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A Resident Advisor's Guide to Students with Perceived Eating Disorders

Danielle Smith
dasmith@bgsu.edu

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Danielle Smith

Abstract

According to an extensive 2013 survey conducted by the National Eating Disorder Association which examined 165 different college campuses to see what was being done on campuses nation wide to spread awareness about disorders as well as treat them. There is still a significant gap in perceived need and available counseling or nutritional services by staff specializing in eating disorders on college campuses throughout the country” (National Eating Disorder Association). Therefore, the purpose of this honors project is to develop a comprehensive training guide for resident advisors on Bowling Green State University's campus to utilize in order to support and help residents who may be struggling with eating disorders. The hope in doing this is so that anyone who is struggling will be offered the highest level of care and support while still thriving in a university setting. Included in this guide are warning signs to look for in individuals, a list of do's and don'ts, as well as a list of resources for residents to be referred to. The information in the guide was backed by research and review of current literature on the topic. This project is a combination of studies in the fields of social work and journalism and is targeted at a specific audience which is the Resident Advisors at Bowling Green State University.

In planning the project, a few research questions came to mind. First, what forms of training are already being offered for resident advisors concerning mental health topics? Another question that is the backbone of my project is, what are the most effective ways to handle a situation as delicate as this? Striving to answer these questions helped to guide the project in that it helped guide the choices of the most important topics to cover within the training manual.

The Honors Project

In order to be strategic in who I chose to help guide me through the Honors project process, I wanted someone knowledgeable in formatting websites as well as someone who would be able to offer advice as far as writing techniques and grammatical aspects of the creation of this training manual. I also wanted to work with a professor who had been a part of other honors projects in the past since I was unsure of how to go about many of the steps within the project. It was also important to me to choose someone who had some prior knowledge regarding the topic of my honors project. Therefore, the advisors I ended up choosing to assist me with my project, Dr. Craig Vickio and Dr. Kelly Taylor, were extremely helpful in guiding my planning, writing, and creating process. They were always available to offer suggestions, answer questions and to meet with me in person to discuss the project.

Literature Review

A review of the research that exists on the prevalence of eating disorders on college campuses, and specifically within residence halls, revealed substantial evidence that this is an issue that is not being addressed adequately on college campuses based on the prevalence of these diseases. For example, a study was conducted by Carolyn Powell at Western Kentucky University that showed that women living on campus were more likely to be diagnosed as disordered eaters than those who live at home (2003).

Also, a review of the literature that exists concerning the training of resident advisers in college residence halls provided many helpful tips that were utilized when creating the training manual. These tips will greatly enhance the guide for resident advisers. One specific article by Moxley (2009) explored Virginia Tech's training that is provided for RA's which mostly focuses on role-playing which lead to some interesting ideas to add to the training guide. Though the role playing strategy did not end up in the finished manual, it could be included in a later, updated

version which would help to prepare them for similar situations they may encounter with residents.

J. Barbarzette (2013) wrote a book titled "How to Write Terrific Training Materials: Methods, Tools, and Techniques" which lays out specific guidelines explaining to readers explicitly how to configure training materials for purposes such as this project. Each chapter is tailored to a different aspect of the writing process which became very useful in finding the tools needed while putting everything together for this training guide.

Extensive literature explained how eating disorders manifest themselves and signs to look for. This was extremely important to include in the training guide since oftentimes, symptoms may be subtle or hidden well. One specific journal article titled "Identifying eating disorders" that was in the British Journal of Nursing was also especially helpful since it featured different charts and very specific symptoms for several different types of eating disorders (Jenkins, 2005).

Another article explored the specific differences between men and women with eating disorders which was important when looking at what specific information to include within the training manual because most people would not assume that they manifest themselves so differently but evidence from this study shows that that is the case (Olivardia, Mangweth, 1995). The guide did not allow for inclusion of this information. However, many of the links provided within the manual do address this issue.

After conducting interviews with Dr. Stefani Hathaway and Claire Semer, who are both directly responsible for training resident advisers at BGSU, gaps were determined within the current training programs offered here in the areas of mental health within the residence halls, and more specifically, eating disorders. The interviews provided information about what is currently being offered in the form of training residence life employees about eating disorders. Both wom-

en explained that they have seen multiple cases of eating disorders within the residence halls but expressed that there is no specific training for RA's currently at BGSU that focuses only on eating disorders.

The interviewees both stressed the importance of "starting the conversation" and teaching advisors how to correctly refer students to trained professionals instead of taking matters into their own hands since this becomes a liability for the school. Therefore, the guide includes the process of "starting the conversation" and how that leads to referral to a higher level of care for students. One other piece of information that was a point of interest (potentially separately for those who are training the advisors) were some examples of role plays that could be used during training sessions since that seems to be highly effective at Virginia Tech and since BGSU resident advisors are trained using role plays currently as well.

Creating the guide

In response to my research questions and the research I conducted, during the implementation phase of the Honors project, I constructed a four-page manual which is to be used for the training purposes of resident advisors using a design program on my computer. To make the manual visually appealing charts were added as well as different colors and sizes of fonts that were used throughout the guide in order to catch readers' attention. Extensive review of the literature concerning eating disorders on college campuses, as well as training programs that have been implemented across the country, were compiled in order to include the most useful information for resident advisors at BGSU.

The original plan was to distribute paper manuals for all RA's to have at hand and to also have the same copy published online to make it easier for an advisor to access in a time of need. After discussing this plan with both project advisers, however, they both recommended only put-

ting the guide online and not distributing paper copies since students are given so many different papers and flyers that it is hard to keep track of them all and the guide would most likely not be at hand in any given time of need.

Included in the manual is information from research on how each individual disorder manifests itself and a list of dos and don'ts when it comes to what to do and say to someone who may be struggling with this illness. Since one goal was to have resources to offer someone who may be struggling with situations where they may feel alone or confused, one of the most important aspects of supporting and assisting residents was a list of books for resident advisers to suggest to students. The books included are a compilation of workbooks, autobiographies from recovered individuals, as well as a few informational books. The focus of the book section was on individual stories, however, it is important for those who are suffering to be able to relate with someone who understands what they're going through.

The guide includes an extensive list of on and off-campus services and resources with contact information that RA's can refer students to since that appears to be the most effective way of assisting these students. Many assessment instruments exist to help individuals determine whether or not they have a clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder and levels of help that they require depending on what score they receive. Included in the guide is a section which cites links to the different assessment tests that RA's can provide to their residents so that they are able to take the assessment and take the situation into their own hands. A list of informational videos is also part of the guide for students, and can be used by Resident Advisors so they can educate themselves about how eating disorders are manifested. Other videos include recovery stories, interviews with leading professionals who treat eating disorders, and videos from popular advocacy associations such as The National Eating Disorder Association.

Originally, the plan included creation of a section within the guide that would address how to offer support to students without going beyond the role an RA is meant to play and how to recognize his or her limitations in this position. However, after beginning to create the manual, this information did not fit into the guide with the way the formatting was set up. This information was also already being covered by the BGSU Counseling Center on their start the conversation page which is mentioned in the guide, along with a link to the website so that advisers would be able to access more in-depth information about “starting the conversation” than what could be included within the training manual.

The guide also includes ideas for bulletin boards that can be created by resident advisors in their respective residence halls to create awareness of eating disorders and give examples of how to offer support or signs to look for, etc. Some of the ideas included in this section are information about proper nutrition or myths and facts surrounding nutrition, why BMI calculations are incorrect, reasons why residents love their bodies (using quotes from residents or take pictures of them holding a sign with their reason), etc.

The guide also needed to include information that provides those who read it with ways to advocate for those who are struggling with disorders. Since many advisors may come in close contact with those who have disorders and see the toll that such disorders take on one's mental and physical well-being, they may feel moved to do something on a large scale to educate others and raise awareness about this issue. Some of the resources provided in this section include suggestions such as starting an eating disorders anonymous group on campus as well as hosting a Proud2bme event which promotes healthy living amongst young adults and raises awareness about topics concerning body image and eating concerns.

Future Implications

The next steps of the project include presenting the guide to the Office of Residence Life on campus and asking those who oversee training for employees of Residence Life if they would be willing to inform residents that the guide exists and possibly link it to their website so that it can be easily accessed in a time of need by any resident advisor. I also plan to speak to Dr. Stefani Hathaway and Claire Semer again in order to get their input concerning the most effective ways to have the manual seen and utilized by resident advisors, now that it is completed and to see if they have any suggestions concerning changes that should be made.

Eventually, if the guide should prove to be useful at BGSU in educating student staff members about this topic and is seen as a helpful resource, it could be shared with residence life departments at other universities who may not have any sort of guide such as this in place or whose training in this area may be lacking and offer my guide to them to be published on their residence life web page. The resource portion of the guide would have to be edited slightly in order for it to fit with the surrounding area of the university that would be utilizing it.

The hope in completing this project is that resident advisors would be made more aware of, not only what eating disorders look like in females and males, but how to approach the topic in a sensitive manner and also in such a way that will yield the safest environment for students struggling with this mental illness. Additionally, the hope is that the guide will eventually be used by the residence life staff at BGSU to train upcoming and current advisors during their annual training sessions. The main obstacle toward implementation was answering the question of whether or not the guide would actually be approved by the Office of Residence Life so that it could be used at BGSU and eventually other universities. By meeting again with employees in the Office of Residence Life, the goal is to be able to help them see the value in utilizing the guide.

This guide will hopefully serve as a resource that RA's can continually refer back to during their time working for the university and even within the context of their own lives. Ideally, a survey could be created for those who oversee the training process to hand out to resident advisors who have been trained using the manual after about six months or so in order to examine their opinion on the effectiveness of what the guide in order to correct any faults for future RA's who are trained using this guide. It will also be important to be able to continually update the guide, if it is published electronically, based on feedback and changing resources available to the community.

The ultimate projected outcome after the completion of this project is a decrease in the prevalence of eating disorders discovered within residence halls along with an increase in the number of individuals who seek help for these life-threatening illnesses as well as an overall increased awareness of these disorders and what they look like in order to get help to those who need it. Though this is a lofty goal, high hopes exist that this guide will actually impact the lives of struggling students.

Other future directions for this guide could be the university and even the surrounding community, as a whole, providing additional services to those who may be struggling openly or in silence such as support groups or self-help groups since none currently exist solely for those with eating issues. Making this issue more of an open topic of discussion through educational sessions, the campus hosting a Proud2bMe event or a walk on campus to raise awareness or funding for those seeking treatment would be beneficial in creating less of a stigma for students living on campus and would potentially lead to a greater amount of students receiving the help they need.

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