Abstract

This study assessed the outcome impact of providing a structured suicide prevention program to selected student, faculty, and staff audiences at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. We first reviewed the Oshkosh Suicide Prevention Survey and the Youth Risk Behavior Scale Suicide Items, and then integrated demographic questions into both of these pre-existing surveys. These surveys were then used in a pilot study with a sample of convenience to assess the survey’s utility. We then incorporated this into a suicide prevention training program which was administered to 144 resident assistants on campus; using the scales first as a pretest and later as a posttest to evaluate the program. The data gathered was then tabulated to assess the degree of impact of the suicide prevention training program, and to help the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire counseling services refine its suicide prevention training on campus.

Introduction

Suicide is a major concern for schools and college campuses, with it being the third leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 15-24 (American Association of Suicidology, 2006). The statistics surrounding suicide are staggering, suicide rates in the U.S. have been characterized as “stable” over time, where as the rate of suicide among 15-24 year olds has increased over 200% since the 50’s and late 70’s and since the 70’s they are remained quite stable. Suicide rates are highest in the Midwest and “intermountain states” like Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, etc; 7 out of the top ‘suicide’ states come from the intermountain states (Joffe 2008; American Association of Suicidology, 2006). These surprising statistics heighten awareness that prevention techniques are needed on college campuses. It is reported that students who seek counseling today on American college campuses have greater problems which are much more complex in nature and students exhibit more signs of depression and suicidal thoughts than before (McCarthy & Salotti, 2006).

Lester & Yang discuss the possible approaches to suicide prevention, should students be targeted as a whole with focused interventions or should suicide prevention be given on a case-by-case basis, centered individually (2006). College students are among the highest at risk for suicide and many campus prevention techniques have been implemented in response to the greater incidences of suicide; The present study was modeled after the successful suicide prevention program offered at the University of Wisconsin- Oshkosh in 2006-2007; this study tests the outcome impact of a structured suicide prevention program on the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire campus, assessing groups of students, implementing the “society as a whole” perspective. Researchers evaluated Residence Hall Advisors (RA’s) before a structured suicide prevention training was given and evaluated the RA’s afterwards to assess the presentation’s outcome.

Method

Participants consisted of 144 males and females, all of whom were Resident Assistants, or “Gatekeepers” at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. As a whole group, the RA’s were given a “Pre-Student Advisor Group Training Evaluation” to access their previous knowledge about suicide and depression, to fill out before they were shown a short 15-20 minute long PowerPoint presentation which consisted of information about anxiety disorders, different types of depression, the warning signs for depression, anxiety disorders and suicide tendencies and how to react to individuals who exhibit these signs. Then participants were shown a 27 minute film movie titled “The Truth about Suicide- Real Stories of Depression in College” developed by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. After the PowerPoint and movie, the RA’s filled out a "Post-Student Advisor Group Evaluation" to assess knowledge, comfort level with the subject of depression and suicide and their subjective opinion of their ability to handle suicidal residents.

Results

At the start of each training session, each Gatekeeper was given a pre-test as a way of testing any previous judgments and knowledge they may have about suicidality as well as the resources available on our campus. The first set of questions revolved around knowledge of resources and ways of reaching out to others. This is based on a 5 point-Likert Scale. The second set of questions refers to stereotypes and stigmas associated with suicidality. This is based on a 4 point-Likert Scale. After the completion of the training program, these Gatekeepers were given a post test, much of which contained the same questions. The data shows that the amount of information each subject retained was greater after the presentation, and that the negative stereotypes of suicidality and depression lessoned.

Discussion

At the beginning of this project on suicidality in 2008, the goal was to survey the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s campus, see if there was a need for programs and services, and develop and implement the most beneficial programs for our students and staff. We were able to see that many of the population is not one in which was easily identified, but often found amidst others. To target this population, we developed a training program for Resident Assistants and other Gatekeepers in the Residence Halls on campus as a way in which to prepare those individuals that will be closest to students and other individuals in a time of need.

In looking at our data from the pre and post tests, we were able to see that the Gatekeepers reported having more knowledge of resources available on campus as well as ways in which to provide comfort and support to individuals after completing the training program. We were also able to infer that the stereotypes and stigmas often associated with suicidality were lessoned by the end of the program. By showing the change in attitudes as well as the knowledge that was gained from this training program, these Gatekeepers will be more prepared to handle a situation that may arise on their watch and have the resources available to offer support.

We plan to continue implementing our training program to Gatekeepers in the Residence Halls as well as expanding this training to faculty and the general student body. There will be slight revisions made to the pre and posts tests to make the questions appropriate for each population. In the future, we would like to look at long term retention of the training information as well as use of the information in various scenarios.