

KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING, AMONG FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone experiences stress in day to day life due to physical, environmental or psychosocial stressors. However ability of a person to cope with stress mainly depends on the individual's characteristics such as his or her personality, experiences, coping style and available support system. Experiencing stresses can have a great impact on someone's work, social interactions, educations, physical as well as psychosocial wellbeing.

Today Psychological counseling is recognized as one of the important means for helping people who are affected with psychosocial stress.

University students, who entered in to a university for the first time, are exposed to various challenges and stresses due to many reasons. They are separated from family members, loved ones and they may find it hard to adapt to university life, where the environment differ from usual home environment. Apart from that, heavier academic work, economical hardships, accommodation problems, meeting their basic needs are challenging and costly. Students may adopt unhealthy ways to cope with their distress if they do not have good support, guidance and pastoral care.

Counseling services are available in each university within the medical services. But appropriate use of these counseling services in the university is questionable as most students are reluctant to seek counseling help. The main objective of this study was to identify knowledge, attitudes and practice towards psychological counseling among first year undergraduates in University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

METHODOLOGY

This Study was conducted in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. The university consists of five faculties; Medical Sciences, Applied Science, Management Studies and Commerce, Arts and Graduates Studies. Counseling services are available for the students by two professional counselors every week days in the university medical center. The population of this study consisted of first year undergraduates (2008/2009) approximately 2200 of students. The following students are excluded from the study population.

- Students following external degrees.
- Students from Faculty of Graduates Studies.
- Students who could not understand either Sinhala or English.

Descriptive survey research design selected. Sample size was 260. A sample of 257 participated in the study, including 167 female and 90 male students. Simple random sampling was used to select the sample from four faculties. Data were collected by distributing self-administered questionnaire after obtaining their informed consent. The questionnaires were distributed among students during non-study hours. Total of 260 questionnaires were distributed. Only 257 were completed and used in the analysis. The

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questionnaire was pretested, by distributing among 10 students in third year of Faculty of Medical Sciences who did not participate in the study. Required modifications were done after the pretest. The final questionnaire consisted of 41 questions in five sections. Attitudes measuring questions were developed with the guidance of Mackenzie Gegekoski & Macaulay (2004, p.2421) Inventory of Attitudes toward Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMHS) by making culturally relevant modifications and pretesting. To use this inventory no permission was required. The students were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate knowledge, attitudes and practices toward psychological counseling and the voluntary and confidential nature of their responses. No compensation was provided for participation. Educational statistical packages MS Excel was used as data analysis tools. Descriptive statistical methods like mean, standard deviation and proportions were computed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean age group of the sample was 21-22 (Coded Mean 2.3 SD= 0.6). Faculty representation of students were 123 students from Management Studies and Commerce, 63 students from Arts, 36 students from Medical Sciences and 35 students from Applied Science. Forty nine percent (n=125) of students knew about the counseling service at the university medical center while 51% (n=132) did not know about it. This result corroborates some earlier results observations by Olofintoye (2006) and that the students were ignorant of counseling services around them. Students were given an orientation during their orientation programme. However, most of the students do not participate in the orientation programme because of many reasons .Sometimes because of ragging during the orientation.

Students got to know about the counseling service at the university medical center from their friends (43.2%, n=54), from the academic staff (48.8%, n=61) and from other methods (8%, n=10) such as orientation programme. Questions 08-13 consisted of general knowledge, multiple choice questions on counseling. More than a quarter (27.2%) of the sample shows excellent knowledge on psychological counseling. Only 31.5% shows poor knowledge. In many university programmes/ courses counseling topics cover in their curriculum. That may be the reason that students have an idea about psychological counseling.

The attitudes measuring questions belong to three domains, psychological openness, indifference to stigma and help seeking tendency. 8 questions tested each domain. A composite score was computed ranging from 0 to 4.

Table: 4.3 Frequency distribution of first year Undergraduates' attitudes towards psychological counseling

	0	1	2	3	4
Psychological openness	26.7	29.3	12.3	14.0	17.7
Indifference to stigma	12.0	26.7	15.6	16.6	29.1
Help seeking tendency	12.1	12.2	20.0	27.1	28.6

Hinson and Swanson (1993) stated that people are reluctant to self-disclose. This is due to a tendency to conceal distressing and negative personal information (Kelly & Acher 1995) and perception of social stigma associated with seeking mental health services (Farina *et al* 1996). When considering indifference to stigma Vogel, Wade & Hackler (2007, p.46) indicated that the perceptions of the public stigma associated with mental illness predicted the self-stigma associated with seeking counseling, which, in turn, predicted attitudes toward seeking help and, finally, willingness to seek counseling services for psychological and interpersonal concerns. According to previous literature, people are reluctant to seek professional help due to low interpersonal dependency (Bornstein *et al.* 1993, p.44), Help seeking behavior can be varying according to gender and religion. "Male gender, greater perception of stigma associated with counseling and lack of openness to emotions are some factors to reluctant to seek psychological services" (Komiya *et al.* 2000). Seventy one point two percent (n=183) had not used psychological counseling before. According to Olofintoye (2006) very few

students consult a counselor before. Mack (cited in Olofintoye 2006) showed that (p. 270) this could be due to students unwillingness to discuss their problem with counselor or having negative attitudes towards psychological openness, Falana (cited in Olofintoye, 2006) showed that (p. 270) they were ignorant of the nature of counseling services, or “their non-challant attitudes to counseling developed from their secondary school”. Out of about 71.2% of students who used counseling services before, 60 indicated from where they had got these services.

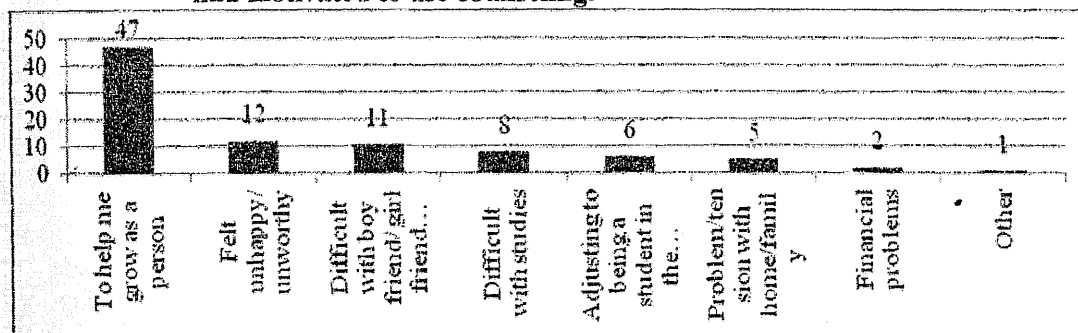
Table: 4.5 Frequency distribution of first year Undergraduates, the place of counseling services had taken.

	Frequency	Percentage
Religious organization	18	25.3
Other	18	25.3
University counseling service	15	21.1
Private counseling service	11	15.5
Government counseling services	9	12.7

According to Gho (1996) most of the students sought counseling services form religious organizations. This may be due to cultural influence. Normal in our culture people tends to seek religious support when they face a problem.

Out of 74 students who sought counseling before, 54 students marked reasons for using counseling.

Table: 4.6 Frequency distribution of first year Undergraduates, the reasons they had motivated to use counseling.



97 students marked for the question 10 “what did you expect from counselor” some students marked 2 or more answers. Students expect most is talk to someone who can understand them (n=59, 29.3%). The other students’ expected to get advice (n=41, 20.4%), get encouragement and assurance (n=35, 17.4%), talk to someone interested in your problems (n=24, 12.0%), talk to someone who will help them (n=17, 8.4%), gain better understanding of themselves (n=15, 7.5%), reduce anxiety/ pressure over academic problems (n=6, 3.0%) and talk to someone (n=4, 2.0%).

Limitation:

There are limitations to the present study that should be noted. First, the sample consisted of first year undergraduates, which limits ability to generalize the results to other age groups in the university or to the general public. Second, the sample was predominately Sinhala Buddhists (97.3% Sinhala, 94.2% Buddhist) the findings do not reflect the cultural influences of other races and religion groups.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Majority of the undergraduates were unaware of the counseling services at the university medical center.
2. Academic staff, friends and other methods were used by the students to get to know about the counseling service at the university medical center.

3. High percentage of students had good knowledge on counseling.
4. Majority of students had negative attitudes on psychological openness but considering indifference to stigma and help seeking tendency, majority of them had positive attitudes.
5. Among those who are using counseling services only one third of students used counseling services available at the university
6. University counseling service, Religious organization, Private and government counseling service were the places of sought counseling services by the students.
7. Most of students sought counseling to help them grow as person.
8. Students expectation from a counselor were to talk to someone, to get advices, to get encouragement, to gain better understanding of themselves and reduce anxiety and pressure over academic problems.
9. New students should be made to register with the counseling center at the university medical center.
10. Awareness about psychological counseling need to be improved among university students
11. Counseling services should be available at the university during the nonacademic hours so that they can access this service during their convention time.
12. Quality and effectiveness of the available counseling service at the university need to be investigated and make necessary improvements

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