

COMMENTARY

Why Peer Helping?

by Barbara B. Varenhorst

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Mother Teresa once said, "We will never know until we get to Heaven how much we owe the poor for allowing us to serve them." The truth she spoke lies in the basic need of human beings to do something useful-helpful for others if one is to be truly fulfilled and happy. As Henry Drummond has said, "In the pursuit of happiness half the world is on the wrong scent. They think it consists in having and getting, and in being served by others. Happiness is really found in giving and in serving others." Based on these quotes, we have a profound answer to the question, "Why Peer Helping?" which might be sufficient for most people. However, the benefits to self is only a partial answer, nor is it sufficiently specific to serve as a rationale for implementing a Peer Helping program on a college campus, or in any other arena.

What may serve as an adequate answer may depend on what motivates an interest in Peer Helping. Perhaps the interest lies in its effectiveness as a prevention or intervention strategy related to social problems. Some may want to know about cost-effectiveness compared to other types of programs. What effect does Peer Helping have on others, and does it impact interpersonal relationships, build cooperative communities and promote pro-social values? To address these various concerns, a rationale for the concept of Peer Helping will be built by examining the efficacy of peer helping in three broad areas: Personal Benefits; Prevention/Intervention Strategies; and Benefits to Society.

The term "peer helping" is an umbrella name that is used to cover a wide variety of services, in many different settings with diverse populations. Although "peer" usually applies to those with equal status, whether it be age or circumstance, many peer helping programs provide services involving older students working with younger youth; non-handicapped helping handicapped; females helping males and even senior citizens mentoring adolescents! The basic core of these programs which make them unique is that help is provided formally and informally by "lay" people who often are not of adult age, nor who have professional credentials. This concept of using non-

credentialed personnel in the intervention process has caused a great deal of debate and conflict among mental health professionals which has made Peer Helping suspect by many, despite the growth of the programs and the obvious service they have provided. Arguing for the validity of using non-credentialed personnel, as early as 1973, Ivey and Alschuler said:

It is self-condemnation to argue that counselors comprise only a small percentage of those who could rectify the situation, because it is we who have created an artificially scarce helping resource by legally restricting help to a specific role and by not teaching our colleagues, administrators, teachers, parents, and children the fundamentals of helping others. Then we make it doubly difficult for ourselves by waiting passively for symptom-clients to bring problems to us instead of our actively intervening at an early stage in schools, communities, or agencies and offering programs designed to promote psychosocial health directly (1973, p. 592).

As social problems have increased dramatically over the years since this was written, more and more professionals have come to realize the need to supplement the scarcity of helping resources and are turning to peer helping as an answer to this need. They are, because they are learning that Peer programs are providing services they can not provide; that often the help that is provided by peers meets a need or resolves a problem so that the person does not require professional help; and that often peers are aware that a problem exists long before it is brought to the attention of counselors or psychologists, and therefore, the peer helper can assist in bringing in professional help before the problem becomes more severe.

The rationale which follows is based on the assumption that peer helping is solidly based in a carefully implemented program. This means that there is a defined *purpose*; peer helpers are given a quality, task-oriented *training*; are provided appropriate *service* activities to perform following training; are assisted in their work through on-going *supervision*; and that some type of *evaluation* is utilized to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the total program and the resultant outcomes. If these

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components are in place, then what follows can be a legitimate justification for peer helping.

PERSONAL BENEFITS

Three basic components of a healthy self-esteem are: 1) a sense of one's unique attributes, that awareness of what is special about me that makes me different, and valued, from others; 2) secure membership in a group or groups that one values; and 3) a feeling of participating in meaningful roles that make a lasting contribution to others or society as a whole. All of these elements are difficult to experience in our present society, yet all are potentially available through peer helping. Increasingly through the span of adolescence from early (10-15 years) until late adolescence (19-23 years), peers take on increasingly more importance in the development and socialization of youth. From peers youth learn attitudes, values and skills that will influence them the rest of their lives. Therefore, how one interacts with the peer group, be it as a victim, aggressor, or helper, significantly affects one's

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self-esteem. Plenty of evidence exists to illustrate the negative effects of cliques, rejection, loneliness and alienation experienced at the hands of the peer group. But now we are beginning to see the evidence of the power of peer influence to build lives, rather than destroy them.

Sense of Unique Attributes

As youth become involved with peer helping they not only learn the skills of how to cope with their own developmental tasks more effectively, but also begin to recognize their own unique qualities, skills, talents and experiences that can be useful in helping others. One girl who was a junior in high school, who was a heavy drinker and drug user, enrolled in the peer counseling program in her continuation high school. As she began to reach out to other students who were starting on the same path she had taken, she began to realize that she had skills to empathize with hurting

peers, to listen, and help her peers think through the decisions they were making that were potentially harmful. Gradually, she saw the positive influence she was having on them, and came to reassess her own value and worth, which eventually led her to enter college and a career in a helping field.

Membership in a Group One Values

At the top of most young people's list of values is a desire to learn how to make friends and be a friend to others. It is not surprising that youth *want* friends, but knowing that they also have an intense desire to *learn* how to make friends, and being a friend makes one thoughtful. There is a loneliness in our society today that is more pervasive than we have ever known before. More people are isolated from one another, and as families are more fragmented and involved in individual concerns, friendship skills are not being systematically taught, or modeled. As a result, many people today lack the skills to become a significant member in a group, or to acquire the support of lasting friendships. This can be a serious deficit because failure to develop social and relationship skills is a powerful predictor of later substance abuse, delinquency, and mental health problems (Kellam et al, 1982). Peer helping training, and the subsequent application of that training, teaches the necessary skills that ultimately provide the social competence one needs to be successful in life — including marriage, parenting and employment.

Participating in Meaningful Roles

The key element of self-esteem, as Diana Hedin (1987) states, is the experience of being needed, valued and respected by another person, which produces a new view of self as a worthwhile human being (p. 43). Many people have few avenues to experience this kind of self-worth because they are not given responsible tasks to perform, or are told in one way or another that they are inadequate, too young or too old, or incompetent. However, when peer helpers are given useful and relevant tasks these feelings change. Assisting others to work through a problem, supporting them through a difficult period, or even teaching peers the skills they have learned, peer helpers *know* they have given something to another that can't be taken from them. They *know* they have performed a useful role, and that their life has meaning. When these opportunities are given to at-risk youth who become peer helpers, these youth are salvaged from going through life feeling useless, unvalued and certainly not respected. When you know you have helped even *one* person, you know your life has worth. This is the truth

of what Ralph Waldo Emerson has written: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

These benefits alone are sufficient to justify the value of peer helping. When we see what is happening in the lives of those involved and those they serve, it is clear these programs are making a tremendous contribution to society as a whole, and to human lives that would be lost in the shuffle, were it not for the work of peer helping.

Prevention/Intervention Strategies

Bonnie Benard, one of the most vocal advocates of peer programs, calling them the "lodestone to prevention," has summarized much of the research supporting peer resource strategies in her latest monograph, "The Case for Peers" (1990). In this she states that youth service programs can play a major role in reducing the alienation many youth feel from their families, schools, and communities, a disconnectedness that often manifests in the social problems of alcohol/drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school (p. 1).

In pointing out the importance of social support provided by peer programs, Benard cites the work of Cassel, who claimed that "people can become physically, mentally, or socially debilitated if they do not receive or perceive signs from significant others that make them feel safe and valued" (p. 3). For youth, peers are the significant others that can destroy most effectively the feeling of safety or worth if social support is withheld. On the other hand, peers also are the most powerful to provide that support. With the ever-increasing number of teenage tragedies such as suicide, eating disorders, alcoholism, and pregnancies, peer programs are an absolute necessity if many youth today are to survive as adults with any kind of health.

Peers represent a vast human resource that has been under-utilized because we haven't empowered them by teaching how to care for others, to make friends and to be a friend, and by not motivating them to reach out to those who are lonely, isolated, or at-risk. For many youth, and for a growing number of seniors, peer support may be the *only* social support they get. We may never know how many suicides alone, may have been prevented by the support given through peer helpers.

Research also documents the effects of peer helping in the area of academic achievement. Since school failure and antisocial behavior are clearly interrelated, the help that peers provide in tutoring and cross-age teaching serves as a powerful prevention

strategy.

Another benefit resulting from what has come to be called "cooperative learning" is the potential reversal of competition that dominates so much of academic life, and is so destructive to one's self-esteem and feelings about school in general. Helping another learn negates the desire to compete. Instead, there is a strong desire to see the one you are helping succeed. It is well known that when a person feels unloved or rejected, it is hard to make the mind work to concentrate and absorb what is being taught. So when a peer provides the care and acceptance, as well as the academic tutoring, it becomes a double-barreled vehicle for producing academic achievement.

An illustration of this happened in one high school where a senior boy was concerned about his 9th grade "Buddy," whose grades were poor. He decided to study with him every school night, and give him any tutoring help he might need. After a few months of this he remarked that he didn't know whether he was doing any good for his buddy, but *his* grades had soared! The buddy, however, knew that his "friend" was interested in having him succeed; that he wasn't getting paid to spend time with him; nor was he getting a grade for his efforts. But he also *did* know that his friend cared about him. No adult, other than a parent could spend that amount of time or intensity with one person, and even if he/she should, it would not carry the weight of a *peer* who was doing it.

A significant study conducted by Search Institute of Minneapolis, involving over 49,000 6th-12th graders across the country, gives further evidence of why peer helping programs should be an integral part of every school, campus and community. This systematic study of youth perspectives, values, and behaviors looked at the external assets of *support, control* and *structure* and the internal assets of *commitments, values* and *competencies* that are needed to stimulate and nurture health development. It also looked at the deficits, or liabilities which can interfere with healthy development, such as Hedonistic values, TV over-exposure, drinking parties, stress, social isolation and negative peer pressure. Each of the deficits is associated with at-risk behavior, and those students reporting the deficit also report a significantly higher number of at-risk indicators, such as frequent alcohol use, cigarette use, attempted suicide, school absenteeism, driving and drinking, sexual activity, and bulimia than those not reporting the deficit. They also found that the more assets a student reported, the few deficits were indicated.

One of the results of the study showed that students who engage in projects and programs to help others, defined as pro-social behavior, on a weekly

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basis are less likely than non-helpers to report at-risk behaviors. As Peter Benson, author of *The Troubled Journey*, in which the results of this study are reported, states:

In our efforts to raise healthy children, it is as important to *promote* prosocial behavior as it is to *prevent* antisocial or healthy-compromising behaviors. Several reasons are paramount. One is...that providing help to others functions as a teacher. Through acts of compassion, social competencies develop, positive values form, and the seeds for meaning and purpose in life are planted. This is why many of the school-based programs are called "service learning" programs (p. 34).

This study adds additional weight to what Tobler (1986) concluded after her meta-analyses, evaluating hundreds of drug and alcohol prevention programs and strategies. Based on her analysis of these programs she stated that peer programs are dramatically more effective than all the other programs reviewed even at the lowest levels of intensity (hours spent in prevention programming) (p. 555). Among Benson's recommendations, based on finds of his study, were:

- Personalize schools so that each and every student feels cared for, supported, and important.
- Enhance social competencies, including friendship-making skills, caring skills, assertiveness skills, and resistance skills.
- Emphasize the development of positive values, particularly those that build a sense of personal responsibility for the welfare of others.
- Emphasize service learning programs, seeking to provide all students with helping opportunities and personal reflection on the meaning of help.

The goals of peer helping encompass these recommendations, and to the extent that goals are met, these programs are proving to be the most cost-effective path to prevention and intervention. As Benard points out, among the positive outcomes that would emerge if youth are given the opportunity to help, would be the cultural norm and ethos of helping and caring. "We all know the negative power of cultural norms promoting alcohol use; imagine the positive power of a school community, let alone society, that promoted and systematically infused the value of caring for others!"

Societal Benefits

When we think of the staggering amount of money that is spent each year by federal, state and community agencies to minister to those who have fallen victim to drug and alcohol abuse, violence, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and a host of other tragedies, we *know* we live in a hurting, and hurtful society. We *know* that many of our interventions are not producing the results we hoped they would, and we *know* we must find most cost-effective strategies to turn the tide of what is happening to people, especially to our youth. Based on the evidence, peer helping certainly is one of the answers.

Social problems get our attention because they affect our pocket books and too frequently our personal lives. But there is a more basic concern that is the cause of most of our problems. This is the concern about the spirit and attitude of society itself. Phil Zimbardo, a professor at Stanford University, has called our age, the age of indifference, where everyone is so busy looking out for one's self that he or she can't be bothered to be concerned about others. We live in a world full of hate, fear, stress and poverty, defending ourselves against one another rather than pulling for one another. We talk peace, yet have violent arguments in our homes because we don't know how to express anger in healthy ways, or to resolve conflicts in constructive ways. If this continues, if we don't begin to learn and to teach how to live cooperatively in our homes, communities and society, then all of us will be deprived of our humanity. According to Nobles (1984), if our culture were to adopt a value system based on cooperation and mutual support, we could mitigate the societal alienation which may be at the base of many social and psychological problems. A Harvard study investigating how to decrease the numbers of suicides in our country reached the conclusion that the most effective way would be to teach the values of commitment, responsibility, integrity and service to others.

You don't teach values of cooperation, acceptance of diversity, commitment, responsibility and service to others by lectures or by dispensing information. You teach by example and by providing opportunities to experience these values in relationship to others in a context that is relevant. This is why peer helping is such a powerful tool for teaching the values that society so desperately needs. If we can reach the youth of this country in these programs, while they are still exploring their values, we will be able to raise up a future generation of adults who are prepared and committed to living in a peaceful, cooperative world.

There is another issue, however, related to socie-

tal benefits that is most relevant to college level peer programs, where currently, fewer programs exist compared to other school aged populations. The issue has to do with stimulating the leadership skills of the many talented students who are seeking a college education.

What motivated me to start the first peer counseling program in Palo Alto, CA schools was the repeated story of students telling me that they turned to their peers rather than their guidance counselor for help with personal problems. They went to their counselors for help with career or educational problems, but turned to their peers for help with personal problems. The same situation happens at the college level, but with a different intensity, because students at college often live almost totally with their peers. Leaving home and embarking on a college experience entails for most youth a final end to the external assets they have of parental control and structure. At college, now they are on their own, with greater freedom, and their internal assets are tested and peer influence takes on a different power as students work to solidify values and explore the direction in life that they will take. For many, this new phase of life is scary and their need for social support of peers is vital to validating competencies and self-worth. With new freedoms they are also even more vulnerable to the deficits of at-risk behaviors, if social support and acceptance is not available.

Every college student is a potential leader, in some realm and in some way, and peer support plays a vital role in whether or not this potential is stimulated and ultimately developed. Students denied the necessary peer help they need to develop this potential often resort to negative behaviors, drop into anonymity, or even drop out of college itself. Those who survive often do so through sheer competition, bitterly turning their backs on those who have rejected them.

When this happens, society loses. We need leaders today who are healthy psychologically and socially, and who believe in the values that support and nourish the welfare of society. Peer helping not only develops this kind of leadership, but also rescues potential leaders who are falling through the cracks of society. Therefore, it seems essential to increase the numbers of peer helping programs on college and university campuses, to support and promote the diverse leadership potential that exists among their student populations. What a contribution this would make to the welfare of society and in the years to come.

Why Peer Helping? The answer is, as Mother Teresa said, because each one of us has a mission to fulfill, a mission of love. "At the hour of death when we come face to face with God, we are going to be judged on love; not on how we have done, but on how much

love we have put into our actions." Through peer helping we can learn how to love our neighbor and ourselves and thereby truly desire to be our brother's keeper. When that happens, many of our destructive social problems will begin to diminish, and many more people will enjoy the pleasure of living fulfilling and happy lives.

Dr. Barbara Varenhorst founded the Palo Alto Peer Counseling Program in 1969. She is a former junior high school teacher and counselor, and school psychologist. She authored The Guide for Student Peer Counseling Training; Real Friends: Becoming the Friend You'd Like to Have; and Training Peers for Peer Ministry. Former president of the California Peer Counseling Helpers Association, Dr. Varenhorst earned her Ph.D. at Stanford University in Counseling Psychology.

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