

NEW RESEARCH

Strengthening College Students' Mental Health Knowledge, Awareness, and Helping Behaviors: The Impact of Active Minds, a Peer Mental Health Organization

Q4 Lisa Sontag-Padilla, PhD, Michael Dunbar, PhD, Feifei Ye, PhD, Courtney Kase, MPH, Rebecca Fein, MPH, Sara Abelson, MPH, Rachana Seelam, MPH, Bradley D. Stein, MD, PhD

Objective: To examine the relation between college students' familiarity with and involvement in Active Minds, a student peer organization focused on increasing mental health awareness, decreasing stigma, and affecting mental health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

Method: Students (N = 1,129) across 12 California colleges completed three waves of a web-based survey during the 2016 and 2017 academic year to assess familiarity with and involvement in Active Minds and mental health attitudes, behaviors, and perceived knowledge. Fixed-effects models assessed relations between changes in organization familiarity and involvement and changes in mental health-related outcomes over time overall and stratified by students' baseline engagement (i.e., familiarity/involvement) with Active Minds.

Results: Overall, increased familiarity with Active Minds was associated with increases in perceived knowledge (0.40; $p < .001$) and decreases in stigma over time (-0.33 ; $p < .001$). Increased involvement was associated with increases in perceived knowledge (0.40; $p < .001$) and a range of helping behaviors. Associations differed by students' baseline engagement with Active Minds. For students with low engagement, increased familiarity with Active Minds was associated with decreased stigma and improved perceived knowledge. For students with moderate baseline engagement, increasing involvement with Active Minds was associated with increases in helping behaviors (e.g., providing emotional support, connecting others to services) over time.

Conclusion: Student peer organizations' activities can improve college student mental health attitudes and perceived knowledge and significantly increase helping behaviors. Such organizations can complement more traditional programs and play an important role in improving the campus climate with respect to mental health.

Key words: mental health, stigma, college students, student organization, late adolescence

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Among college and university students in the United States, there is a substantial gap between the need for mental health treatment and the receipt of mental health services. Recent studies estimate that 20% to 36% of college students deal with some form of serious psychological distress,¹⁻⁴ but that only approximately a third of these students, many of whom have access to on-campus providers and insurance to cover services, receive treatment.^{1,4} This unmet need for mental health care among college students represents a significant public health issue. Young adulthood is a critical period: without treatment for mental health problems, students face a range of potentially serious and lasting consequences, including dropping out,⁵⁻⁷ substance misuse,⁷⁻⁹ difficulties with social relationships,¹⁰ and lower lifetime earning potential.¹¹⁻¹⁴

Student peer organizations on college and university campuses, such as Active Minds (<http://www.activeminds.org/>), NAMI on Campus (<http://www.nami.org/namioncampus/>), and To Write Love on Her Arms (<http://twloha.com>), are uniquely positioned to have direct and immediate effects on students' perceptions of mental health issues and associated stigma and thereby have the potential to increase the rate of students accessing mental health services. Students' peers and social networks can play an instrumental role in supporting mental health and facilitating help-seeking behavior for individuals in distress.¹⁵ In campus settings, student peer organizations seek to improve student attitudes and knowledge regarding mental health, lessen the personal and perceived stigma of mental health, and bolster peer-to-peer support for students with mental health needs. Through raising awareness,

decreasing stigma, and maintaining a long-term consistent presence on campuses, such organizations can enhance the campus environment for students with mental health problems, potentially increasing their use of mental health services.⁴

More traditional (i.e., short-term or 1-time encounter) education or contact-based programs, such as Mental Health First Aid and the National Alliance on Mental Illness' In Our Own Voice, Parents and Teachers as Allies, Provider Education Program, and Ending the Silence, lessen participants' mental illness stigma and improve knowledge of mental illness and skills for identifying and referring students with symptoms.¹⁶⁻²⁰ By improving personal and population-level knowledge about mental illness and student attitudes and behaviors related to mental illness, such programs also can increase the likelihood of disclosure of mental illness²¹ and help-seeking behaviors among college students and young adults.^{4,22-26}

In addition to conducting more traditional trainings and contact-based programs, student peer organizations conduct a range of activities to lessen stigma, improve knowledge of mental health, and enhance skills for identifying and referring peers struggling with mental health issues.^{27,28} These include innovative public exhibitions such as Active Minds' *Send Silence Packing*, a display of student backpacks on campus to represent students lost to suicide; interactive, campus-wide speak-out events and storytelling programs, such as Active Minds' Speakers Bureau; and small-group activities and seminars, such as discussion groups about mental health issues on campus.²⁸ These activities help promote an ongoing dialogue about mental health on campus through peer-to-peer conversations, social media, ongoing programming, and campus print media.

There is growing recognition of the importance of peers in mental health and suicide prevention programming on campus and expanding involvement of students in such peer-driven efforts.²⁹ However, there is a paucity of studies that have examined the impact of student peer organizations on factors likely to influence college students' help-seeking behaviors, such as mental health stigma, knowledge of mental health issues (e.g., mental illness signs, services, and other supports), and peer-to-peer helping behaviors. To address this gap in the evaluation literature and increase our understanding of whether student peer organizations influence such factors, this study examined the association between engagement with Active Minds and changes in knowledge, stigma, and helping behaviors relating to mental health.

METHOD

As part of California's Mental Health Services Act (Proposition 63), California counties began working

together in 2011 under the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) to develop and implement a series of statewide prevention and early intervention initiatives, one of which was aimed at improving student mental health in the University of California, California State University, and California Community College systems. This study is part of a larger evaluation of the activities under the initiative, one of which involved support of an expansion of activities and enhanced technical assistance for California-based chapters of Active Minds. Established in 2003, Active Minds is the oldest national nonprofit organization empowering students to speak openly about mental health, with more than 400 student-run chapters on college, university, and high school campuses throughout the United States.³⁰ Active Minds student members work to promote a dialogue of issues of mental health and to educate the entire campus and student body about available mental health resources in and around the campus community.³⁰

Study Design and Participants

To assess the impact of familiarity and involvement with Active Minds on changes in knowledge of services and supports for mental health needs, stigma, and peer-to-peer helping behaviors, a confidential online survey was administered to a convenience sample of undergraduate students on 12 college campuses with Active Minds chapters (mean 96.4 per campus; SD 124.2). Students were recruited by a combination of in-person events (e.g., student union tables, Active Minds events, on-campus courses, other student organization meetings) conducted by Active Minds and other on-campus groups and online strategies (email listservs, targeted Facebook pages) with the goal of recruiting students becoming involved with Active Minds at the beginning of the academic year and those who were likely to have little or no knowledge of or exposure to Active Minds. After initial recruitment, the RAND Corporation used email and text messages to communicate with first-wave survey participants about the second and third survey waves.

Students completed a confidential online survey 3 times during the 2016 and 2017 academic year: within the first three weeks of the fall 2016 semester or quarter (wave 1; N = 1,129), approximately 3 months later (wave 2; n = 932), and again 3 months later, toward the end of the 2016 and 2017 academic year (wave 3; n = 893). Students were offered Amazon e-gift cards as incentives for survey completion (\$5, \$10, and \$15, respectively); overall retention rate was 76%. The study was approved by the [blinded] institutional review board.

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