

# Anonymous online peer support can ease anxiety, depression: NUS study

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Online support may improve the psychological well-being of young people, with a study finding a 40 per cent drop in self-reported depressive and anxiety symptoms for those who confided in their peers online.

In a study by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and digital peer-support platform Acceset that was published online on Wednesday, 100 students from NUS sought anonymous support from 30 other students through letters online.

They shared emotional experiences and feelings with the befrienders, who received training from a clinical psychologist and certified counsellors to provide responses. A total of 192 letters were exchanged over three weeks in March and April 2022.

The study aimed to investigate the clinical effectiveness of those who anonymously shared emotional experiences online to seek support, and whether it improved components of psychological well-being. The components measured were mattering (the extent to which one is important to people), self-hood (sense of identity), compassion and mindfulness.

The study noted that past research suggests digital platforms offer reduced non-verbal cues and high accessibility, which may mean that individuals are less apprehensive and are able to share emotions with a large audience across physical locations.

The study found that digital peer support lowered depressive and anxiety symptoms by nearly 40 per cent, and its effect was sustained beyond the period of intervention for around six weeks.

Professor Dean Ho, director of the Institute for Digital Medicine (WisDM) at NUS Medicine and

the study's co-principal investigator, said a unique feature of the study's intervention method is that students drew support from peers with common lived experiences.

"This model of care enables knowledge sharing and transfer between clinicians and students, and draws on resources from the community in providing students with digital peer support to cope with daily life stressors."

Students wrote about the issues in their lives, including stress and relationships with their families or friends, said Acceset chief executive Matt Oon. They also mentioned their uncertainty about the future, and sought advice for school-related topics like internships.

The study showed that students who sought support had a 76 per cent increase in compassion and 90 per cent rise in mindfulness after the intervention. Students who took on the role of befrienders reported an 81 per cent spike in compassion and a 114 per cent jump in mindfulness.

Prof Ho said: "Learning these well-being skills helped befrienders cultivate skills of well-being. The opportunity for befrienders to apply what they have learnt led to a two-way exchange of experiences, which contributed to the improved well-being of befrienders."

Dr Yeo Geck Hong from WisDM at NUS Medicine, who is the co-principal investigator, said the results can lend insights into the development of community-based strategies and interventions in meeting the increasing mental health needs of the population.

Figures from a mental health survey conducted in March 2022 by the People's Action Party youth wing showed that two in five people had personally experienced mental health struggles.

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