Benefits of a Support Group for High School Students Returning After a Mental Health Hospitalization: An Educational-Support Group Model

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Abstract

This poster highlights the benefits of a post-hospitalization support group for high school students returning to school after a mental health hospitalization. An outline of the 6-week support group and its goals will be provided. This includes suggested structure, activities, weekly themes, possible challenges, and discussion around improving student attendance and academic performance. Overall, the poster is 1) a discussion on how to help support and encourage students following a recent mental health related hospitalization and 2) it provides readers the tools to implement a post-hospitalization support group of their own.

Background

- A 2021 survey including high school students in Austria discovered that the covid-19 pandemic significantly decreased student mental health. Out of 3,052 participants:
  - 1/3 reported suicidal thoughts/ideation
  - 1,514 presented clinically depressed
  - 1,326 presented clinically anxious
  - 680 presented with clinical insomnia
  - 1,702 presented clinically disordered eating behaviors

  (Piet et al., 2021)

- A study that interviewed 14 mental health professionals identified *effective communication between all parties involved* as the key factor to a successful reentry after an adolescent has been psychiatrically hospitalized. In comparison, "feeling socially isolated" was a significant barrier to successful reentry.

  (Clemens et al., 2011)

Model

- This group follows a curriculum for six sessions using RULER and Brené Brown materials
- The group will begin with the same check-in activity: reviewing the group charter, introductions, the Mood Meter, something you are grateful for, and a goal you are working on
- This group meets weekly for one class period (~50 minutes)
- This is an open group facilitated by the school's LCSW/LSW/MSW

Proposed Group Sessions

Sessions 1-2: Values Light the Way
Before the group members focus on learning new coping strategies, it is important for them to dive into what specific values are most significant to them. These sessions focus on learning how to tie coping strategies back into personal values and how to recognize when one has strayed away from these values.

Session 3: I Am Enough
Group members entered a hospitalization due to being in a low point in their lives, resulting in low self-esteem and low self-worth. This session aims to reflect on shame versus guilt and dive into what each group member's "shame triggers" are. By doing this, group members will be able to recognize when they are in a shame spiral and going down a path of self-defeating thoughts, actions, or behaviors.

Session 4: Best Self
Members focus their check in on something stressful that they are trying to cope with. Quiet music is played in the background while members learn different breathing techniques. Members receive a copy of a relaxation CD in their "toolbox" upon completion of the group.

Session 5: Empathy & Self-Compassion
This session focuses on building self-esteem through empathy and self-compassion. Members watch a video on describing empathy. Then members explore self-compassion through a writing exercise. The prompt has group members consider what emotions are stirred when thinking about an issue that makes them feel inadequate. Members then write a letter with their non-dominant hand to themselves from their "older and wiser self" in reflection.

Session 6: Mindfulness
In this session, members are lead through a guided meditation audio. Following this, there will be a guided worksheet based on determining balance in group members' lives. This worksheet is separated by category of life, such as social, health, etc. A discussion surrounding balance and what one can control in their lives will follow.

Evaluation

- Participants who have completed six group sessions will be asked to fill out a feedback form consisting of both Likert scale and short response questions. The goal of the form is to measure effectiveness of group content, facilitator skills, and insight on group environment.
- Facilitators will receive consultation through other school social workers in the building, or direct supervisor.

Considerations

- Due to open membership and the rotating group structure, group members are most likely to reach the stages of pre-affiliation and power and control; other stages are less likely to be achieved.
- It's anticipated that the progress group members, especially those who have never participated in a support group, make depends on their ability to socialize within group. It's encouraged group leaders be familiar with and capable of fostering mutual aid.
- It is critical that teachers respect request forms, group spaces are appropriate, and individual members provide feedback on group experience.

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* Complete reference list available upon request.