

Free Therapy and Support: Qualitative Analysis of Educational Barriers and Service Needs Among Post-secondary Students with Probable PTSD

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Introduction

MHCs affect an estimated 17% or more of post-secondary students (Blanco et al., 2008; ,3). A major contributor to the prevalence of MHCs among youth is exposure to trauma and related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Childhood trauma, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACES), have been indicated as a predictor of poor outcomes for college students (Windle et al., 2018). Smyth et al. (2008) and Read et al. (2012) found that between 6-17% of post-secondary students met criteria for current PTSD. Rates of PTSD have been found to be higher among samples of students who are military veterans (Rudd et al., 2011). It is well-documented that students who have been exposed to trauma experience an increase in academic, social, and emotional problems, including increased likelihood of dropout and lower grade-point average (GPA) (Mutavi et al., 2017; Kataoka et al., 2012; Delaney-Blacket et al., 2002).

Given the documented impacts of PTSD on post-secondary students, providing services that address PTSD may be a powerful strategy to improve long-term outcomes (Dudley et al., 2014; Killackey et al., 2017; Waynor et al., 2018). Failure to complete post-secondary education could potentially lead to unemployment and dependence on public benefits. If students with PTSD successfully obtain post-secondary education, pursue meaningful careers, and engage in competitive employment, public expenditures could be decreased. Vocational disability associated with PTSD may therefore be minimized or prevented through services focused on assistance with the completion of formative educational tasks (Dudley et al., 2014; Marino & Dixon, 2014; Ellison et al., 2018).

Methods

- 539 PSE students with trauma exposure completed surveys of:
 - ACEs, trauma history, PTSD Symptom Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5), educational experiences and outcomes
- 426 (33.1% male, 54.2% female, 5.6% other; 52.9% white vs 41% non-white; 73.6% undergraduate) screened positive for PTSD (PCL-5 \geq 33)
- Narrative responses to four open ended questions were analyzed using grounded theory:
 - 1) "Compared to people your age, what educational/career barriers do you face?",
 - 2) "If you could have ONE symptom or feature caused by mental health go away, which one would it be?"
 - 3) If you have experienced trauma (i.e abuse, accidents, violence, traumatic losses), what is the most important thing that helps you manage symptoms?
 - 4) "In your opinion, what services do college students with PTSD need to succeed in their education?"

Results

Themes in Barriers:

• **Struggles due to mental health**

"While many peers from high school have completed their bachelor's degree and are moving on, I'm still repeating undergrad classes that I've failed or withdrew from due to being unmedicated, undiagnosed, and untreated for a majority of my time in school..."

• **Trouble communicating**

"I have a hard time with communication, I get nervous talking to people I don't know, holding conversations, have anxiety being put in new situations."

• **Inability to Focus**

"I have to work a lot harder to focus and complete assignments on time..."

Themes in symptom participants most wanted to get rid of:

• **Anxiety**

"Anxiety. I'm so afraid to do anything. I'm afraid to try because I don't want to fail or look dumb."

• **Depression**

"Ongoing sadness."

Themes for what has been most helpful:

• **Mental healthcare services**

"There is a need for more counseling therapy and academic assistance"

• **Having a support system**

"Support and compassion from family, friends, and especially university staff. It's hard to be able to cope with things when everyone around you does not understand."

• **Mindfulness and grounding exercises**

"The most important thing would be mindfulness training. I try to bring myself back into the moment and remind myself that the trauma isn't what is happening now and that the feelings are from a long time ago and will pass"

Themes for resources needed:

• **Psychoeducation for professors**

"To help students with trauma exposure, professors need a greater understanding of how trauma manifests itself in learners and they also need to pay greater attention to learners as whole persons with physical, emotional, and cognitive needs."

• **Accessible mental healthcare services**

"Access to affordable counseling and psychiatrists. The waitlist at my college is 2 years long to see one of their free counselors. For those with no insurance or insurance that won't cover help, these people are necessary."

• **Academic accommodations**

"Possibly accommodations through the Office of Disability Services; I probably would benefit from some more time to submit assignments or to do exams"

Discussion

The themes from the qualitative analysis depict the significant impact PTSD symptoms have on thriving or feeling at ease in post-secondary education. Findings have important implications for enhancing and developing services for students in post-secondary education with PTSD in achieving optimal educational outcomes. The themes from the qualitative analysis depict the external resources students with PTSD may need in order to thrive or feel at ease in the academic environment. Findings suggest that addressing trauma symptoms as a key barrier for students with PTSD attending post-secondary education programs is crucial to ensure successful outcomes. College counseling centers can improve services to students with PTSD by adopting multiple diverse modalities, such as crisis counseling, flexible hours, and telehealth, to make services accessible. To facilitate trauma services and support, findings further suggest that university counseling center may consider screening clients for trauma exposure to identify those in need of additional support in order to improve educational outcomes (Freedy et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2013). Trauma training for staff and faculty is also needed to promote a mental health friendly campus environment, reduce stigma, and facilitate service use and referral.

In addition to trauma support, disability support services, i.e. Office of Disability Services at various post-secondary education institutions, should be aware of the impact of PTSD on academic functioning. Disability services should inform the campus community that a diagnosis of PTSD makes students eligible for services. They should work with faculty to educate them on the signs and symptoms of PTSD and the functional issues associated with it. Disability services can support students with a PTSD diagnosis by collaborating with them to develop reasonable academic and administrative accommodations to provide equal access and learning opportunities. Because of the cyclical nature of mental health conditions such as PTSD, students may need more regular check-ins to ensure the agreed upon accommodations are meeting their needs. Disability services can also provide encouragement and foster a sense of partnership with the student to create intentional, individualized accommodations based on the student's environment and needs.

In summary, themes explicitly demonstrate in participants' own words how the symptoms of PTSD interfere with the education process. The participants described scenario after scenario where their education was stifled due to symptoms related to PTSD and past trauma. Students reported experiencing barriers such as isolation from peers, stigma, difficulty concentrating, and the need for various, specific services and accommodations when dealing with PTSD and college or postsecondary education. Yet, an important point to emphasize is that the participants in the study were attending post-secondary education or had completed higher education. While participants showed tremendous resiliency to work on their career development process while living with PTSD and other mental health conditions, findings nevertheless call for increased access to accommodations and mental health supports for students experiencing PTSD in post-secondary education.