Grounded Theory Investigation into Depression during the Freshman Year of College

Graduate Student: Grace Gass, BSN, RN; Junior BSN Students: Carley Ellenberger, Marlaina Houshell, Maddie McKibben, Mireya Mota
Professors: Theresa A. Kessler, PhD, RN, ACNS-BC, CNE and Julie Brandy, PhD, RN, FNP-BC, CNE

Background
Depression, whether diagnosed or self-identified, is a significant problem in emerging adults. Because this transition can lead to depression in all students, it is important to learn more about this issue to enhance our ability to lessen the burden.

In a national study of college students during the fall of 2017, in a total of 31,463 students:
• 51.7% report feeling hopeless
• 86.5% report being overwhelmed
• 39.3% report feeling so depressed it was difficult to function
• 12.1% report seriously considering suicide

These statistics represent a major health concern because a mental health crisis can disrupt students’ daily lives. Learning more about depression is becoming increasingly relevant since it is a serious issue in this population.

Purpose
The purpose of this research is to amplify awareness of freshman student depression to gain knowledge about the mental health of college students using grounded theory methodology.

Method
• Data collected via grounded theory methodology
• Interview started with open-ended question: “What was the experience of your freshman year in college?”
• Recorded and transcribed interviews
• Data analyzed using NVivo software and compared for emerging themes

Sample
• 5 sophomore students, age 19-20 years old (M=19.2), randomly selected from 35 student interviews that were completed
• 100% white, 80% female, 80% residential students

Conclusions
• Commonalities exist among students who reported depression during their freshman year.
• Students who experienced pre-college depression reported relapses due to experiences in freshman year.
• Students experienced social issues, academic stress, and physical symptoms of depression.
• Reaching out to others (friends, family, counselors, etc.) was a common way students coped during this year.

Recommendations
Interventions for each of these identified themes should include:
• Reducing isolation, providing affordable on-campus resources, and educating students about recognizing depression. These could positively impact the experience of many students entering college.

Pre-college Depression
Participants expressed how past experiences with depression impacted their freshman year. Several participants reported depression before college and how that experience helped them recognize their symptoms.

Social Issues
This theme includes three subcategories: roommate issues, family and friend issues, and social isolation, as reflected by adjusting to living with a new roommate, experiencing challenges from making new friends in college, and feeling detached from family and friends.

Academic Stress
Participants emphasized the increased stress encountered during this time due to the difficulty of the subject matter and the amount of class work required.

Reaching Out to Others
Participants reported reaching out for social support from counselors (both on and off campus), professors, friends, and family during episodes of depression. The campus counseling center had a negative impression among participants.

Physical Symptoms
Most participants reported sleeping or eating too little or too much while experiencing depression, among various other physical symptoms such as headaches, weight fluctuations, and a general feeling of heaviness in the body.

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