Using Technology to Deliver
Cost-Effective Out-Of-Hours Support
to At-Risk University Students

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of university students are studying online. Counselling appointments via skype are becoming almost commonplace. If counselling services don’t make it easy for students to access support, students will simply engage elsewhere with the risk of students seeking peer advice on social media or not engaging at all (Inglis & Cathcart 2016). The incidence of psychological distress in university students is four to five times that of the general population yet less than a third present to university counselling services (Stallman, 2010). On Australian university campuses, a rich suite of health services is provided during traditional business hours but why stop there? There are changing expectations around access to student support services and technology makes 24-hour counselling support possible and affordable while at the same time mitigating risk for universities. This paper discusses the use of an after-hours crisis support service to help callers find immediate relief from emotional distress and explore coping strategies for their current crisis until they can be referred to longer-term help.

Introduction

Veness (2016) makes the point that outreach services should be developed by all university counselling services in order to reach those students who are less likely to engage directly through conventional means. “[Counselling] service availability at each university should be matched to their students’ schedules, rather than conforming only to traditional business hours” (Veness, 2016, p. 30). Online services already exist in other sectors (for example, services such as Lifeline, headspace, beyondblue) and there is a growing body of evidence that telepsychology can reduce levels of depression (Wagner, Horne & Maercker, 2014). Telepsychology can also benefit rural and remote students who don’t have access to face to face services, as indicated by the Australian Government’s announcement on 20 April 2017 that people living in these areas will be able to claim a Medicare rebate for online videoconferencing consultations with psychologists.

One example of an out-of-hours support service for university students: How does it work and what does it offer?

The Out-of-Hours support service being described here was implemented at Southern Cross University (SCU) NSW in 2013, Charles Darwin University (CDU) Northern Territory in 2015 and Swinburne University Victoria in 2017. It is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education’s Student Services & Amenities Fee and addresses the Veness Report’s (2016) recommendations in relation to outreach and accessibility, in that it:

- uses an evidence-based practice model (Woodward, Turley & Milne 2010) to relieve distress and manage immediate safety
- is easily accessible by all students – on campus, off campus, external
works closely with and refers to university support services
is accessible by phone or as a text-based service
offers flexible support options in emergency situations or when the university counselling service usage exceeds capacity

The service is intended to: help callers find immediate relief from emotional distress; explore coping strategies for the current crisis; safely manage any immediate threats to life or safety; open pathways for longer-term solutions; and focus on specific next steps for the caller to take. It differs from community help-lines in that it is clearly associated with the university and there is immediate linkage for students to general practitioner medical services and to university help services. Additionally, anecdotal evidence from students at SCU indicates that some students experience less sense of stigma in contacting their own university’s after-hours service rather than an external agency, resulting in students being more prepared to identify themselves rather than seeking to remain anonymous. While anonymity is still an option for callers, identifying the student allows for a richer and more effective relationship in an extended crisis.

Why should universities provide an out-of-hours support service?

One in four young people will experience a mental health episode and 75% of mental health problems become apparent before the age of 25. The incidence of psychological distress in university students is four times that of same-age peers in the broader community and the rate of serious mental illness is five times that of the general population (Stallman, 2010). Many young people who have coped well up until the time of leaving home can find that, in moving away to attend university and losing the proximity of family and friends, they can become very lonely and homesick; in addition they have to cope with living in a new town, making new friends and meeting the demands of university study.

Writing in the New Yorker, Gregory (2015) notes that the average adolescent sends almost two thousand text messages a month; of these, more than 98% are opened and are four times more likely to be read by the recipient than are emails. Within this article Gregory cites a substantial body of research confirming the efficacy of writing as a therapeutic intervention, saying “it can act as a behavioural buffer, providing distance between a person and intense, immediate, and often impulsive feelings” (p. 30). Furthermore, young people who contact crisis text-lines could be doing so from anywhere at any time; unlike a phone call, this can be done confidentially, sometimes even safely in the presence of others “without even looking at their phone” (Gregory, 2015, p. 31) which is particularly important if they are feeling unsafe.

Offering out-of-hours support at Southern Cross University

As with other universities, at SCU increasing rates of students are studying online, either because they have work or family commitments which preclude them from studying on-campus, or they prefer to study externally, even if they can come on to campus. Providing an after-hours support service is especially important to cater for the needs of online students who are not able or willing to access services on campus, particularly during normal business hours. For SCU students, the after-hours support service normally operates between 5.00 pm and 9.00 am on weekdays and offers a 24-hour service at weekends and during public holidays. The service is promoted through a variety of media and usage is encouraged in specific circumstances. Senior staff within the university have indicated support for the service, recognising that it has been of particular value following critical incidents.

There is also evidence that students are willing to use support services that are offered remotely using technology. An SCU Counselling Service survey of all Gold Coast campus students in July
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2016 using Survey Monkey (Inglis et al., 2016) in which 100 students participated, revealed that the majority of these participants expressed a willingness to use technology to access counselling support. Types of support they were willing to access included:

- Skype Counselling – 14%
- Chat or IM drop in chat – 15%
- None - I would only access F2F counselling – 20%
- SMS Counselling – 25%
- Blog and Facebook Posts – 31%
- Online Support or Psychoeducation Groups – 33%
- Counselling Support via Email – 35%
- Webinars on Psychological Wellbeing – 36%
- ‘Ask a Counsellor’ Email – 56%

**How the out-of-hours support service is used by SCU students**

The service can be accessed by a 1300 number either by a phone call or a text message. The on-call crisis supporters receive instant alerts and respond in real time to calls and texts. The service has a mandated call-back time of less than 30 minutes if calls exceed crisis supporter availability due to peak demand (usually before midnight). Seven thousand hours of coverage are provided each year to the respective universities that are using the service; this after-hours coverage includes nights, weekends, university breaks and public holidays. In terms of cost to the university, this is provided at about a third of the annual cost of a single counsellor for each university. There is an individual referral database for each university involved, and because each university has its own 1300 number, operators can identify where the call is coming from when they answer.

Since the original out-of-hours service was implemented at SCU in 2013, approximately 29% of calls have used the text-line with 62% of contacts being made between 5.00 pm and midnight. The majority of the caller issues have been related to university studies, family and relationships and anxiety; with bereavement, loss and suicide the next most common caller issues.

During the time that SCU was closed for severe floods earlier this year in the Local Government areas of Tweed and Lismore on the NSW North Coast of Australia, the crisis service operated 24 hours a day. One incident during the floods involved a situation where the after-hours service had been communicating with an international student stranded by floodwater, making sure that she and her husband were safe and providing reassurance about her safety and that of her house. The student was also sent relevant web links to local information about the flooding situation, so that she could see the facts herself. She was also offered assistance with finding alternative accommodation when they were finally evacuated, until the house became habitable again. The after-hours service was also getting calls from many other distressed SCU students who were emotionally distressed; many were homeless because of the flood or had lost their part-time jobs.

**Conclusion**

The out-of-hours support service discussed here not only increases availability of support to students outside normal business hours, but also provides an alternative avenue for help-seeking through its use of technology to connect students with the service. In addition to this being a valuable crisis service for traditional on-campus students, support can be accessed by a wider range of students, including those studying externally and those who would prefer not to seek face-to-face
support.

The experience at SCU has shown that, pleasingly, there has not been a high level of usage by students; however, students have expressed appreciation and relief at having the service available:

*Caller said XXX was like no other University in terms of being supportive. The caller felt having access to a counselling service out of hours allowed her to feel highly supported.*

**References**


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