

# Improving university students' mental health



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Dr Pan Jiayan (third from left) and students of the cognitive behavioral group

The recent spate of student suicides has left Hong Kong citizens in a state of shocked disbelief. At the time of writing, on 16 March 2016, a total of 23 students, including 11 university students, had ended their promising lives in the academic year 2015/16.

The whole society is coming to grips with the tragic loss of young lives, asking what the causes are and how to prevent students from committing suicide. Mental health issues of students have been and will continue to be one of the major concerns of the education system in Hong Kong. As a researcher and social work educator, I pay particular attention to the mental health issues of university students. Although we are overcome with sadness and still reeling from the student suicides we have to come up with measures through collective efforts of all stakeholders to prevent such cases from happening again and again.

The recent crisis reminded me of a research project I conducted three years ago when I started working in HKBU. The objective of that project was to help Mainland students cope with stress and improve their mental health during their stay in Hong Kong. A cognitive behavioral group intervention approach was adopted to help students change their thinking and perspectives so that they may have a more positive way of coping with the stressors they experience in Hong Kong. Mainland students were invited to join an eight-session group that was held weekly, with each session lasting

three hours. An experienced cognitive therapist and I led four groups with a total of 36 students. The result of this project indicated that cognitive behavioral group intervention is effective in reducing their acculturative stress, psychological distress, negative thoughts and emotions, and increasing their positive emotions. The project gave me a good opportunity and experience to listen to the challenges and struggles they face in their university life. The following are some of my reflections on this project that have a relevance to the recent cases of the student mental health crisis.

First, prevention is much more important than treatment. Undoubtedly, treatment is crucial for students at high risk of committing suicide. Unfortunately, most students do not seek help from mental health professionals when they have mental health needs. In this case, much more should be done at the level of prevention to increase students' mental health literacy, normalise help-seeking attitude and behaviour, and equip them with stress management skills for self-protection. One difficulty of this project is participant recruitment. Although there are an increasing number of Mainland students in Hong Kong universities, few students are willing to join the project on their own initiative for various reasons. In fact, students with a moderate level of stress are the target group for this project. None of the participants had been diagnosed with any mental health problems. Most of our students may not have one or more diagnosis of mental illness, but they may experience various levels of stress in their university learning and do not know how to cope with the stress. Thus, psychoeducation in a group or class setting may be an efficient approach to meet the mental health needs of the majority of our students. In this academic year, our department initiated a new General Education course "Improving Mental Health for University Success" with student counsellors in the Counselling and Development Centre of HKBU. I believe it is a good attempt to integrate mental health education in the higher education curriculum. More initiatives should be proposed to promote mental health for students and sufficient resources should be allocated to prevent self-inflicted harm.

Second, it is important to enhance the peer support network of university students. Peers play an important role in the developmental stage of young adults. The first important source of social support for university students is friends. When they encounter any stressful events or emotional disturbance, they tend to seek help from their peers instead of family and/or mental health professionals. In this sense, working with students in a group or class setting can develop their peer support network. In fact, some project participants continued to keep in contact with each other after it ended. I was so astonished when I received an email from a participant inviting me to attend her wedding ceremony with another student from her group.

Finally, it is highly recommended to allow university students more room for personal development. The major source of stress for university students comes from their academic work, such as heavy course workload and many assessments for each course. Many participants in my projects felt most stressful during the examination period as they need to prepare for various assessments and meet a variety of deadlines in a short period of time. In this sense, one way to alleviate their external stressors is to reduce their coursework, particularly those courses with overlapping teaching content, and to consider adopting some continuous assessment throughout the course, such as participation, in-class exercise and homework. By reducing their coursework, they will have more time to involve in

the activities beneficial for their personal development, such as overseas exchange, internship, engagement in student associations and social life.

### About the author



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Dr Pan was trained in psychology and social work in both Mainland China and Hong Kong. Her research interest is mainly on resilience and mental health of university students, particularly of Chinese international students, and cognitive behavioural intervention for student clients. She has published nearly 30 journal papers and delivered more than 10 conference presentations in these areas. Over the past years, she has been invited to be the reviewer for 17 international journals, including *Journal of Happiness Studies* and *Social Science & Medicine*. She also developed a new



General Education course “Improving Mental Health for University Success” with the Counselling and Development Centre of HKBU.

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