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Grounded Theory Investigation into Depression during the Freshman Year of College

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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 (American College Health Association, 2017)

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.

"As a person whose experienced depression on multiple different levels, pretty much as far back as I can remember, I just was able to definitely pick it up and be like, there it is, that's where it was."

"I did definitely feel like this sense of helplessness that I recognize as a person who's experienced depression for a long time."

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.

"It is very difficult to be far away from someone that you love and like you're not able to just like talk to them whenever you want to . . . and like it's just phone conversations aren't the same as in person and so like if you have a hard day you can't even just tell them like, you know, like you can, but it's just not the same cause sometimes you just want a hug or just sit there and like in silence or like cry and you can't . . ."

"... like why even try to make friends and like be out there and do good in school, when it's all just going to collapse in on itself. I definitely isolated myself or I tried to . . ."

"Me and my roommate we didn't really know each other going in and we had a lot of issues. We were very different people and she ended up moving out. So, then to make it even worse I was alone a majority of the first semester like in my room and it seemed like everyone else and their roommate was like best buddies . . ."



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.

"I think that the biggest contributors to my, the depression I experienced freshman year were probably the pressure from grades."
"I definitely felt like a failure. Like I messed up. What, when you're the smart kid and then you're not the smart kid, you feel like oh, maybe I was just the pretend smart kid."

"My mom knew that I was having a really hard time and so she encouraged me to go see my old counselor whenever I needed to, whenever I was home. Because I explained the situation with the counseling center here and she said that if I needed to I could find somebody outside of campus up here if I really wanted to."

"I will say the moment that probably helped me through the most was my physics professor. . . he's the one who convinced me that a bad grade doesn't make a bad student."

"... I'm lucky enough that I had, that I found a group of friends who just do something on a Saturday together and that, that's honestly something that was really helpful. . ."

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.

"...then like when I'm depressed I will lay in bed and I will just not eat and I will have like so much anxiety and like I just lose my appetite and it's so bad."

"But another physical thing that I had dealt with freshman year was like sleeplessness and like it was fluctuation between, you know, like not being able to sleep and sleeping way too much."