

Qualitative Analysis of Educational Barriers and Service Needs Among Postsecondary Students with Probable PTSD

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Introduction

Mental health conditions (MHCs) affect over 17% of post-secondary students (Blanco et al., 2008), with trauma and PTSD being significant factors. Childhood trauma is linked to poor outcomes in college (Windle et al., 2018), and 6-17% of post-secondary students meet current PTSD criteria (Smyth et al., 2008; Read et al., 2012). Veterans have higher PTSD rates (Rudd et al., 2011), leading to academic and social issues (Mutavi et al., 2017; Kataoka et al., 2012; Delaney-Black et al., 2002). Addressing PTSD among students could improve long-term outcomes (Dudley et al., 2014; Killackey et al., 2017; Waynor et al., 2018), reducing unemployment and dependence on public benefits. Services supporting educational completion may minimize vocational disability (Dudley et al., 2014; Marino & Dixon, 2014; Ellison et al., 2018).

Method

539 PSE students with trauma exposure completed surveys of: ACEs, trauma history, PTSD Symptom Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5), educational experiences and outcomes. Narrative Responses from 4 open-ended questions from 426 (33.1% male, 54.2% female, 5.6% other; 52.9% white vs 41% non-white; 73.6% undergraduate) who screened positive for PTSD (PCL-5 \geq 33) were analyzed using content analysis:

- Q1. "Compared to people your age, what educational/career barriers do you face?"
 Q2. "If you could have ONE symptom or feature caused by mental health go away, which one would it be?"
 Q3. If you have experienced trauma (i.e., abuse, accidents, violence, traumatic losses), what is the most important thing that helps you manage symptoms?
 Q4. "In your opinion, what services do college students with PTSD need to succeed in their education?"

Results

Q1: Compared to people your age, what educational/career barriers do you face? (See Fig. 1)

- > **Mental Health Issues**
 "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..."
- > **Interpersonal Difficulties**
 "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."
- > **Difficulty functioning**
 "I have to work a lot harder to focus and complete assignments on time."

Q2. If you could have ONE symptom or feature caused by mental health, go away, which one would it be?

The responses were analyzed using content analysis (See Figure 2),

Fig-1 Main Educational Barrier in Students with Probable PTSD (N=426)

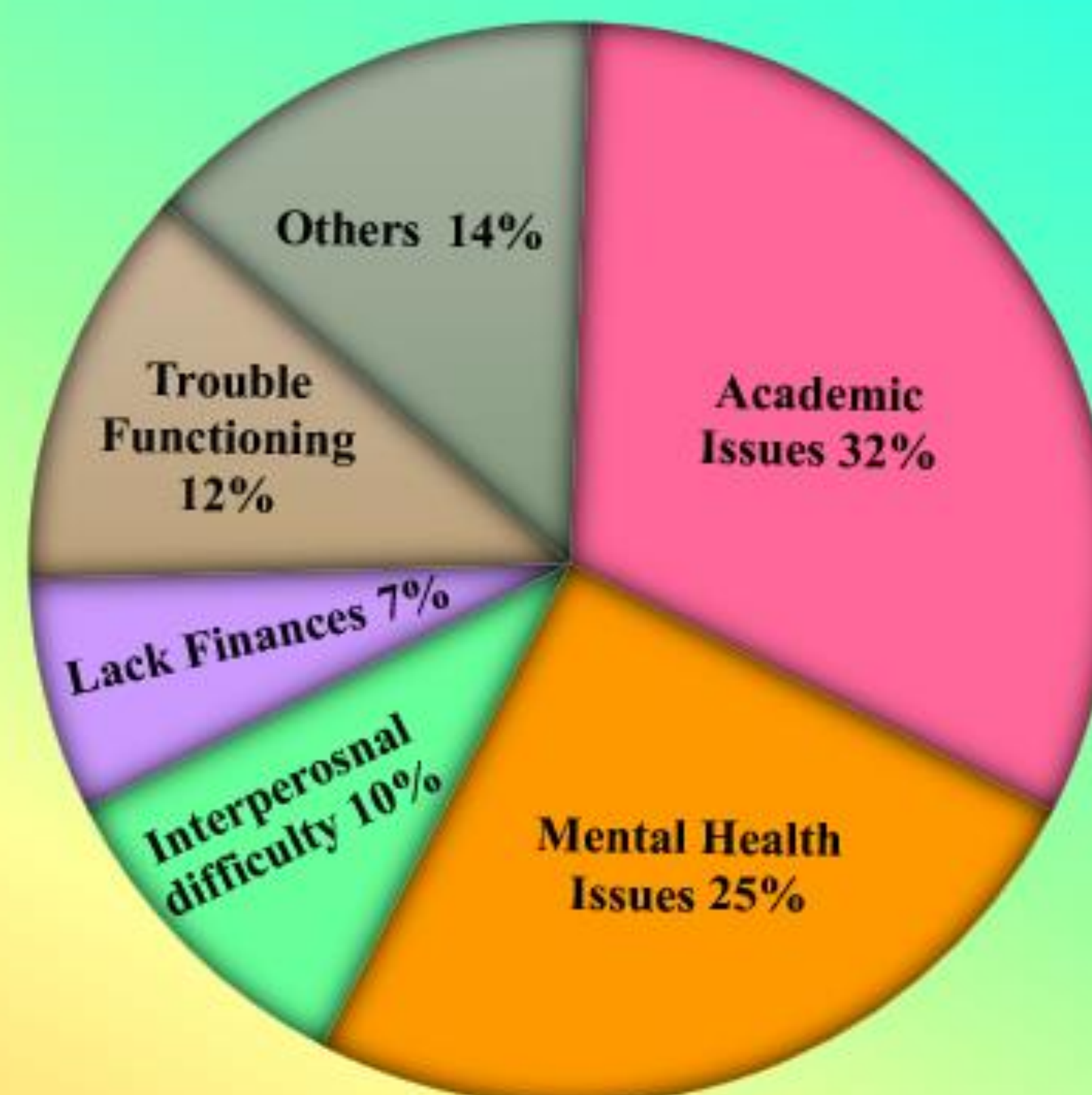


Fig-2 If you could have ONE symptom or feature caused by mental health go away, which one would it be? (N=426)

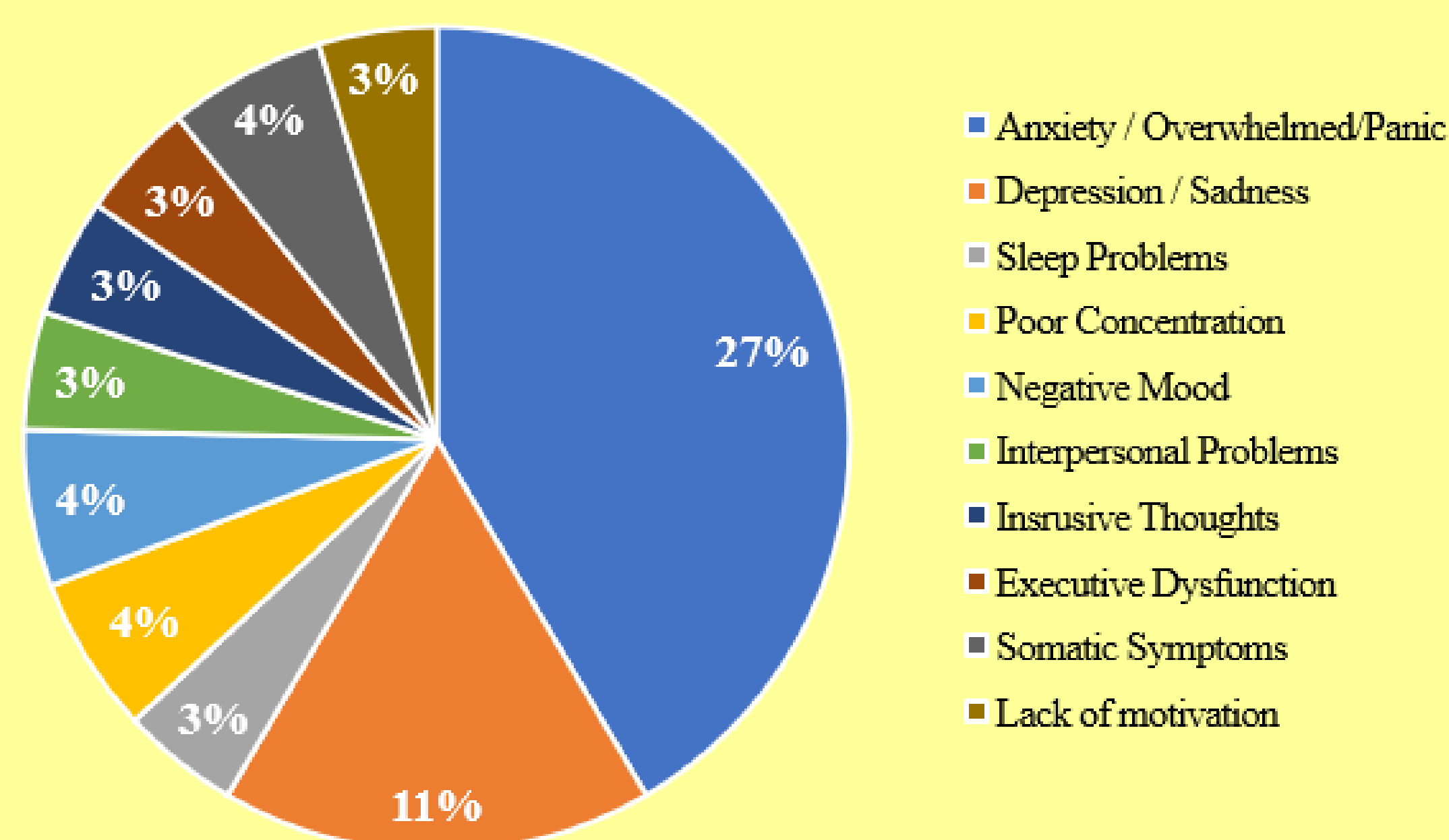
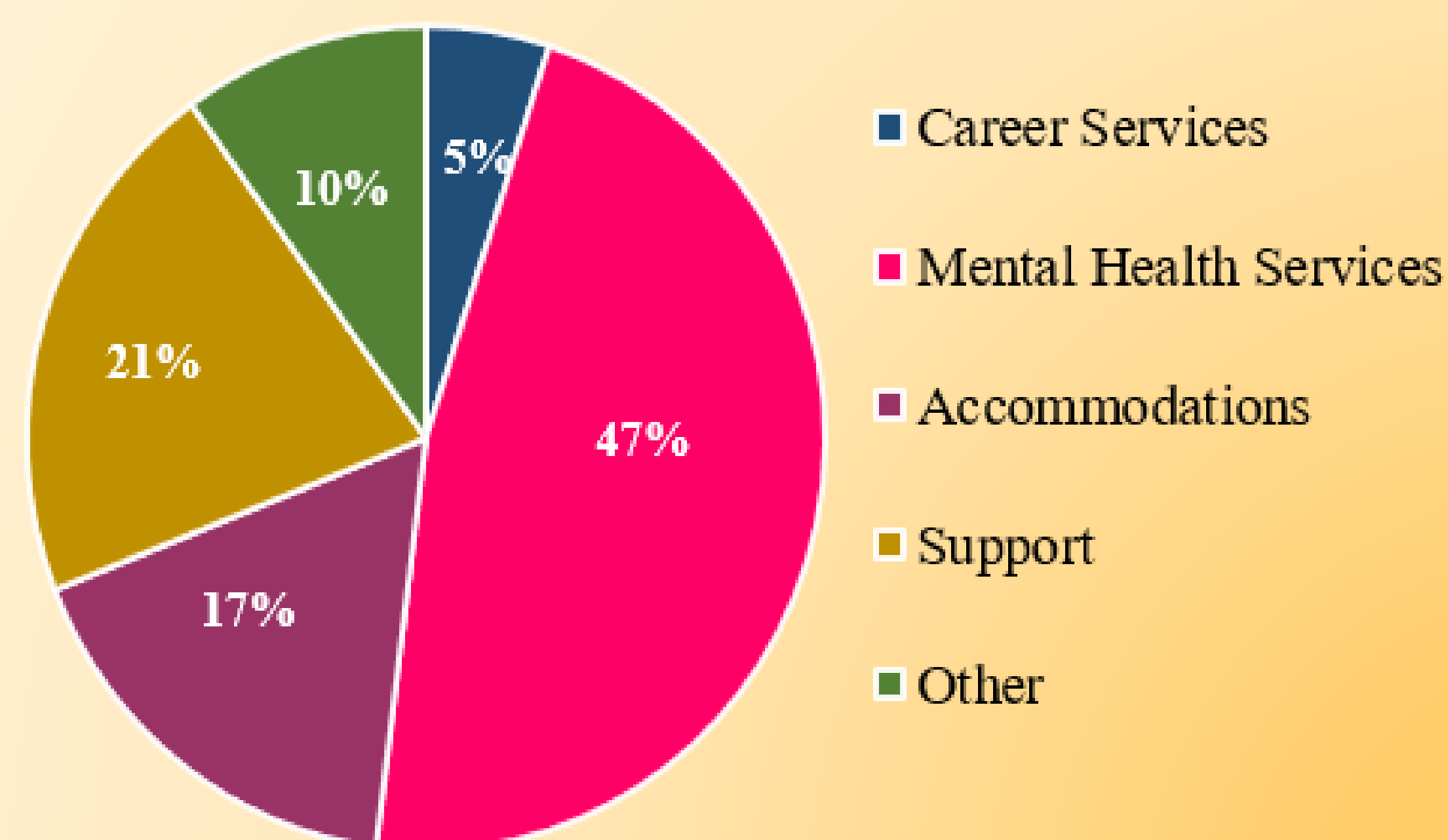


Fig-3 Services PSE Students with PTSD need to Succeed in Education (N=426)



References



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Results, cont.

Q3. If you have experienced trauma (i.e., abuse, accidents, violence, traumatic losses), what is the most important thing that helps you manage symptoms.

- > **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."

Q4. Services College Students with PTSD need to Succeed in Education (See Fig. 3)

- > **Accessible & Affordable mental healthcare**
 "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."
- > **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"

Discussion

The qualitative analysis highlights how PTSD symptoms significantly affect students in post-secondary education. It emphasizes the need for improved services, including trauma support and accommodations, to help these students succeed. Students with PTSD may require various resources, like crisis counseling and flexible hours, to feel at ease in the academic environment. Additionally, faculty and staff should receive trauma training to create a supportive campus atmosphere and reduce stigma. Disability support services should also recognize the impact of PTSD on academic functioning and collaborate with students to provide suitable accommodations. In summary, the study underscores the challenges students with PTSD face in pursuing higher education and the importance of enhancing support services for their success.