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Internship

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Introduction

In my early years of high school, I struggled immensely with managing my mental health in beneficial ways. I grew up in a broken family, lost a close friend to suicide at a young age, and isolated myself from others. I remember feeling alone and desperately wishing to be heard by someone. I turned to unhealthy methods of coping and I shut myself down emotionally, which only made my mental health worse. I believe that if I had understood and developed the skills necessary to cope successfully, I would have been able to live with and manage my emotions in ways that didn't hurt me. Through my experience as a peer counselor at HTHNC, I saw first hand how successful counselling is in helping people develop the skills necessary to resolve issues, communicate effectively, and manage feelings.

The “shrink and couch” stereotype unfortunately steers a lot of people away from seeking counselling. Many will make the assumption that you need to have a serious emotional or mental issue in order to benefit from counselling, while the truth is it can be beneficial for anyone in developing communication skills and managing emotions. Counselling can build connections, strengthen relationships, and improve problem solving skills. The proven benefits of counselling led me to question how students cope without utilizing external resources and if they know how to cope in healthy ways. My research looked to answer: *How effectively do students at HTHNC use coping methods?*

Background

Peer counselling is an internship program available to seniors interested in the field of psychology. The long-existing program has allowed interns to gain experience in advertising, setting up meetings with clients, and working directly with students seeking mental health resources. A peer counselor must be a senior at High Tech High North County, receive over seven months of training as a Day of PEACE facilitator, do a few external readings, and hold a few mock meetings with Mr. Gooch, the school's dean, as preparation before working with actual clients. There are typically only one or two peer counselors per semester as there is a limited amount of clients.

Day of PEACE is an intensive program involving juniors and seniors as they train to facilitate mental health discussions with underclassmen, strengthen connections with peers, and build community in a way unique to High Tech High North County. PEACE stands for Peers Empowered to Advocate Cultural Elucidation. Facilitators train from Fall to Spring by having discussions, doing various activities involving communication, and designing games to be played on Day of PEACE.

As additional preparation after Day of PEACE training, interns would be given external readings from the school's dean to develop listening and speaking skills within a counselling environment. Prior to setting up meetings, doing mock meetings, or beginning research, interns would read How To Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. This book, written initially for parents, highlights the key mistakes made when expressing concern and it teaches the skills necessary for effective communication.

Additionally, the intern was given the resource of The Anxiety Workbook for Teens by Lisa M Schab to reference when meeting with clients.

After the first two steps of initial training, recruited interns would have mock meetings with Mr. Gooch to test newly developed communication skills. These meetings would also serve as an opportunity for interns to express any concerns regarding the work or level of confidentiality. Another trial meeting would be held before meeting with the interns first client, to help them ease into the counselling mindset.

Ideally, after the intern received the necessary training and advertised their presence in the Peer Counseling program, a peer counselor would take on five weekly clients in addition to holding occasional meetings with curious students. In between these meetings were opportunities for research and more external readings to help with clients. These readings were dependent on client situations and research. In this scenario three books were given as references from Mr. Gooch, Odd Girl Out : The Hidden Culture of Aggression In Girls by Rachel Simmons, Lost At School : Why Our Kids With Behavioral Challenges Are Falling Through The Cracks and How We Can Help Them by Ross W. Greene, and Helping Teens Who Cut : Understanding and Ending Self Injury by Michael Hollander.

Methods

Essential Question: How effectively do students at HTHNC use coping methods?

In order to better understand the coping methods of HTHNC students today, a twelve question survey, was sent out to 167 respondents at High Tech High North County. 25.9% of respondents were seniors, 30.2% of respondents were juniors, 21.6% of respondents were

sophomores, and 22.2% of respondents were freshman. The survey was split into two sections based on the types of questions being asked.

The first section focused on the student's counselling background, use of coping methods, and how frequently the person taking the survey finds themselves stressed. The survey first asked about grade levels and previous counselling experience, but then moved into the personal, experience-based questions. It asked respondents to rate their level of stress and ability to manage stress on a scale of 1 to 10. This information was primarily used to determine the amount of students who could benefit from external coping methods. The final question of this section asked students to list and check off coping methods they had used to manage stress (talking, writing, improving physical health, and so on) to determine how many students were already benefiting from external methods of coping.

The second section of the survey focused on personal emotional reactivity. These questions along with experience in counselling drew a line to confirm or deny the hypothesis that students practicing healthy coping mechanisms will rate their ability to manage stress at a higher level. The survey asked how students saw their level of sensitivity in comparison to their peers. It also asked if the respondent has immediate and/or intense emotional reactions to life events and if they believed themselves to be more emotional than their peers. Additionally it asked if moods had the power to affect productivity and if identifying/explaining feelings is difficult. These questions can identify if someone is emotionally-reactive according to Lost At School : Why Our Kids With Behavioral Challenges Are Falling Through The Cracks and How We Can Help Them by Ross W. Greene.

Analysis

Stress can be overwhelming and difficult to manage, especially for teenagers. In high schools, students are put under pressure from peers, educators, and themselves. When this pressure becomes too intense, students often don't know how to manage their stress in healthy ways. Some students look to addictives, some shut themselves down or detach from their communities, some resort to self-harm, and others have no calming-methods and "wait out" anxieties until they build up even more.

According to Helping Teens Who Cut : Understanding and Ending Self Injury by Michael Hollander, a psychologist with more than thirty years of experience in the field, the most common reasons for self injury are to to gain control of an overwhelming emotional experience or to escape the feeling of numbness or emptiness.

Of the fifty two respondents, only sixteen had claimed to have met with a counselor in the past thirty days. Of these sixteen respondents, the vast majority rated their stress level above five and believed their ability to manage stress to be mostly or very successful. Altogether the fifty-two respondents with counseling experience had rated their stress at high levels, but saw their ability to cope as successful.

When examining the individual responses of students with no prior experience in counseling, it was found that respondents rated their stress level at a ten more often than any other response. Additionally, thirty two respondents without prior counseling experience rated their ability to manage stress below five, indicating that they had difficulty coping. This information only brings up more questions surrounding how students with counseling experience cope differently than those without experience in counseling.

Further into the survey, respondents were asked to list the coping methods they'd used in the past thirty days. The listed options were reminders of environment (not end of days), recognition of feelings, relieving symptoms through relaxing acts, talking it out, writing it out, improving physical health (exercise, diet, stretching), and a space where students could write anything unlisted (see Appendix).

Thirty-six of all one-hundred sixty seven respondents claimed that reminders of the environment had helped them cope over the past month - with twenty-seven of those respondents being without any prior counseling experience. Sixty-six respondents said they coped by recognizing and acknowledging their feelings - with twenty of those respondents having previous counseling experience. Sixty-seven respondents said they coped by relieving symptoms through relaxing acts. Fifty-eight people said they coped by talking it out with someone - with twenty-three of those respondents having previous counseling experience. Thirty-five respondents claimed that writing out feelings helped them cope. Sixty-six people said improving their physical health improved their emotional/mental state. Seventy-one respondents wrote in their own methods of coping and nineteen of those responses indicated that the student didn't use coping methods at all. Of the nineteen respondents who claimed to have not used any coping methods, 73.68% of those respondents lacked any counseling experience. While this data is fairly spread out, it is very concerning that there are students who lack the ability to cope with stress in healthy ways.

In Lost At School : Why Our Kids With Behavioral Challenges Are Falling Through The Cracks and How We Can Help Them, Ross W. Greene claims that kids who are emotionally reactive or have behavioral issues in classrooms lack the skills to manage emotional responses

effectively. He states that when the demands being placed on a child exceed that kid's capacity to respond in an adaptive manner, unhealthy coping mechanisms can develop. The intensity of these unhealthy habits are determined by the child's ability to "hold it together" when pushed to the limit. A few of the emotional responses that Ross W. Greene lists are self-induced vomiting, violence, and destructive behavior both to one's self and others. Through his experiences in the field, he believes the most successful way to help students in their development is to define their lagging skills and act as a helping relationship in developing those skills further (Lost At School, p. 27).

Michael Hollander defined emotionally reactive teenagers with four questions, so those questions were repurposed for the survey sent out to students at HTHNC (Helping Teens Who Cut, p. 32). The first question simply asked the respondent if they believed they were more sensitive than their peers and 49.1% of the 167 students stated that they did (see Appendix). The next question asked if the student has immediate and sometimes intense emotional reactions to life events and 56.3% of respondents said yes. When asked if it takes the respondent longer to get over emotional reactions than others 43.1% of students believed that they did. Additionally, 61.1% of students agreed that their mood affects their ability to be productive and 47.3% said they found it difficult to put their emotions into words. These responses indicate that there is a large body students that could benefit from developing coping methods with a counselor if they are not already.

So how effectively do students at HTHNC manage their stress? Students with previous counselling experience are proven to manage their stress more effectively than those who don't.

Additionally, students who visit counselors use more healthy coping methods, while those without counseling experience are less likely to know how to cope in healthy ways.

Action Plan

Based on my experience as a peer counselor and the information I have drawn from surveying the HTHNC student body, I think there needs to be more work done to allow students to feel safe in a counselling space. I suspect stigma plays a large role in why many students don't utilize school counseling resources and I think that my research could benefit students because of this. If more people see how well students who visit counselors manage stress, more people will be interested in meeting with a counselor.

After my research, more questions have been raised that could benefit students. I'm curious what coping methods are most the successful for students at HTHNC. I want to know how the "shrink and couch" stereotype can be eliminated. More than anything - I want to know how we (as a community) can provide more support for students so they can learn how to support themselves in stressful situations.

Works Cited

Greene, Ross W. *Lost At School : Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges Are Falling Through*

the Cracks and How We Can Help Them. Scribner, 2008.

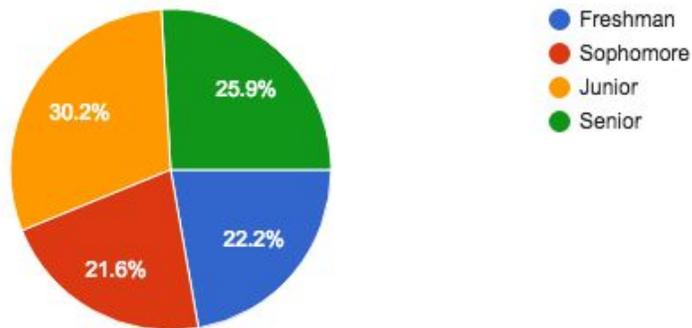
Hollander, Michael. *Helping Teens Who Cut : Understanding and Ending Self Injury*. The Guilford Press, 2008.

Appendix

I sent out an anonymous survey about stress management to students (grades 9-12) at High Tech High North County with 167 responses.

Grade Level (Optional)

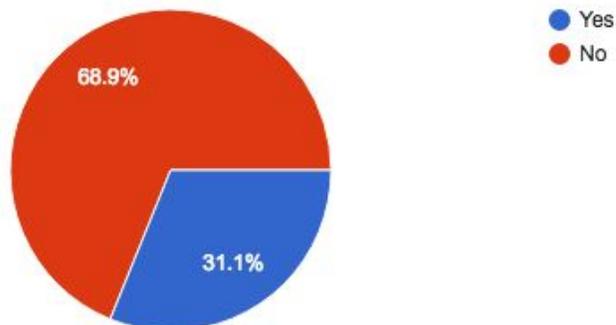
162 responses



I sent out an anonymous survey about stress management to students (grades 9-12) at High Tech High North County with 167 responses. The data above shows that there is a nearly even amount of responses from each grade level.

Have you ever met with a counselor?

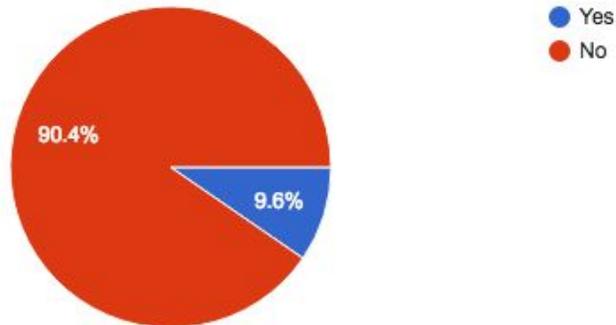
167 responses



The data above shows that more than two thirds of the students at High Tech High have never met with a counselor inside or outside of school.

Have you met with a counselor in the past 30 days?

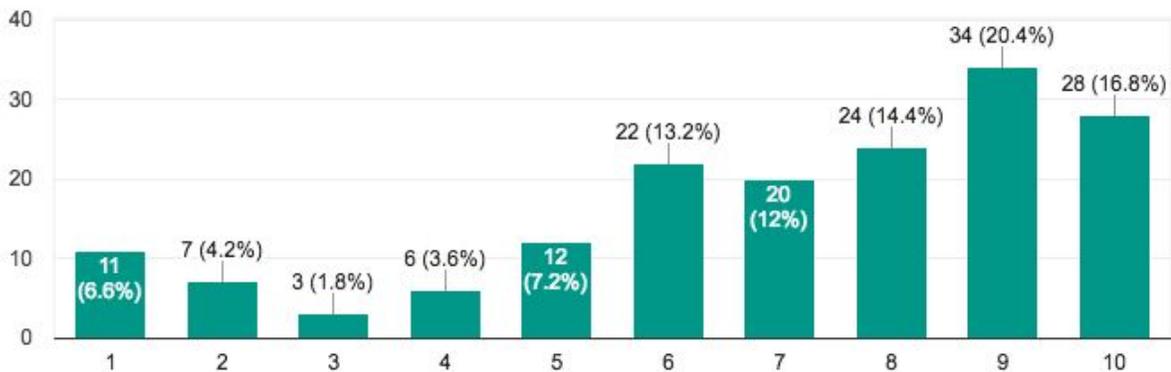
167 responses



This data shows that only 9.6% of the students at High Tech High North County have visited a counselor in the past 30 days, indicating that about 9.6% of students at High Tech High regularly meet with a counselor.

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not stressed at all and 10 being extremely stressed: How would you rate your stress level in the past 30 days?

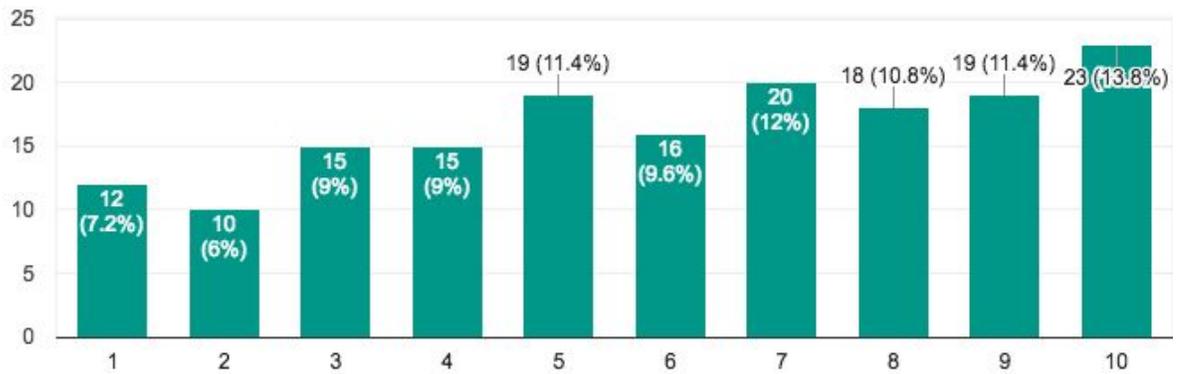
167 responses



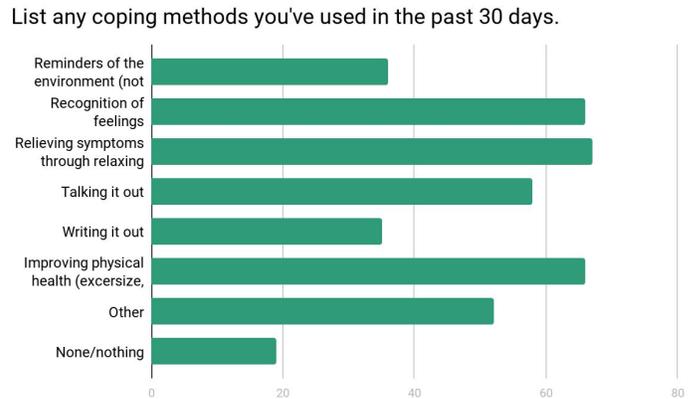
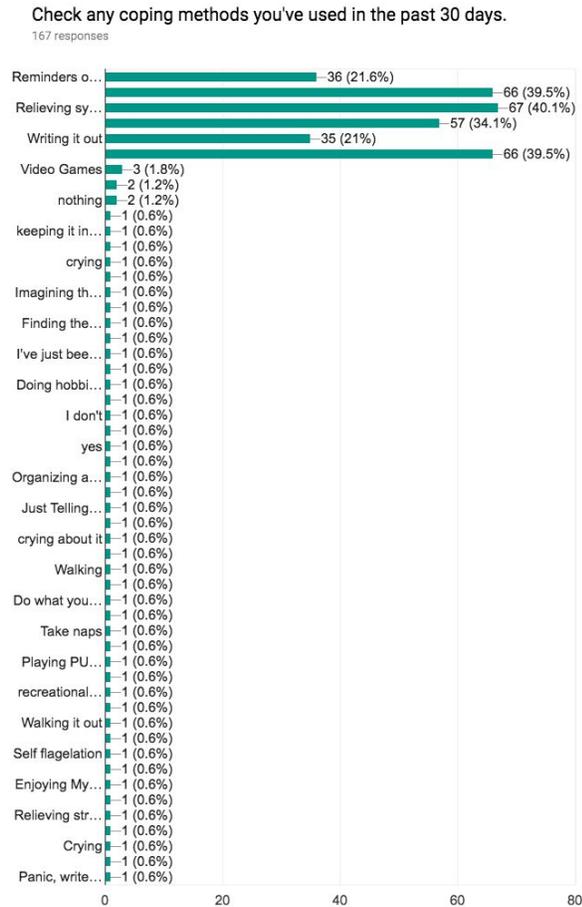
The majority of students rate their stress level over the past month at a 9, the next highest level being 10, 8, 6, and 7. From this data, it can be gathered that there is a very small minority of students who aren't stressed with only 11 respondents rating their stress level as a 1.

**On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being ineffective and 10 being effective:
How would you rate your ability to manage stress in the past 30 days?**

167 responses



Across the board, there isn't a drastically large or small percentage of students when rating their effectiveness of stress management. Most students found their ability to manage

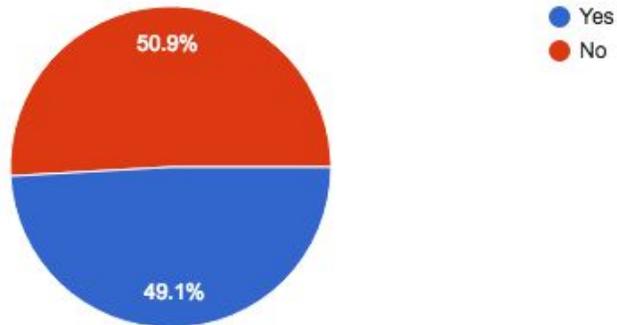


stress was very successful.

In this data, it can be seen that many students improve physical health or do relaxing acts as coping mechanisms, but nineteen respondents listed that they didn't use any methods and/or they weren't sure how to cope.

Do you think you are more sensitive than others?

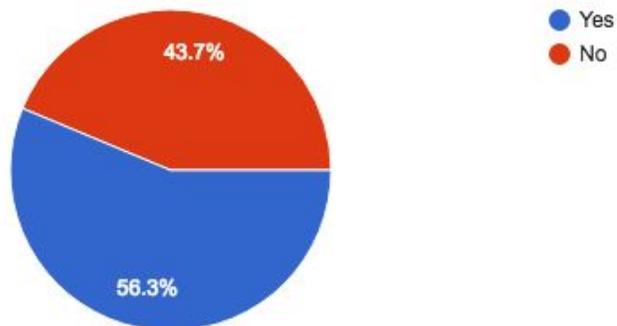
167 responses



Just over 50% of respondents consider themselves to be more emotional than their peers.

Do you have immediate and sometimes intense emotional reactions to life events?

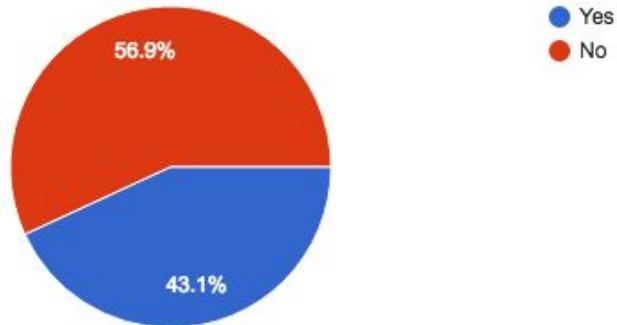
167 responses



56.3% of respondents said that they have immediate and intense emotional reactions to life events, while 43.7% of respondents said they didn't regularly have those emotional reactions.

Does it take longer for you to get over emotional reactions than others?

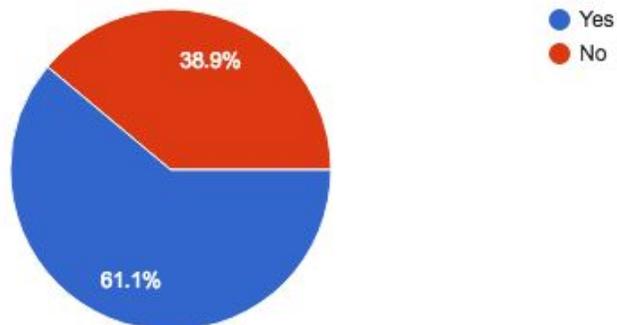
167 responses



56.9% of respondents said they take about the same if not less time to recover from emotional reactions than their peers.

Are you able to be productive when in a good mood, but accomplish little when in a bad mood?

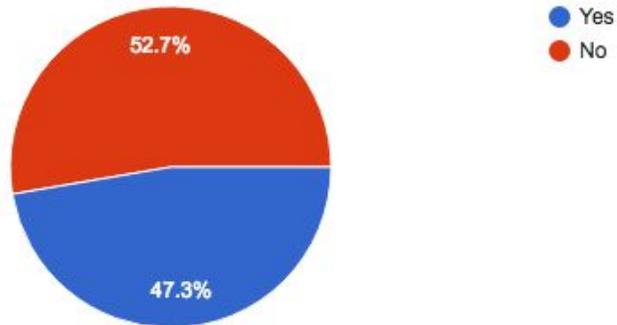
167 responses



61.1% of respondents claimed that their mood dictated their ability to be productive, while 38.9% of respondents said that their moods didn't affect their productivity.

Is it difficult for you to identify/explain what you're feeling?

167 responses



47.3% of respondents said they have a difficult time putting their emotions into words.