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Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Ideals on the Gustavus Adolphus College Campus
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Abstract

As more students are going to college than ever before, mental health problems seem to be on the rise or more apparent, and stigma toward mental illness still exists. By appraisal of help-seeking accessibility, the campus can discern how best to serve the students. A focus group was conducted discussing what individuals felt the ideal student at the private institution to be. On the basis of responses of the focus group- a survey was created to assess the current campus state, to review resources, and to create more mental health awareness. A sample of psychology students attending Gustavus Adolphus College participated in a survey concerning mental health, mental illness, and ideals on campus. The survey found results which were used to develop increased awareness on campus.

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An earlier article states, “College life is at times pleasurable for students, yet is also a period in which every student experiences problems” (Houston, 1971, p.157). This is a quote from a review done over thirty five years ago but still holds true today. This review includes the current state of research findings on sources of problems for college students, potential adverse effects of problems of college students, and the identification of students who are adversely affected by their problems at the present time or are likely to be adversely affected in the future. The primary concern and identified source was identified as academics in this article, which may not be the same today, but the idea of studying what could reveal the potential sources, effects, and individual vulnerability is a constant battle. A more current study done by Komiya et. al. (2000) writes, “Severe underutilization of mental health services by the public has been found in both national and regional surveys.” Previous research has identified different possible factors which may prevent individuals from getting professional help including strong belief in individualism, low interpersonal dependency, reluctance to self disclose, a tendency to conceal distressing and negative personal information, gender roles, social stigma, low socioeconomic status, low education, and low awareness of resources (Komiya et. al, 2000, p.138). The goal of this study was to further the identification of unexamined barriers, specifically emotional openness, to seeking needed psychological services- hoping to alleviate factors that prevent people from receiving needed help (Komiya et. al, 2000, p.138). Two significant findings in this study were that greater emotional openness was positively correlated with better attitudes toward help seeking and those more closed to their emotions perceived greater stigma toward counseling.

The current study was done to see why some students are more affected than others when as stated in the first article, “it is a period in which every student experiences problems.” A group of students can all be a part of one community, but come from entirely different backgrounds. One’s personal experiences, knowledge, exposure to mental illness are all different and can influence how one evaluates a struggling individual. Opinions are formed before college, but opinions are also formed during college. The social atmosphere created by the community controls norms. Each student has a different experience while attending college, but because of these social norms which create ideals some similar pressures may be experienced that may contribute to one’s mental health.

Methods

Participants

One hundred psychology students currently attending Gustavus Adolphus College were voluntarily involved in this survey study. Those who participated in the study either freely signed up to receive class credit for a general psychology class or were presented with an option to take the survey during a typical forensic or abnormal psychology class. There were an unequal amount of male and female volunteers reading 33 and 67 respectively. A wide distribution of years were represented including 31 students in their first year at Gustavus, 26 in their second, 29 in their third, and 14 seniors. The sample surveyed was predominately United States Citizens (90%), but included students from Mexico, Switzerland, Sweden, and India.

Materials

The only materials needed are the 40 question survey including campus specified ideals and writing utensils (located in Appendix-A). The survey was designed to incorporate questions addressing demographics, personal experience, knowledge and opinion of mental illness, The

Counseling Center, outside influences, and ideals. The demographics section included questions concerning gender, year in school, and where one was born and raised to be aware of student's background and also to see if correlations exist among those category similarities. The personal experience questions indicated past mental health help received, past mental illness diagnoses, current mental state, and family or close friend occurrence to evaluate if having past experience influences one's opinions about mental illness. The knowledge and opinion of mental illness portion included questions asking one how much they believe they know about mental illness, stigma prevalence, possible causes, and help-seeking practices to observe how knowledge and opinion could impact ideas about mental health. The Counseling Center segment included questions asking whether one knows certain facts about the office. It is to appraise the familiarity and accessibility of the Counseling Center as a resource for mental health and illness. The outside influences section asked opinions about media portrayals of mental illness and family openness to examine how outside roles may influence opinions and ideas about mental illness. The last section used the information gathered from the focus group as to what an "ideal" Gustavus student is seen to be. The questions in this portion were to see if people were feeling pressure to fit this "ideal" and whether this pressure influences their mental health.

Procedure

Gustavus "Ideal." A diverse focus group of Gustavus students (both male and female and of different school years) was conducted, before the survey was created, discussing what individuals felt the ideal student at Gustavus to be. It was found that the ideal characteristics of a "Gustie" are successful, energetic, friendly, intellectual, involved, hardworking, and athletic. This information was used for the last portion of the 40 question survey given.

Survey Section. When the survey was given, the researcher properly introduced the experiment, including the main topics covered, anonymity of the participants, declaring no deception, and concluded by asking them to sign the informed consent forms. It was also stated that this was optional and if at any time they did not want to finish the survey, they would not be penalized and would still receive class credit. Each of the surveys was given in a quiet classroom, in the early evening, and took approximately 15-30 minutes. For the purpose of this study it is important to distinguish between mental health and mental illness. Defined by the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health, mental health " refers to the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity," while mental illness is a term that, " refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders."

Results

Demographics. There were 100 psychology students involved in the study including 33 males and 67 females. The year in school of the students involved varied with 31 individuals in their first year, 26 in their second year, 29 in their third year, and 14 in their fourth year. The population surveyed was predominately U.S. citizens (90%) but included students from Mexico, Switzerland, Sweden, and India.

Personal Experience. Thirty seven percent of the students who took the survey reported having received mental health help. Twenty percent of the students reported having been diagnosed with a mental illness. Of the twenty percent who have been diagnosed with a mental illness, fifty-five percent are still dealing with that mental illness, and seventy percent were diagnosed after coming to college. However, only three percent of the population surveyed is currently receiving mental health help on campus, five percent is receiving mental health help off

campus, and one percent is receiving both on and off campus mental health help. Majority of students, seventy four percent, have someone in their family or a close friend who has dealt with a mental illness.

Knowledge and Opinion of Mental Illness. The three cause(s) of mental illness were identified as environment, personal weakness, and biology. Eighty-eight percent identified environment- including stress, media, living environment, and trauma- as a cause of mental illness. Eighteen percent identified personal weakness- including personality type- as a cause of mental illness. Seventy-four percent identified biology- including age, genetics, family history, chemical imbalance- as a cause of mental illness. Ninety-eight percent of the students who too the survey thought more public knowledge would change the stigma of mental illness. Thirty-six percent of students reported thinking the stigma associated with mental illness has increased, sixty-three decreased, and one percent thought it has remained steady over the last ten years. On average within the sample surveyed, it was thought that sixty-six percent of those who see a professional are helped, whereas nineteen percent were thought to get better on their own without a professional. Of those surveyed, thirty-eight percent reported they would be embarrassed if their friends knew about them getting professional help.

The Counseling Center. Sixteen students reported not knowing where the counseling center was. Seventy-two students reported not knowing any of the counseling center employee's names. An independent samples t-tests was run to examine the counseling center usage perception difference between first years and upper classmen. The test proved to be statistically significant ($p < .000$) as first years reported Counseling Center Usage perception to be forty-seven percent where upperclassmen reported twenty-five percent. Ninety-six percent of those surveyed knew the counseling center does not cost additional money to students.

Outside Influences. Seventy percent of the survey takers reported seeing more negative than positive news stories in the news media about mental health. Seventy-nine percent of the students surveyed reported seeing more negative than positive portrayals of people with mental illness in the media.

Ideals. An Ideal Gustavus student was defined by the focus group and in the survey as: Successful, energetic, attractive, friendly, intellectual, involved, hardworking, and athletic. Eighty-seven percent of students reported feeling some pressure to fit this ideal and sixty eight percent of students reported this feeling affecting their mental health.

Discussion

Prevalence of personal experience with mental illness or connection to a close friend or family member with a mental illness was reported showing it is an applicable topic to address on the Gustavus Adolphus College campus. The prevalence rate is representative of the average rate throughout the nation. However, after seeing the evidence of avoidance of help because of stigma and ideals, these suffering individuals are high functioning. As reported, still a large group of people would still be embarrassed to get help. Almost all students wrote they feel some pressure to be the “ideal.” Mental illness may be becoming a more spoken and accepted illness, but there is still a mark of shame with help seeking and labeling. Labeling may be the core initiating of stigma. When one is diagnosed, they are labeled different. However, as the first article discussed stated, “College life is at times pleasurable for students, yet is also a period in which *every* student experiences problems” (Houston, 1971, p.157). Individuals easily approach a health service office with an accepted medical problem, but why not a counseling center? These findings present the possibility of many individuals suffering mentally to seeking physical help. These findings are not conclusive to justify the rise of psychosomatic illness and

somatoform disorders, but stigma reduction may help those avoiding counseling to receive needed attention. Medicinal therapy is constantly changing and in fast paced America, many individuals want a quick fix drug.

A main confound in this study is subjectivity. Though the surveys were anonymous, there is no way to insist that truth was reported. Another possible confound may be the subject pool. Because the surveys were all taken from psychology students, this may not provide an accurate representation of the campus or college students as a whole. Being on a spectrum, how mental health is defined by individuals may be different as well. The Surgeon General's mental health and mental illness definition were used as a reference. This experiment is a novice study which could be pursued in each of the areas studied more in depth.

Further research could be done comparing the private institution to a public university examining whether more anonymity would influence ideas and struggles. It could also be more generalized to be more representative by including all majors. Comparing faculty, employees, and students of the college on each of the discussed levels could provide insight into where the pressure is from, and whether it is experienced by the faculty and employees as well. Similar to a study done by Rosenthal (1973), which showed the devastation of labeling mentally ill, creating a blind experiential study on campus where individuals would be labeled as mentally ill and measuring observational responses could provide less subjective results. A study done at Colgate university did a blind study similar to the one mentioned, where some students were labeled counseling center clients and some were labeled psychology students when introduced to a conversation with another. When having the conversation with a "client," individuals were more negative than when talking to students they believed were psychology students. Another significant results was found when the "clients" also began to behave in the less socially

“normal” conduct (Sibicky & Dovidio, 1986, p. 148). As a weekly watching of a television series with friends is a common social occurrence, media’s role could also be studied. As suicide is currently the second leading cause of death of college students, one study addressed the role of media and suicide showing the strong role it can play. Titled, “Suicide and the Media: Pitfalls and Prevention,” Crane et. al. (2003) wanted to congregate a group of media professionals, medical researchers, and experts attempting to find evidence for media influence on suicidal behavior and discussing possible prevention. They found that, “media reporting or portrayal of suicides can influence suicidal behavior, leading to increases in the overall number of suicides and increases in the use of particular methods of suicide.” If media can influence suicidal behavior, it can certainly have an affect on mental health. With the current results, there are many directions this initial study could further be studied and over years, the results may change nationally and intimately on a small campus like Gustavus Adolphus College.

Putting these results into action, a mental health awareness week titled, *Mind Your Health Week*, was created to generate awareness on campus. Because the survey said, “16% of students did not know where the counseling center was & 72% did not know any of the counseling center employee’s names,” a special edition Once Upon a Potty Newsletter was put up in all the dorm bathroom stalls including pictures and brief friendly biographies of each of the counseling center employees. This was done to destigmatize the employees in the Counseling Center. Beginning the awareness week, a nationally recognized motivational speaker was brought to campus to speak about mental illness and stigma presenting, “What Happy Faces are Hiding,” with over 500 students attendance. The survey also said, “87% feel pressure to fit “Gustie” ideal & 68% said this pressure affects their mental health. To contradict the pressure to fit the “ideal” figure, a brief drama was performed before the speaker addressing mental health struggles and feelings

representing true Gustavus voices from the previous three years. This week also included three sessions provided by a Counseling Center psychologist, addressing the mental health connection to time, sleep, and eating. There was an intentional eating evening to coincide with the mental health and eating workshop, where a calm environment incorporating entertaining piano music and intentional eating tips was available. There were various other opportunities including a spa, meditation, chapel speakers, encouragement cards, and a live improvisation comedy evening. Ninety-eight percent of survey takers reported, “more public knowledge would change the stigma of mental illness.” This awareness week amid the starting of a national awareness group on campus titled, Active Minds on Campus, will hopefully begin the discussion of mental health, mental illness, and ideals on the Gustavus Adolphus College Campus.

As many a mentally ill person has reported: *"The worst thing about being mentally ill is not the illness, it is the way we are treated by others because of it."*

The Surgeon General states, “Stigma tragically deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society. It must be overcome.”

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Twenty of those surveyed reported that they have been diagnosed with a mental illness.

Figure 2. Seventy-four percent surveyed reported that they have someone in their family or a close friend who has dealt with a mental illness.

Figure 3. When asked the cause(s) of mental illness 88% reported environment, 18% personal weakness, & 74% biology.

Figure 4. Thirty-six of those surveyed reported that mental illness stigma has increased, 63% thought it has decreased, and 1% thought it has remained steady over the last 10 years.

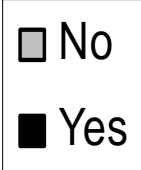
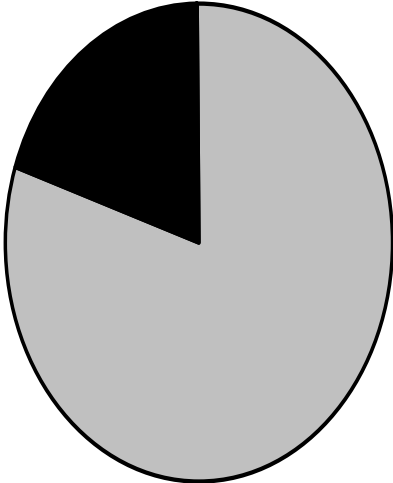
Figure 5. Of those surveyed, 38% stated that they would be embarrassed if their friends knew about them getting professional help.

Figure 6. An independent samples t-test showed: first years reported Counseling Center Usage perception to be 47% where upperclassmen reported 25%- a statistically significant finding ($P < .000$).

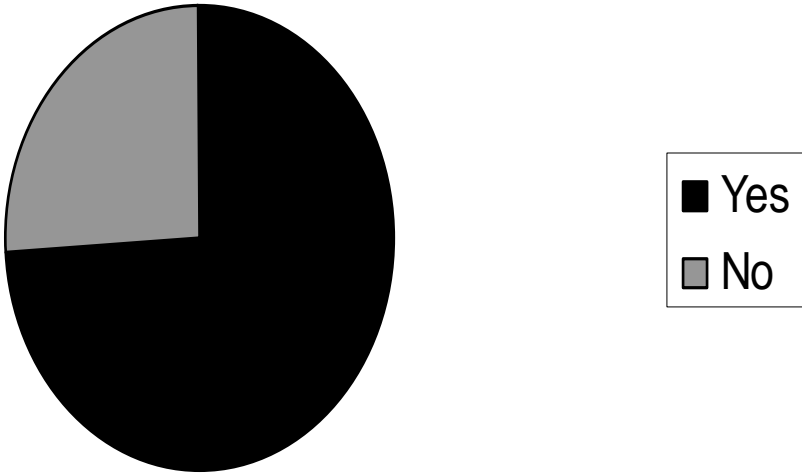
Figure 7. On average, those surveyed thought 33% of students use the counseling center at any point and time.

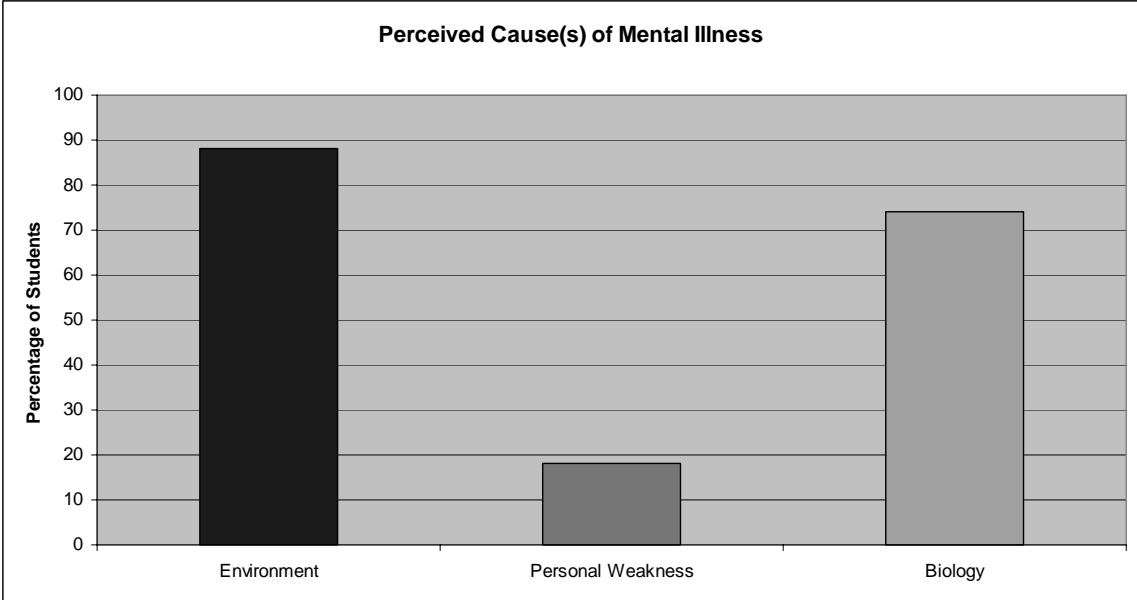
Figure 8. Seventy-nine of the students surveyed reported seeing more negative than positive portrayals of mental illness in the media, 3% more positive than negative, and 18% believed they were neutral.

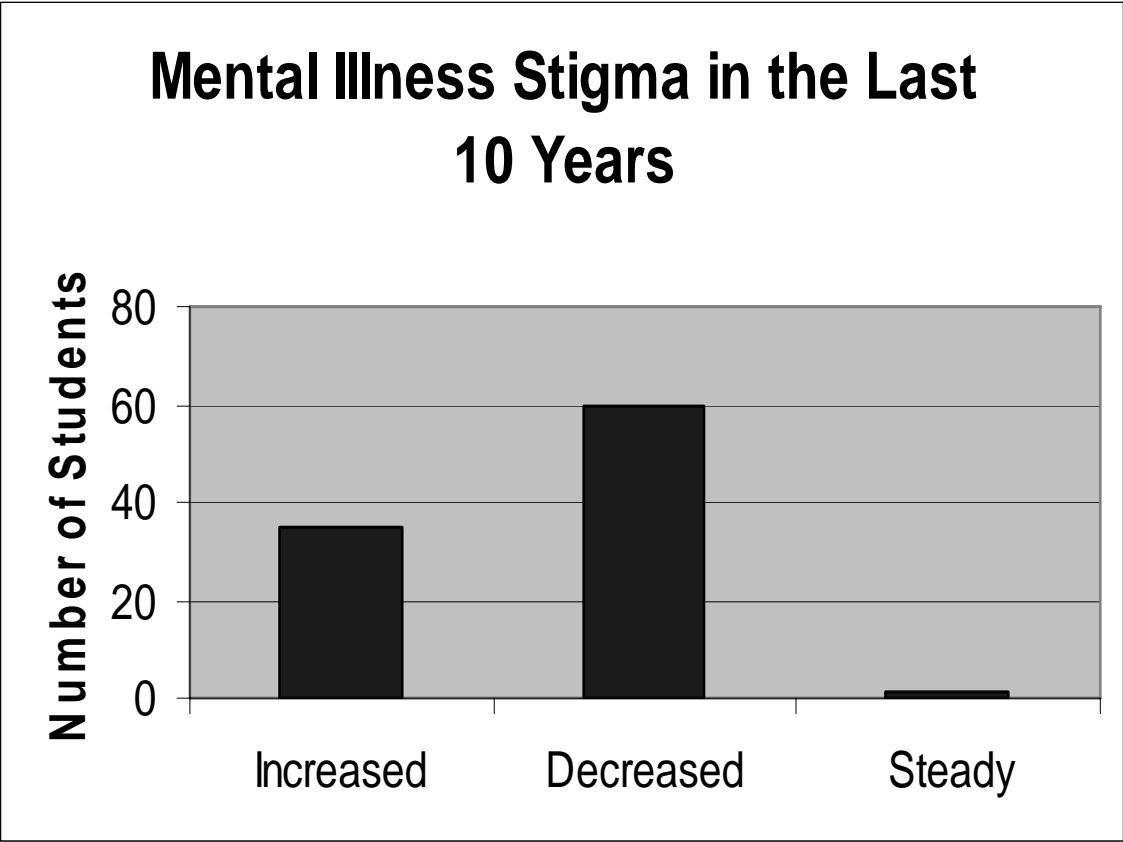
Diagnosed with a Mental Illness



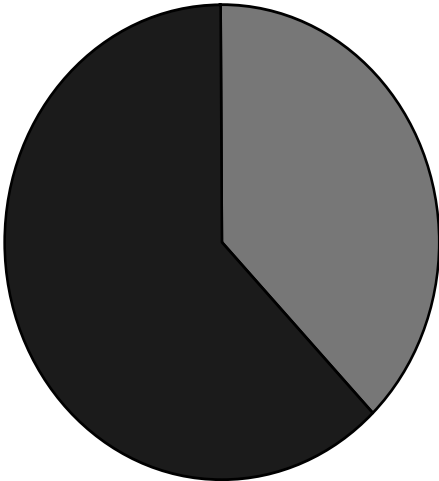
Family or Close Friend Who Has Dealt With a Mental Illness



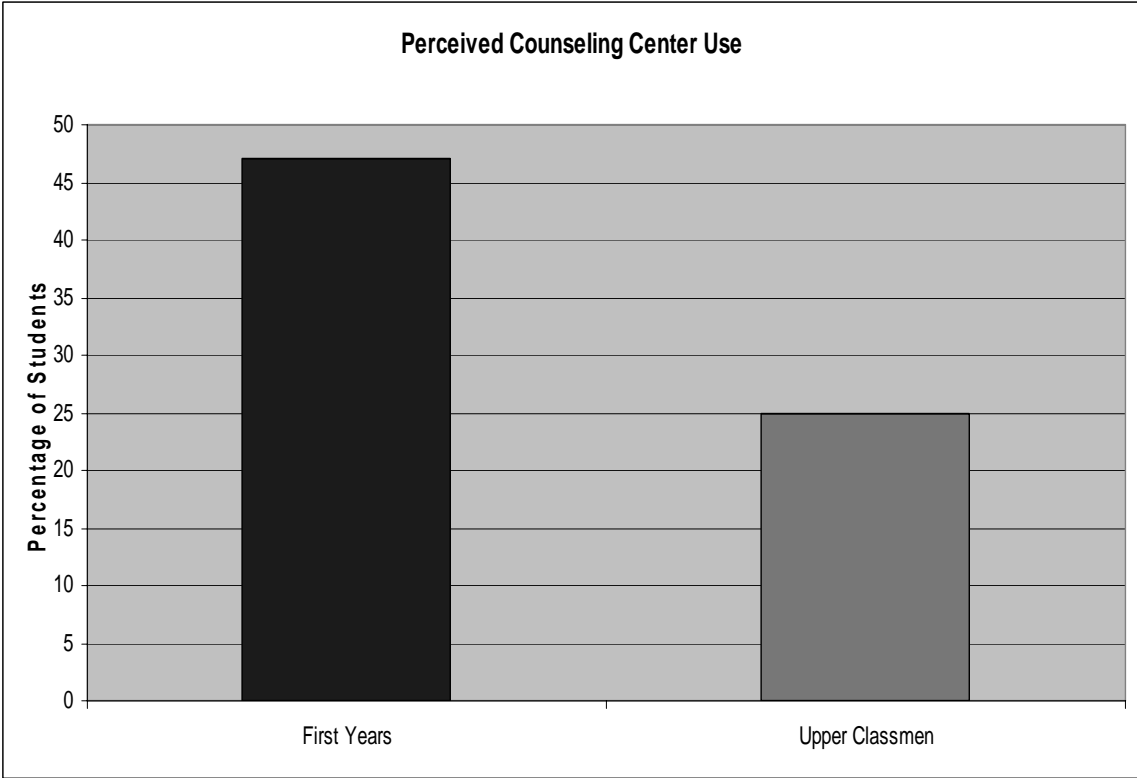


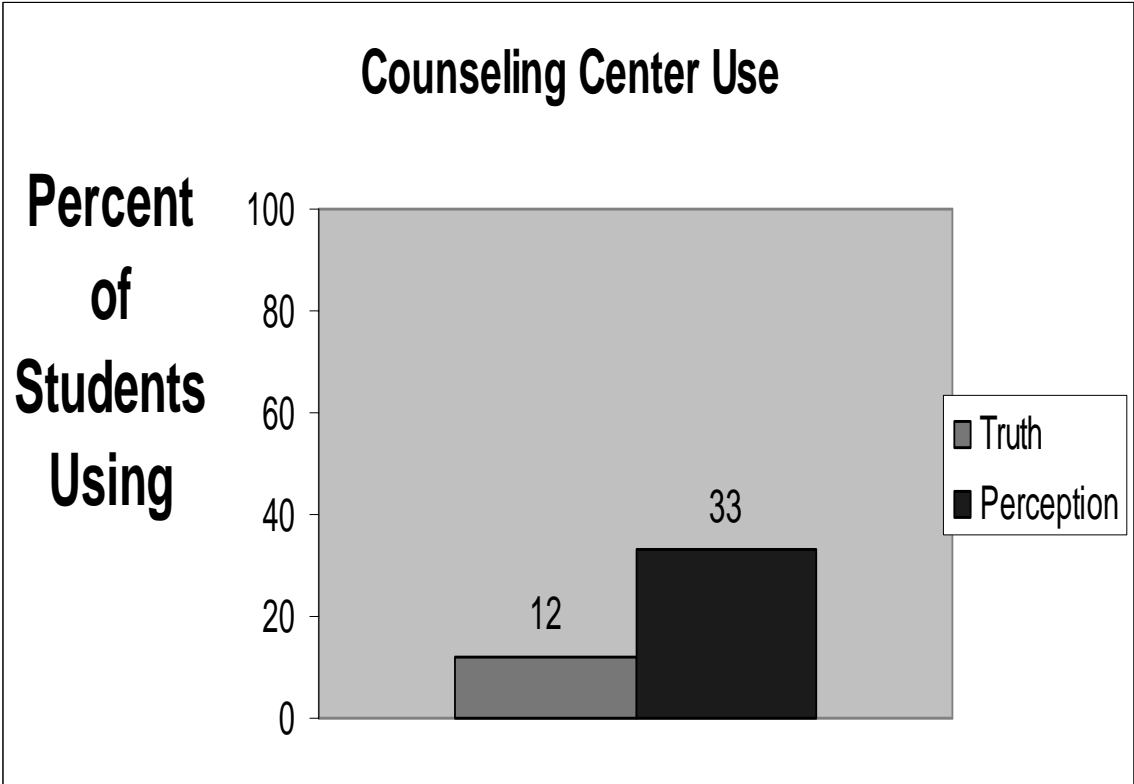


Embarrassed For Getting Help

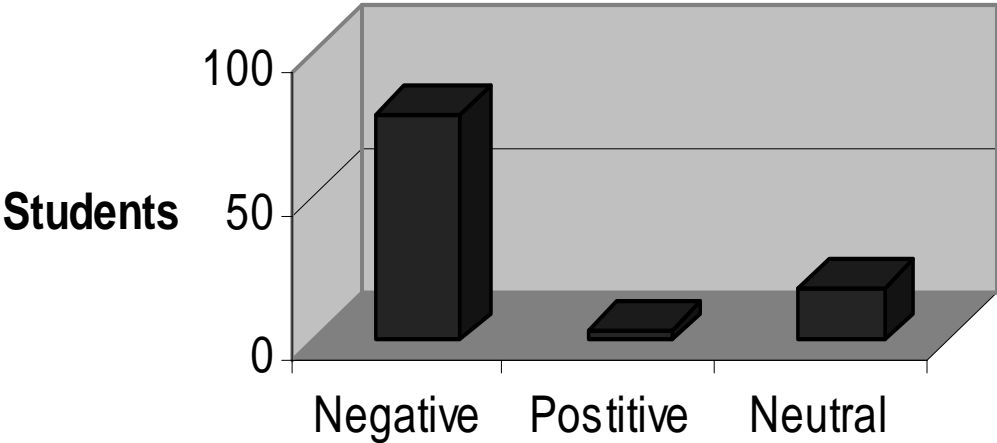


- Would
- Would not





Mental Illness Portrayals in the Media



Participant ____

Mental Health Survey Questions

Demographics

1. Sex/gender:
2. Age:
3. Year in School:
4. How long have you attended Gustavus?
5. Where did you grow up?
6. What is your race?
7. Where were you born?
8. How long have you lived in the United States?
9. Is there anything else you would like to state about your cultural background that may influence your opinion of mental health?

Personal Experience

10. Have you ever received mental health help? Y N
11. Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? Y N
12. If so, are you still dealing with that mental illness? Y N NA
13. If so, were you diagnosed before or after coming to college? Before After NA
14. If you are currently receiving mental health help, are you going on or off campus for services? On Off NA
15. Has someone in your family or a close friend ever dealt with a mental illness? Y N

Knowledge and Opinion of Mental Illness

16. How much do you know about mental illness?
(almost nothing) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (a lot)
17. Do you think more public knowledge would change the stigma of mental illness? Y N
18. How competent are you at identifying the basic warning signs of mental illness?
(not educated) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (very educated)
19. What do you think is/are the cause(s) of mental illness?
Personal weakness Environment Age Other_____

20. Do you think the stigma associated with mental illness has increased or decreased in the last ten years? Increased Decreased
21. If you have/had a mental illness or thought you might, would you feel most comfortable initially talking to a psychologist (P.H.D.), psychiatrist (M.D.-specialist), or a family practice physician (M.D.)?
 Psychologist Psychiatrist Family Practice Physician
22. What percentage of people who see a professional do you think are helped?
23. What percentage of people who do not get professional help do you think get better on their own?
24. What fraction of all people with a diagnosable mental disease seek treatment?
25. At what point(s) would you seek professional help for a serious emotional problem?
 a) After dealing with it for a certain length of time: if so, how long? _____
 b) When it begins interfering with school
 c) When it begins interfering with social life
26. How comfortable are you or would you be talking about personal problems to a professional?
 (not at all) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (very comfortable)
27. Would you be embarrassed if your friends knew about your getting professional help?
 Y N
28. If mental illness were in your family, would you care if people knew? Y N

The Counseling Center

29. Do you know where the counseling center is? Y N
30. Do you know any of the counseling center employee's names? Y N
31. Have you ever received personal help from the counseling center? Y N
32. Do you know anyone who has received help from the counseling center? Y N
33. On average, what % of students do you think use the counseling center at any point in time?
34. Would you or have you felt nervous going into the counseling center? Y N
35. Does using the Counseling Center cost money to students? Y N

Outside Influences

- 36. Do you see more positive or negative news stories in the news media about mental health? Positive Negative Neutral
- 37. Do you see more negative or positive portrayals of people with mental illness in the media? Negative Positive Neutral
- 38. How much influence do you think friends and family being open about their mental health experience have on society’s view of mental health?
(none) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (a lot)

Ideal?

A focus group was conducted among a group of Gustavus students (both male and female, different school years) discussing what characteristics students consider an ideal “Gustie” to be: Successful, energetic, attractive, friendly, intellectual, involved, hardworking, and athletic were the conclusive descriptive words.

- 39. Do you feel pressure to fit this ideal?
(not at all) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (a lot)
- 40. Does this pressure affect your mental health?
(not at all) 1.....2.....3.....4.....5 (a lot)

Any additional comments:
