



Facilitators and Barriers to Mentor-Mentee Relationships in a Mental Health-App Intervention

Mattheus Shack, Sarah E. Broner, Colleen S. Conley

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Improving Mental-health and Promoting Adjustment through College Transitions Lab

Introduction

- The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an expansion of technology-delivered interventions in the mental health field. Although there are hundreds of mental health apps (MHapps) available to the public, many have not been developed in accordance with evidence-based practices.¹
- Despite this, MHapps are promising in their potential to alleviate problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.²
- Among adolescent and young adult populations, human interaction, especially with a trained professional, can increase positive outcomes by improving adherence to MHapp-based interventions.³ Supportive accountability is a model that involves training mentors to communicate clear expectations, exude trustworthiness and benevolence, and form a bond with mentees.⁴
- Improving adherence to MHapp-based interventions is especially pertinent to young adult populations, who tend to have higher attrition rates in these interventions.⁵
- Previous research has suggested that the relationship between mentor and mentee is an important factor in intervention outcomes. For example, Brodeur et al.⁶ developed four “behavioral profiles” that encapsulate differing mentoring styles. These styles had a distinct effect on mentee’s evaluations of the program.
- In a similar vein, the current study attempts to understand which aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship facilitated and which aspects created barriers to participating in the intervention.

Preliminary Results

- We are currently conducting a thematic analysis of the qualitative survey data and focus group transcripts according to the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke.⁷ Two undergraduate research assistants are independently coding student and advisor responses under the supervision of a graduate student (step one from Braun and Clarke). Interrater reliability will be assessed and disagreements resolved through discussion with the graduate student supervisor. Major themes from the responses will be extracted from the established codes.
- To ensure the coding process was data-driven, coders did not begin with any specific themes in mind. Rather, codes were derived directly from what participants reported. Examining facilitators and barriers to project participation was chosen as a general framework to guide analysis because students tended to focus on these topics in response to the open-ended questions.
- Through initial readings, it seems that most participants who provided qualitative data had positive relationships with their mentors. About 92% of these students mentioned they would recommend their advisor to other students.
- Students seemed to appreciate mentors who showed signs of high emotional engagement (see Facilitators, row 4), provided the knowledge and resources for students to succeed in many different areas (see Facilitators, row 5), and had good communication skills. Students repeatedly mentioned “good listener” as a major strength of their advisor.
- Students also expressed an interest in advisors more frequently initiating conversations about aspects of the students’ lives outside of academics and mentioned they wanted mentors to take a more active role in maintaining the relationship (see Barriers, row 4).
- Barriers to the relationship included college-related stress, feeling overwhelmed by aspects of the project, and stigma surrounding discussing feelings of failure or stress. Further, many students felt they did not or could not consistently schedule appointments or communicate with advisors, therefore wanting advisors to take a more active role in the relationship (see Barriers, row 5).

Discussion

- Students especially appreciated advisors who provided them guidance throughout the intervention, took a personal interest in their lives, and had knowledge of resources for a wide range of student needs, including mental health and job prospects. These traits are similar to the high-emotional engagement, directivity, and competency support domains outlined in Brodeur and colleagues (2016), and make up what the authors described as the “optimal” behavioral profile. This profile garnered the most appreciation from mentees in the Brodeur study.
- Many students expressed feelings of overwhelm, which may have contributed to a desire for the mentor to take on a more active role. Students may need high engagement from the advisor in order to keep up with the relationship and maintain adherence to MHapps.
- MHapp interventions for college students might benefit from the structure provided by supportive accountability, as the stressors of daily life seem to prevent students from maintaining participation. Further, students would benefit from advisors who can provide advice and guidance in multiple different areas (i.e., not just mental health and academics). Importantly, the personal connection between advisor and student seems to be crucial in forming quality relationships. Future research should employ fully randomized, controlled designs to assess the benefits of these kinds of relationships. There is also a need to assess the effects of different mentor-mentee relationships in larger populations from other schools as well.

Method

- Academic advisors and similar support staff were recruited from Academic and Support Services at a mid-sized, public university in the United States. Interested academic advisors and staff members provided contact lists of students on their caseloads. These students were then invited to participate in a project aimed to support college student mental health through the use of MHapps. Advisors participated in online training sessions that taught core tenants of supportive accountability. Afterward, advisors practiced using MentorHub, a MHapp that provides a link between students, advisors, and other MHapps (such as Headspace, Intellicare, and SuperBetter).
- Weekly surveys asked for students’ and advisors’ opinions on: a) MentorHub, b) MHapps used, and c) the relationship between the student and advisor (e.g., Is there anything you would like to share about your relationship or communication with [advisor] over the past week?).
- After the intervention, both advisors and students completed an assessment battery that included open-ended questions about the quality of their relationship with their mentors, perceptions of the apps, and general thoughts on the project as a whole (e.g., What could [advisor] do to improve the quality of his/her advising?).
- Two focus groups were held post-intervention, and they assessed student perceptions of their advisors, the apps, and the program as a whole (e.g., What is your comfort level in talking about mental health issues with an academic advisor?).
- One-hundred and ninety participants were originally invited and filled out the pre-intervention survey. Twenty-nine students provided qualitative data through weekly surveys administered to all participants. Twenty-six students provided qualitative data in the post-intervention survey administered after the nine-week trial ended. Two students attended each of the two focus groups.
- Eleven advisors began the project, and two dropped out due to medical or other complications. Their students were reassigned to new advisors within the program. Advisors had between one and six students.

Sample Codes

Facilitators		Barriers	
Codes	Sample Quote	Codes	Sample Quote
Good communication skills	“[Advisor] is a great person to talk to. She is really engaged and is so friendly that it makes it easier to communicate with her.”	Anxiety/Nerves	“I think that I was nervous to meet, so I will make myself more available next week.”
Listening skills		Scheduling issues/busy schedule	
Inviting atmosphere		Active role of advisor	“Being a little more aggressive in the sense to text me more often”
Inviting atmosphere	“Her demeanor is very calm which allows me to feel less anxious.”		
Method of communicating with Wellness Coach	“For me, we had a weekly Zoom meeting each week, so I feel like it kind of started off as like small talk kind of thing, but then as like the weeks progressed... I feel like we got more of like trust and like bonded and I was able to be like... I'm really stressed...”	Desire for office hours/weekly meetings	“I think it would be great if they had like- had like office hours, where like people can drop in and have multiple coaches...”
Progress of relationship/communication with Wellness Coach			
Perception of caring/kindness	“She has genuinely tried to know me”	Active role of advisor	“[I wish she'd] encourage us more to book advising sessions, even if just for a quick check in”
Knowledgeable	“[She has an] in depth knowledge about everything going on...”	Overwhelmed/busy/stressed	“I was really struggling mentally for the past two weeks, so I kinda of phased out of communication. It definitely wasn't her fault, but I just felt so overwhelmed with things that I just shut down”
		Mental health issues	

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