

# **Development of the Peer Helping Programme (PHP): The Many Facets of Peer Support**

**Tan Lih Chin**

**Nanyang Technological University**

## **Abstract**

The importance and efficacy of peer support is widely recognised and accepted. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find peer support programmes in settings including education, healthcare, religion etc. Peer support programmes do vary widely with regards to their purposes as peer support lends itself well to many functions. Consequently, establishing the purpose of a peer support programme then determines how the programme is operationalised.

The Student Wellbeing Centre, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), established its peer support programme, the Peer Helping Programme (PHP) in 2009, primarily as a means of peer support for students who were in need of social, emotional and psychological help. It also served as an extensive referral system for the Centre, identifying students who would benefit from professional help. Essentially, PHP functioned like a subsidiary arm of the Centre. Although the Programme was established in collaboration with the NTU Psychology Society, a student club, it was largely run by staff from the Student Wellbeing Centre.

Over the years, PHP has evolved with regards to the work that it does. Although the primary purpose of the Programme remains as it is, the work of PHP has expanded to embrace a more holistic view of mental wellbeing, bringing about changes in the management of the Programme. This has profound influence not only for the students who are on the receiving end of peer support but also for the Peer Helpers. It paves the way for changes in which the general student population views and understands the concept of mental wellbeing and also provides opportunities for Peer Helpers to develop themselves.

This paper follows the development of the Peer Helping Programme and how changes in the Programme have resulted in unexpected outcomes in the development of personal and professional capabilities in students.

## **Introduction**

The importance and efficacy of peer support is widely recognised and accepted. Many studies have shown that peer support is helpful in many areas including education, healthcare, religion etc. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find peer support programmes in these settings. Peer support programmes vary widely with regards to their purposes as peer support lends itself well to many functions. Consequently, establishing the purpose of a peer support programme then determines how the programme is operationalised.

Formerly known as the Student Counselling Centre (SCC), the Student Wellbeing Centre (SWC), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), established its peer support programme, the Peer Helping Programme (PHP) in 2009. The purpose of the Programme was to provide peer support for students who were in need of social, emotional and psychological help. It also served as an extensive referral system for the Centre, identifying students who would benefit from professional help. With these purposes in mind, various structures and processes were established and put in place. Although modifications to the operationalisation of the Programme were expected as it evolved, the changes which have occurred over the course of the last 5 years have been beyond expectations.

Being with the Programme as a Supervisor since 2010 has been an exciting and enriching experience. The Programme demonstrates much potential in enhancing the experience of students in NTU and its growth and development in realising this potential has been dynamic and vibrant. This growth and development has also resulted in a paradigm shift in the way the Programme is managed, bringing about unexpected gains which have enhanced the learning and further developed both the personal and professional capabilities of our students.

Although it was established to support students in need of social, emotional and psychological help, the Programme has gone on to benefit those who provide such support, revealing a different facet of peer support. And even as this aspect of peer support is uncovered, yet another facet of peer support is illuminated as potential gains for the general student population are being discovered. Like a diamond in the rough, the Programme has been polished to reveal the many facets of peer support.

This paper follows the development of the Programme to explore the effects of peer support on our students, specifically the peer helpers as well as the general student population, through this author's personal observations and experiences of working on the Programme. Although it lacks the rigour of an academic study, it is hoped that this paper can one day be the premise for future studies.

## **Literature Review**

There have been many studies examining the effects of peer support. Although these studies focus on peer support programmes across various settings, they have all reported positive findings with regards to the effects of peer support on those receiving help. A study conducted by LeRoux (1995) to evaluate the effectiveness of a peer helping programme at a junior high school found that 61% of those who received help believed that the experience assisted them in reducing their stress levels. Another study conducted in a small private Christian college reported a reduction in distress arising from interpersonal problems amongst students who received peer counselling (Pitts, 1996). And according to Mitchell

(2007), befriending played an important role in mitigating social difficulties such as loneliness for adults with mental health problems.

In comparison, fewer studies have been conducted to examine the effects of peer support on the peer helpers themselves. Moore (1994) investigated the effects of being a peer helper amongst eleventh and twelfth grade students and discovered that those who had been involved with peer helping for a year were more likely to report higher self-esteem. Another study conducted by Gammonley and Luken (2001) amongst people with mental illness serving as advocates for peer involvement in recreation and community activities in psychosocial rehabilitation settings indicated improvements in the quality of life for these advocates.

Finally, there appears to be a lack of research in the effects of peer support on the society at large. Although Mead, Hilton and Curtis (2001) theorised that peer support could create a culture of health and ability as opposed to one of illness and disability, they did not present any findings in support of this. They were also of the opinion that a culture of health and ability could encourage and instil a greater sense of autonomy for peer helpers and effect social change. Whilst it is an exciting notion, little has been done to verify this idea.

### **Development of PHP: Initial Phase**

PHP was established in 2009 by the then SCC, now SWC, in collaboration with the NTU Psychology Society. The aim of the Programme was to help students have the best possible experiences in university through peer support. It also acted as an extensive referral system through the identification of emotionally or psychologically distressed students who might require professional intervention.

Back in 2009, Peer helpers or Confidants were student volunteers trained to provide basic helping skills. With these skills, they would be equipped to provide emotional and psychological support to those within their immediate circles of influence and also to student clients, who were receiving ongoing counselling support at SCC, requiring peer support. Being a part of the student body, Confidants were also better placed to alert SCC should they meet with an emotionally or psychologically distressed student who might need professional intervention.

Due to the nature of the work in which the Confidants were involved with, it was decided that the Programme would be run in a covert manner. To ensure confidentiality, Confidants were not allowed to disclose any information about the students to whom they provided support except within the Programme itself for the purpose of supervision. Even then, strict rules were observed to protect the identities of the students receiving support. To further maintain confidentiality, Confidants were disallowed from disclosing their identities as peer helpers and also their affiliation to the Programme.

The Confidants were supported in their work both by the Programme Supervisors from SCC as well as the NTU Psychology Society. Whilst the Supervisors oversaw clinical matters, the Society handled administrative matters. Together, they managed the Programme. This arrangement allowed the Confidants to focus on clinical work without having to worry about the management of the Programme. However, it also meant that those managing the Programme would be doing so without actual experience of the work carried out by its volunteers.

At the end of the first year, an evaluation of the Programme was carried out with the Confidants to assess and further develop the Programme. Majority of the Confidants reported that the helping skills which they had been equipped with were beneficial to their work as peer helpers and that they had been better able to support others as a result. They were also asked to list the skills which they found useful in their work as Confidants and 44.7% spoke of the skill of reflecting feelings, 34.2% brought up the skill of paraphrasing while 23.7% made references to the skill of questioning. It is heartening to know that almost half of the Confidants found the skill of reflecting feelings to be useful in their work as the ability to empathise with others is necessary in order to do so. And according to Piaget, empathy is one of the most critical competencies for cognitive and social development (Strayer, 1987).

Many of the Confidants further reported that they have benefitted on a personal level since becoming peer helpers - 65.8% of the Confidants said they now had a better sense of self-awareness, 28.9% felt they were better able to communicate with others and 10.5% believed they were more confident about themselves. Positive personal gains for the peer helper as a result of peer helping came as no surprise and were expected since studies have shown that peer helping is beneficial for those who receive help as well as for those who provide help. According to Riessman and Banks (2001), "giving help is the best way of being helped" (p. 174). The opportunity to play a meaningful role in the life of another is of critical importance to youths (Moore, 1994) and can help them learn more about themselves, develop their social skills and improve their self-confidence amidst other gains (Swen, 2000).

What was surprising was the fact that 18.4% of the Confidants reported that they were unable to apply the skills which they had learnt. This seemed rather unusual as the Confidants were encouraged to reach out and provide support to those in their immediate circles of influence. It was rather unlikely for one not to encounter a friend or family member who needed emotional and or psychological support over the course of a year.

Further inquiry revealed that although these Confidants had provided emotional and or psychological support to those in their immediate circles of influence, they did not put to use the skills learnt in these instances as they found it uncomfortable responding differently to those with whom they were acquainted or familiar without being able to reveal or explain the reason for the change in their behaviours. It appeared that keeping the Confidants' identities confidential and disallowing the disclosure of their affiliation to the Programme was hindering their ability to carry out their work. Anecdotal evidence also indicated that some Confidants were of the opinion that they would be able to reach out to more people, including those outside of their immediate circles of influence, if they were allowed to disclose their identities as Confidants. They also believed that they had the capacity to do more as Confidants and therefore contribute to the growth of the Programme.

### **Development of PHP: Intermediate Phase**

In 2011, it was decided that radical changes would be necessary for PHP to continue growing and developing. To facilitate the work of the Confidants, they would no longer be required to keep their identities confidential nor conceal their affiliation to the Programme. However, all clinical work undertaken by the Confidants would remain under the jurisdiction of SCC and be kept confidential.

The Programme Supervisors also decided that a shift in the emphasis of the nature of peer support provided by the Confidants would be necessary to expand the role of the Confidants and enable them to reach out to people beyond their immediate circles of influence with greater ease. Although help in all forms can alleviate emotional and psychological stress, the Programme's emphasis had always been on the provision of emotional and psychological support. This influenced and limited the Confidants' concept of help which affected the way in which they carried out their work. By shifting the Programme's emphasis and endorsing all forms of help be it physical, academic, social, administrative etc., the Confidants would be encouraged to provide both intangible as well as tangible support to others. This not only expanded the scope of the Confidants' work but also made it easier for them to approach others beyond their immediate circles of influence since there is less stigma associated with seeking tangible help.

The idea of setting up a sub-committee for the Programme also came to fruition at the end of 2011. Although the NTU Psychology Society had handled all administrative matters when the Programme was first started, it had gradually taken a backseat in these duties over the years. Increasingly, the weight of such administrative matters fell on the shoulders of the Programme Supervisors and with the expansion of the Programme made it rather challenging for the Supervisors to manage the Programme efficiently. To remedy the situation, it was decided that a sub-committee comprising of Confidants would be established to take over the administrative duties of the Programme. This would, to a certain degree, eradicate the situation of having people who were inexperienced with the work of the Confidants managing the Programme.

The intention of setting up a sub-committee was initially to relieve the Programme Supervisors of routine administrative duties so that they could focus on clinical matters as well as the overall management of the Programme. However, it was observed that with the establishment of a sub-committee, the Confidants not only handled administrative matters but also began initiating ideas about the work that they did and which they would like to do. Some of these ideas included the creation of a Facebook Page for the Programme for publicity purposes and also email befriending. Though some of these ideas failed to take off, they suggested that the Confidants felt a strong sense of ownership over the Programme and were keen to manage it.

The Confidants organised themselves to form ad hoc groups so as to explore various ideas. They brainstormed together, came up with proposals and presented their work to the rest of the Confidants. Even in the absence of specific training and supervision, the Confidants learnt and developed interpersonal skills, cooperation and team work through the initiation, exploration and execution of these ideas. According to Robinson (2000), social skills, cooperation and the ability to work in teams are part of a list of personal qualities which enhance the employability of a person. Basic academic skills, higher order thinking skills and this list of personal qualities are the skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job. They are the skills that help people get along with others and make sound decisions. And unlike technical skills, these skills are generic in nature and applicable to all jobs enabling the Confidants to benefit from them no matter what their choice of careers may be.

### **Development of PHP: Current Phase**

The process of working with youths is often a dynamic one. Although fundamental changes to PHP enabled the Confidants to better apply the skills which they have learnt, they felt that

more could be done to encourage students to seek help through the Programme. After some investigation, the Confidants discovered that there were 2 key reasons as to why students were not turning to the Programme for help. Firstly, students did not know about the Programme and its purpose. Secondly, they were uncomfortable with the idea of seeking help due to the stigma associated with it. This discomfort became even more salient if one's issue was an emotional and or psychological one. With these reasons in mind, the Confidants decided that they would need to publicise the Programme and also address the stigma associated with help seeking.

One of the first things the Confidants did to publicise the Programme was to meet up with staff of the various schools within NTU to introduce the Programme. This was done throughout 2011 and 2012. Although the Confidants had already been identifying themselves and making known their affiliation to the Programme, these disclosures were generally on a need-to-know basis. By presenting the Programme to the schools, the Confidants were able to generate awareness of the Programme amongst staff and encourage the referral of students, who would benefit from peer support, to the Programme.

The Confidants also engaged the use of multiple mediums to publicise the Programme to the students. In 2012, the Confidants sent an email blast to the student body informing them of the Programme and its purpose. At the same time, efforts to reach out to the online community were stepped up through the Programme's Facebook Page. The Confidants kept up with weekly posts to create and maintain awareness of the Programme. To reach out to the freshmen, the Confidants conceptualised and created animation videos which were played at the freshmen orientation talks conducted by the schools at the beginning of the academic year. These videos were later played on TV screens situated at prominent places in campus from 2012 to 2013. Traditional mediums such as radio and newspapers were also involved in the publicity of the Programme. In 2013, the Programme was featured in The Nanyang Chronicle, a student-run campus newspaper in NTU. Later that year, a public service announcement about the Programme was also recorded and played over Radio Fusion, NTU's student-run campus radio station.

Besides publicising the Programme through video, radio, print and electronic means, the Confidants also organised their own events to further publicise the Programme. This was important as it not only raised the visibility of the Programme but also that of the Confidants on campus. In 2012, the Confidants collaborated with the NTU Students' Union, the largest student organization in NTU, to organise Stressbuster, an event aimed at helping students de-stress prior to the semester examination. Because the event was held in conjunction with the Union's U Study Campaign, a prominent Union project, it was able to tap on the Union's far-reaching influence to publicise the Programme. To date, there have been a total of 4 Stressbuster events held over a span of 2 years.

This collaboration with the NTU Students' Union further led to the publicity of the Programme at Welcome Week, an annual event organised by the Union held at the beginning of each academic year to welcome freshmen and help them learn more about as well as prepare for life in NTU. The Confidants were invited to put up a presentation on stage during Welcome Week 2013/2014 and decided to put together a game show to educate the audience about help seeking for emotional and psychological issues and also inform them about the available resources on campus. Welcome Week has been an opportune platform in reaching out to freshmen and the Confidants will continue to do so at this year's Welcome Week.

In 2013, the Confidants went on to organise Campus Kindness Movement (CKM), an event aimed at encouraging students to spread kindness by showing care and concern for those around them. For this event, the Confidants worked in pairs to approach students on campus and hand out care packages. Through their concern for them, the Confidants encouraged fellow students to think about and care for the people around them. Although the Confidants were limited in their ability to reach out to a large group of students due to the nature of the event, they were still able to share about the Programme with a number of students. More importantly, the event allowed the Confidants to interact with fellow students on a personal level, leaving them with deeper impressions of the Programme. To date, CKM has been held twice over the span of a year.

Generating publicity for the Programme stretched the Confidants in ways they had never known before. As this was an area of expertise in which the Programme Supervisors had little knowledge or experience, little guidance was offered. The Confidants had to figure out what to do and how to go about doing it most of the time. Whilst it proved to be trying, it also helped the Confidants develop resourcefulness. To be competent at publicising the Programme however, the Confidants needed to be more than just resourceful. The Programme Supervisors thus decided that it would be necessary to also equip the Confidants with project management skills. Project management skills included scheduling, resource allocation, risk management, budgeting, team management, change management as well as issue management (Westland, 2013). In March 2014, a training session was organised to equip the Confidants with the relevant project management skills. However, it was observed that most of them had already picked up the necessary skills in the process of generating publicity for the Programme.

The Confidants were aware that efforts to publicise the Programme would come to nought if the stigma associated with help seeking was not addressed. Therefore, they were always mindful about how they publicised the Programme as every opportunity to share about the Programme was a chance to destigmatise the idea of help seeking. Initially, the Confidants tried to address this stigma about help seeking by normalising the experience of it. Be it the animation videos which the Confidants created, the early Facebook posts or Stressbuster, the approach was to highlight the existence of problems and emphasize the logical resultant reaction of seeking help. Over time however, the Confidants developed a different approach to address the stigma associated with help seeking.

In 2013, the Confidants posted an article providing practical tips about sleep on the Programme's Facebook Page. This was followed by a series of articles which shared about improving various aspects of one's health. These posts differed from the earlier posts as they focused on the positive rather than the negative. The emphasis was no longer on fixing problems but on being well. By focusing on and encouraging efforts towards such a state, the Confidants made the idea of help seeking less taboo. This shift in the Confidants' approach in addressing the stigma associated with help seeking was also observed in the conceptualisation of CKM. Unlike earlier events which focused on addressing and eradicating difficulties, CKM centred on the promotion of specific qualities and behaviours to prevent future problems.

Regardless of whether this shift was a conscious one on the part of the Confidants, it is encouraging and exciting to witness the change in the way they view the idea of mental wellbeing. The Confidants have moved from a problem focused perspective to one that is rooted in positivity. The emphasis is no longer on mental health problems but on mental

wellbeing. This reflects the Confidants' growth in their understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing. In addition, it paves the way for an increased sense of awareness on the part of the Confidants with regards to their own mental wellbeing.

Although the development of the Programme is still in its infancy, it is not entirely implausible to think that this process of growth may be replicated with the general student population. Over the years, the Centre has been approached by various schools within NTU seeking consultation for the establishment of their own peer support networks. The Programme Supervisors have also provided training for the peer helpers of these schools to equip them with basic helping skills. Recently, student groups such as the NTU Graduate Student Council (GSC) as well as the NTU National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC) have also requested for similar training. In addition, the NTUGSC has expressed interest in setting up its own peer support network. Be it consultation or training, the Programme Supervisors have been actively involved with the work of these groups. And since the work as well as the nature of these groups is similar to that of the Confidants, there is always the possibility that this process of growth would repeat itself with these groups. As more groups establish their own peer support networks and grow from strength to strength, a day may come where most students share the Confidants' understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

Since its inception, much planning has gone into the development of PHP. However, the growth of the Programme has not adhered strictly to these plans. The evolution of the Programme has instead dictated its management, and hence development, and although this could be stressful and at times frustrating, the process has brought with it a multitude of gains.

In helping their peers, the Confidants picked up basic helping skills and strengthened their ability to empathise with others, an important component of cognitive and social development. They also made personal gains including increased self-awareness, better communication skills and greater confidence. In working with each other, the Confidants enhanced their employability through the development of personal qualities such as social skills, cooperation and the ability to work in teams. In managing the Programme, the Confidants became more resourceful and picked up project management skills. Lastly, in being a part of the development of the Programme, the Confidants grew in their understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing.

Although research has shown that peer helping brings positive effects to peer helpers, this facet of peer helping remains fascinating as the Programme's focus was always on benefitting those who received help rather than those who provided help. Also, whilst such effects were expected, the Programme has brought on gains in more areas than anticipated.

Even though the impact of peer helping on the society at large requires further research, it is a facet of peer helping that shows much promise. Growth in the Confidants' understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing was never planned for and the possibility of replicating this growth with the general student population is an exciting one. If other peer support networks within NTU develop in similar ways, the understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing amongst students may one day be very different from what it is today.

Since its establishment in 2009, the Programme has experienced significant changes. What started out as a programme to provide peer support has developed not just to serve those in

need but also the peer helpers and possibly the general student population, highlighting different facets of peer support. And with the discovery of each facet, greater interest and excitement await the uncovering of new facets as this diamond that is the Peer Helping Programme is further polished to reveal its brilliance.

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