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A guide to e-mental health supports on BC post-secondary campuses

Considerations for electronic, digital and virtual supports and services

The spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) forced many British Columbia post-secondary campuses to shift to online virtual media to deliver services. This included departments focused on student mental health and well-being, such as health and counselling services. It is anticipated that some use of these means will continue.

To assist BC post-secondary campuses with use of existing and future e-mental health services and initiatives, Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses interviewed or surveyed 15 different health or counselling staff members from 13 different post-secondary institutions in BC and asked questions related to the current landscape of e-mental health supports available at their respective campuses and how it can be improved. This guide showcases a collection of considerations for current and future e-mental health services, programs, and initiatives, based on the answers of our interviewees.

What are E-Mental Health Supports?

For the purposes of this guide, we define e-mental health supports as mental health services and information delivered through electronic, digital or virtual communication channels.

Disclaimer

We acknowledge that every campus has a diverse population with unique traits and needs. Therefore, the considerations proposed in this guide may not be relevant or feasible for all BC post-secondary campuses.

Why are E-Mental Health Supports Important?

E-mental health supports provide unique benefits that typical in-person services may not be able to provide. Perhaps the largest benefit of e-mental health supports is accessibility, as those utilizing e-mental health supports can easily access services/programs through their phone or computer and avoid transportation costs associated with in-person mental health services.[1,2] In addition, e-mental health services have been shown more cost-effective due to lower marginal costs than traditional services.[3]

Types of E-Mental Health Supports

E-mental health is a broad term that encompasses a variety of programs, services, and initiatives. Canada Health Infoway, a non-profit organization that aims to improve the health of Canadians through digital solutions, has listed five main types of e-mental health supports on their website[4]:

Online self-help

Includes self-help modules and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) apps

Crisis support

Includes phone help lines, text support, online chat support, hot spot notifications

Medical intervention

Includes video-based counselling; telemedicine videoconferences; and text-based counselling, clinician follow-up and referral

Peer-led support

Includes online monitoring, peer support apps, social media, chat rooms, instant messaging, gaming

Coaching

Includes online therapy; video, text and voice chat

Advantages and Disadvantages
of e-mental health supports in BC post-secondary institutions

We asked our interviewees to state what they perceived as advantages and disadvantages of virtual mental health services and initiatives, in comparison to in-person services and initiatives. Here is a summary of the most common answers:

Advantages

- **Greater accessibility, especially among students needing to commute**
Commuting costs money and takes up a large portion of a student's time. If a student isn't already on campus, they may feel less inclined to travel to campus for in-person mental health care.

- **Anonymity and comfort**
Students may find it less stressful to attend online workshops, events, and services focused on mental health due to greater anonymity and reduced pressure to participate.

Disadvantages

- **Deficit in connection**
Emotional connection and understanding may be negatively impacted in virtual environments due to reduced ability to perceive nonverbal cues.

- **Technical and internet Issues**
Depending on the internet and devices readily available to both students, providers, and facilitators, virtual communication may be interrupted. Those also not familiar with specific devices or videoconferencing programs may have trouble accessing online mental health services and resources.

- **Lack of a suitable environment**
Students may be living in households that lack privacy and/or comfort, resulting in challenges accessing e-mental health supports.

Areas of Consideration

This guide will take up five areas of consideration regarding BC post-secondary e-mental health supports, based on discussions with numerous post-secondary staff working within student services.

Awareness of available resources

Many of our interviewees emphasized the importance of promotion campaigns to increase awareness around the available e-mental health services on their campus and to promote overall mental health. Collaboration with other departments, staff, and students was deemed a key focus to reach different types of audiences that otherwise would not have been reached through student services departments alone. Allocating a small amount of time during a class lecture for an instructor or student to go over the available online campus resources and services or listing them on a course syllabus are potential ways to involve staff and students, while reaching audiences that are not actively seeking online mental health resources and services. Providing student volunteers/promoters with incentives, such as recording their involvement in a co-curricular

document, is a potential way to increase student involvement in mental health promotion.

Utilizing social media was a focus for some of our interviewees to increase overall mental health literacy, highlight online resources, and to promote online workshops, webinars, and events focused on mental health and well-being. Instagram in particular seems to be a popular social media platform for mental health promotion and marketing, perhaps due to Instagram's high usage among younger adults.[5]

Webinars, online workshops, and online courses on mental health have also been implemented in some post-secondary institutions' orientation processes and should be considered to ensure students are aware of the available resources and services as soon as possible.

Consider:

- Encouraging class instructors to promote available e-mental health resources. Possible ways to implement this area are having instructors allocate class time to review such material or including it within the class syllabus
- Empowering student volunteers by having them host events or deliver class presentations focused on promoting the available e-mental health resources and services on campus
- Utilizing social media platforms such as Instagram to provide various mental health tips and shed light on available online resources and services
- Including clear calls to action in social media posts to increase overall engagement
- Collaborating with student unions on hosting marketing campaigns focused on available e-mental health resources and services
- Implementing online courses, workshops, or webinars focused on available online mental health services and resources in the student orientation process to increase student mental health literacy

Assessing Needs

There is currently a large amount of online services, resources, and apps readily available to post-secondary students in BC at their respective campuses. As indicated in the previous section, awareness of these resources is currently a focal point of many post-secondary institutions. Awareness is just the start of the process. Students also have to be equipped with the knowledge of what is it they need and what works for them.

Development of online self-help resources and webinars on a wide-range of mental health topics should be considered to enhance overall mental health literacy. Some post-secondary institutions have created courses/modules on various mental health and well-being related topics and posted them on learning management systems such as Canvas or Blackboard Learn. Some also have online questionnaires that are programmed to automatically provide available support options specific to an individual's answers. Implementing similar online questionnaires can help students find resources and services specific to their needs.

Consider:

- Hosting webinars and/or online workshops on a wide range of mental health and well-being topics
- Creating online courses and learning modules on mental health and posting them on a campus learning management system, such as Canvas and Blackboard Learn
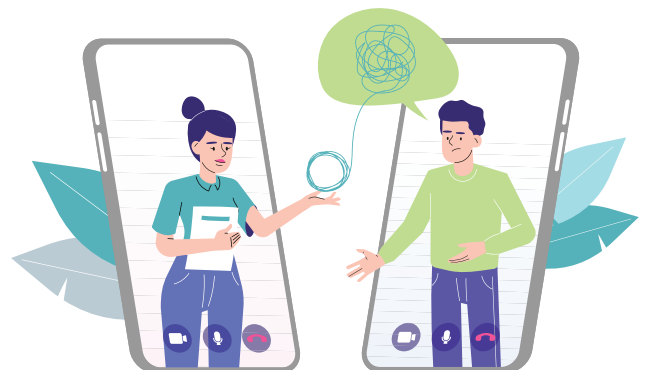
Languages

Currently, most campus-specific online mental health services, workshops, and resources are primarily offered in English only. An expansion of the languages available should be considered or promotion of third-party e-mental health services, such as Here2Talk, MySSP, and SupportConnect, in view of the number of languages each of these services provide.

Any online mental health resources or text-based support in English should be simple, clear, and concise to ensure non-native English speakers are able to easily understand what is written.

Consider:

- Expanding the languages available for campus-specific online mental health services and workshops
- Promoting third-party e-mental health services, such as Here2Talk, for students preferring counselling in other languages
- Using only common English vocabulary and simpe language for any online mental health resources and text-based support

Registration & Appointment Booking

Appointment booking has changed drastically for some post-secondary institutions due to the transition to online learning and remote work. A few of our interviewees emphasized the importance of a streamlined process for students to book online counselling appointments. Before the rise of COVID-19, many post-secondary counselling services had students go in person, via phone, or email to book counselling appointments. Although email and phone appointment booking practices are still maintained by some post-secondary institutions, there are alternative forms of appointment booking that can be considered.

One specific institution has implemented an online form for students to book an appointment with counselling services. This online form has fillable fields that indicate exactly what information students need to provide, which can streamline the booking process for students as they no longer need to think about what they need to write or say. Students may have considered this a barrier in the past. Booking by phone still has its merits for same-day appointments.

Consider:

- Streamlining the appointment booking process by indicating exactly what information students need to provide

Models of Virtual Counselling

There are many different types of e-mental health supports that take place on different online/remote-based platforms. Specifically for virtual counselling, both video and phone counselling should be available for students. Video counselling allows for students and counsellors to optimize emotional connection between one another if each of them make use of nonverbal cues during conversation. There are others who may prefer phone counselling or text-based alternatives to allow for greater anonymity. There are also those who are primarily taking online classes or are working remotely and would prefer the phone/text option to prevent "Zoom fatigue."

Consider:

- Having video-based options available to allow for non-verbal communication
- Implementing alternative modes of counselling other than in-person and video-based counselling to prevent "Zoom fatigue" and to allow greater anonymity for those who prefer it

Current Landscape of E-Mental Health Supports in BC

In BC, e-mental health services are available through extended student health care plans, where post-secondary students receive subsidized e-counselling services from PsyVitaliti and primary e-mental health care from the Studentcare Doctor Network.

Although virtual counselling, workshops, events, and online resources focused on mental health are now widely apparent in BC post-secondary institutions due to the rise of COVID-19, many of these virtual services and resources were not present pre-COVID-19 or were taking place in-person, especially among smaller post-secondary institutions. As such, we will not be covering each of these e-mental health services as there is no way to be certain if these will remain virtual once COVID-19 subsides.

Listed below is a small subset of e-mental health services that have been available before the onset of COVID-19 and are still currently available in a few of the post-secondary institutions in BC.

Post-secondary Specific Resources

University of British Columbia
UBC Student Assistance Program

Offered by Aspiria, the UBC Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a free, 24/7 wellness resource for students. Services include personal counselling, life coaching, group programs and more based on your needs.

Simon Fraser University
My SSP

A free support service available to all SFU students. Students have immediate access to confidential support and counselling in multiple languages. Accessible from anywhere in the world by phone or through the downloadable app.

University of Victoria
SupportConnect

A free, confidential mental health support service for UVic students to get connected with qualified counsellors, consultants, and life coaches anytime, anywhere. Available 24/7 by phone and online. Video and in-person options are also available.

Community Resources

In addition to resources and services available to specific post-secondary institutions, there are also numerous community-based resources available to BC post-secondary students:

MindHealth BC
A detailed online directory for mental health and substance use information, self-help resources, and online programs. Visit mindhealthbc.ca.

Wellness Together Canada
A mental health and substance use website providing free online mental health assessment and resources, or counselling by phone, text or video in both official languages at wellnesstogether.ca.

Here2Talk
All students currently registered in a BC post-secondary institution have access to free, confidential counselling and community referral services available 24/7 via app, phone and web at here2talk.ca.

Mindshift App
Free app created by Anxiety Canada that provides tools for managing anxiety and stress. Visit anxietycanada.com.

BounceBack
A free skill-building program designed to help adults and youth 15+ manage low mood, mild to moderate depression, anxiety, stress or worry. Delivered online or over the phone with a coach. Visit bouncebackbc.ca.

HereToHelp
An online repository with health literacy resources available for BC residents at heretohelp.bc.ca.

Final Thoughts

Although COVID-19 has come with its fair share of obstacles and challenges, the pandemic has prompted many post-secondary institutions into creating temporary virtual mental health services, events, and resources. This has provided us the unique opportunity to interview and survey various post-secondary staff working within student services on the topic of e-mental health supports and develop considerations for new and current post-secondary mental health.

These considerations represent the experiences and observations of numerous BC post-secondary staff working within student services, but every institution has unique needs and these considerations may not be applicable to every institution for these reasons. For example, larger institutions may have the resources to develop their own e-mental health initiatives moving forward, while smaller academic institutions may want to focus on promotion of existing community-based resources.

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