to their peers.

The first session would include an icebreaker to allow the students to get to know one another as well as getting to know themselves. Following the icebreaker would be a complete explanation of the goals and purposes of PACT. The two weeks of training would include ten sessions of one hour apiece to be completed after school. Each of these will include instructions on such topics as listening, empathy, non-verbal communication, and scripture. After each instruction period would come an exercise or role play to show the students how to directly apply the skills they learned that day. Then, after the two weeks of training are over, there would be a full day of intensive training and workshops held on Saturday. Each of the areas covered in the one-hour training sessions would be put into practice at this full day of training.

## PACT In Action:

Similar to other programs, PACT would act within each individual school as a way for the students to deal with their problems. Volunteering their time, the ten students would not only have set hours for talking, they would also be available at any time to help another student deal with a problem. The students would not develop "working" relationships with their peers; they would develop honest and open friendships in which active self-disclosure would take place.

*The promoting of PACT would be similar to the way it was promoted to get volunteers. However, this promotional campaign would differ in the fact that now it would be targeted toward the area of students in need of help. No real funding would be necessary other than the cost of the materials used for publicity.*

This program would be able to serve the entire test area as the sixth graders would be advancing into the seventh grade, which, in the test area, is centralized at the Seymour Middle School. The Christian backing to this program would build a religious support system through which the students seeking help would be able to go to whenever they needed it, even if the original peer counselor is unavailable. Since the Christian aspect of PACT is mentioned in all of the promotional material, the volunteers would know they would need faith to be a member.

The problems which continuously assault our youth are growing day after day. The children seem to be getting younger and younger when they are forced to deal with the very real problems of life. Children need to be shown that there are ways to deal with these problems which are not self-destructive. A peer counseling training program is one of the ways which has been proven to be effective.

*By evaluating a peer counseling training program available at Ball State University, I have found they are very effective at what their intended goals seem to be. However, after examining recent research in the area, I have also found that a training program which starts in college may not be as effective as one which starts earlier. Based upon the research, I developed my own plan, called PACT, which would start this training in the sixth grade so that when put into action, the skills the students learn can be implemented upon the transition from elementary to middle school as well as from middle school to high school. In my opinion, early training for a program such as PACT is the only effective way to training peer counselors. Programs like PACT hopefully will be developed and put to use soon. Our children are depending upon it.*

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