

Karen K.Gabe ( 高纯清 )

PEER COUNSELING


WE ARE TOGETHER



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### Dedication

The “We Are Together” peer counseling program is a labor of love, dedicated to the One I follow, whose love for human beings is unparalleled: Jesus Christ.

——Karen K.Gabe



# PREFACE

## INTRODUCTION

Currently, the availability of psychological counseling services in China fall far short of the needs of the general population, let alone the college-age population, and it appears that it will be many years before the gap between the needs and the services can be closed. This book is intended to be a user-friendly and time-saving “how to” manual for teachers that would like to establish a peer counseling program at their universities. It is based on the “We Are Together” peer counseling program established at Nanjing University in 2006, and it contains resources, curriculum topics, teaching methods, samples of student work, example forms and other related information that can be adapted to fit the specific needs and circumstances of other universities.

The foundational premise of the “We Are Together” program is that most of the counseling needs of college-age young adults are related to their normal psychosocial developmental tasks. For this reason, the typical developmental needs of university-age students can usually be successfully addressed by making available a confidential environment in which student counselees can talk with a peer counselor who has received systematic training in active listening skills, basic counseling skills and in a short-term goal-focused and supportive counseling approach.

Starting any new program can be a daunting task, and starting a new peer counseling program is no exception. However, it can be made much easier if there is an example available with which to start, an example that can stimulate new ideas and from which resources can be taken, adapted and elabora-

ted. By sharing the “nuts and bolts” of the “We Are Together” peer counseling program at Nanjing University in its current developing state, it is the hope of the authors that this book will provide such an example.

This book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One provides a general and brief introduction to peer counseling in America, peer counseling in China and to several counseling theories from which the “We Are Together” draws eclectically for its foundational underpinnings. Special recognition belongs to Qian Bojian for his contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Two provides a general overview of the major counseling components and the organizational structure of the “We Are Together” peer counseling program at Nanjing University. The information in this chapter relates directly to several issues that need to be considered in establishing a new peer counseling program. Special recognition belongs to Li Xue for her contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Three provides a more detailed description of the organizational structure, curriculum and logistical information for the four semesters that compose the “We Are Together” program. This chapter is intended to provide the detailed information that needs to be considered in the planning and development of new peer counseling programs. Special recognition goes to Li Yan for her contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Four describes specific and detailed information about the training aspects of the four semesters of the “We Are Together” program, including the primary short-term counseling approaches used, training methods and several different forms and checklists. In addition, several examples of student-created role play scenarios have been included. Special recognition goes to Jiang Tao for his contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Five relates to providing supervision for the counseling process. The number and types of issues that come up in supervision are, of course, numerous and unpredictable since they are specific to unique individuals and their specific situations. However, there are several issues that are likely to come up repeatedly, and these are ones that typically require careful handling on the part of the supervising teacher. Special recognition belongs to Chen Si for her contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Six focuses on specific listening, questioning and feedback skills.

These skills form the foundation of the peer counseling conversations. At first glance, they appear to be simple skills that should be easy to teach. However, although they are simple and straightforward in concept, learning how to use them fluently and with proper timing in actual practice is quite challenging and requires a great deal of role play practice. Special recognition belongs to Zhou Wenjun for her contribution to this chapter.

Chapter Seven contains feedback from some of the original group of students who helped to establish the “We Are Together” program. Their perspective is very helpful since it extends over the years from the time of the program’s inception through their graduation in 2009, and relates not only to their experiences and the things they learned from functioning as a peer counselor, but also to their ideas and suggestions for future improvements in the peer counseling program. The second part of this chapter focuses on the views of other peer counseling students related to their experiences of being a counselee, both their personal insights as well as the things they learned about the peer counseling process that will help them be effective when it is their turn to function as peer counselors. Special recognition belongs to Wang Lu for her contribution to this chapter.

Finally, special recognition belongs to Zhou Wenjun for her contribution to the book draft vocabulary check.

**Karen K. Gabe**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special recognition goes to my friend and colleague, Dr. Geng Liuna. This book could not have been published without her unfailing support, patience and help. Dr. Geng organized and oversaw the entire translation process and the final polishing of the Chinese manuscript; she provided advice, direction and encouragement at many junctures; and she handled all of the communications with Anhui People's Publishing House. I am deeply grateful to her.

In order to successfully establish a peer counseling program, there must be a group of committed students who are willing to spend the significant amount of time and energy, beyond class time, that is necessary to establish the program. Their ideas need to be a core part of the planning and implementation of the program every step of the way. It is these students, and the ones that follow them, that are the backbone of peer counseling's effectiveness and the key to its success. Thus, the group of Applied Psychology majors at Nanjing University who were both part of the initial planning and the implementation, and also remained committed and involved until their graduation, deserve special recognition and thanks (in alphabetical order): Chen Fudan, Chen Chen, Li Feihan, Liu Qu Yan Yang, Wang Chengkang, Wang Fang, Wei Jie and Wu Qubo.

Another group of students that deserve special recognition are the students that have contributed directly to the content of this book through samples of their work and through their feedback (in alphabetical order): Cai Yimin, Chen Si, Ge Liping, Guan Yiwei, Guo Jingshu, He Ning, Li Yu, Sun Yiqun, Wang Qi, Wang Yuting, Wu Mengyao, Xiong Yingzi, Xun Xiaoya, Yang Fan, Ying Mengxian, Zhou Wenjun, Zhang Yongjie, Zhang Baojun, Zhang Meng, Zhu Fengkan, Zhang Diheng, Zhao Yalin, Zhang Cheng, Zhu Min.

And finally, a special thanks belongs to all of the other peer counseling students, too numerous to mention here by name, all of whom have actively contributed to the "We Are Together" program since it was established in 2006. Their enthusiastic participation and support have been a vital component of its success and are greatly appreciated.



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# 1. INTRODUCTION TO PEER COUNSELING

In recent years, university students in China have begun to face nearly unbearable pressures. Most of them are the only child in their families, so they carry the full burden of their entire family's expectations, both their parents and, often their extended family's as well. They are encouraged (i. e., expected) to be "the best one", "the top student", "to get a good job and make a lot of money", "to bring honor to their family", etc. Thus, the most intense and most common emotional issues experienced by freshmen students are related to these expectations.

The China Population Communication Center recently released the results of a survey that demonstrated some of the effects of these pressures on students' mental health. Face-to-face interviews were held with 133 students in Beijing schools during the months of March to June, 2009. The survey results indicated that the mental health of China's college-age students is declining: 60% of the students reported feeling isolated, and 80% reported having feelings of social injustice. These feelings are most typically expressed through self-sabotaging behaviors such as skipping classes, Internet addiction, suicide, rebellion, etc.<sup>①</sup>

In addition to being the "only" child in their families, nearly all of the students at Nanjing University were the "best" or the "top" student at their high schools. However, once students arrive at Nanjing University, they are suddenly thrust into an environment where they are competing with other "best" and "top" students. Since there can be only one "best", one "top" student, 99% of the students discover that their scores are not

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① China Daily, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/indy/2010-03/10/content\\_9564079.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/indy/2010-03/10/content_9564079.htm)

“the best”, and they experience, perhaps for the first time in their lives, having classmates earn higher marks than their own. The result of this is that many students fall into an excruciating sense of “failure” and guilt over not living up to their family’s expectations, nor to their own.

This situation is made even more serious by the fact that students in China are now confronted with realities that are considerably more challenging than even just a few years ago. The number of students admitted to universities has more than doubled in the last 5 years, so that competition for the coveted “#1” place is fierce and unrelenting. Added to this is the fact that the number of available jobs continues to lag far behind the number of students that graduate each year. A report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said the unemployment rate for new graduates was over 12% and estimated that 1.5 million graduates would still be without a job by the end of 2008. Besides these 1.5 million unemployed graduates, an additional 6.1 million new graduates were expected to enter the job market in 2009, bringing the total to about 7.6 million.<sup>①</sup>

Under the traditional norms of Chinese culture, many students do not want to bother their parents with their problems. They say that because they are now college students and adults, they should deal with their own problems and not cause their parents to worry about them. Furthermore, they do not feel comfortable talking with friends and classmates that they fear will be looked down on for having problems. These attitudinal factors leave students feeling very lonely, without support and without guidance. Since one common suicidal dynamic of high achieving and excellent students is related to having impossibly high, unreachable self-expectations, it is actually not at all surprising that thoughts of suicide are common among college students in China, and especially among some of the most outstanding students. In fact, suicide rates in China have skyrocketed. (21st Century, September 06, 2008) In a survey taken by the China Survey Center in 2005, more than a quarter of the college students surveyed reported having thought about taking their own life at least once, and suicide is the number one cause of death in China among

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① [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2008-12/20/content\\_7324918.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2008-12/20/content_7324918.htm)

young people between the ages of 15 and 34.<sup>①</sup>

Another survey done by the Beijing Suicide Research and Prevention Center (21st Century, September 06, 2006) focused on the causes of suicidal thoughts among students and identified the most common ones as lost love, academic pressure, psychological problems, job pressures and relationship problems. With the exception of psychological problems, all of these are typical age-related problems that are part of the normal developmental tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood. Difficulty with one or more of these problems is experienced by every student at some point during their student life. All are problems that can be worked through relatively easily when there is a trusted person available who is able to listen actively, supportively, and non-judgmentally. Most often such problems get worked through with the help of supportive friends and roommates, but sometimes there are complicating factors, or several problems occurring at once, or there is a special need for privacy. This then, is the role of a peer counselor: to be an active listener who is trained to provide the kind of support that is needed in these more complex kinds of circumstances.

## PEER COUNSELING DEVELOPMENT IN AMERICA

The development of peer counseling in America during the 1960's came in response to the societal breakdown that was symptomatically reflected in America's young people in the form of family problems, racial tensions, campus riots, promiscuity, drug abuse, dropping out of school, youth crime and increasing pressures of academic study and careers. These problems were relatively rare in previous generations, but during the sixties, both the numbers and the intensity of these problems began to explode. By the end of the 20th century, peer counseling had become an accepted and valued part of many schools and universities. In order to provide support and guidance for these peer counseling programs, the National Peer Helpers Association was established in 1984, which later became the National Association of Peer Programs (NAPP). The NAPP developed Program Standards for Peer Counseling

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① <http://www.reuters.com/article/health News/idUSPEK13050120070327>



programs that are available free online.<sup>①</sup> The NAPP Program Standards are an exceptionally helpful planning tool for anyone who decides to establish a peer counseling program. (Shi, 2007)

## PEER COUNSELING DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

Mental health education in China began in the 1980's and has developed to its most common current model of school-department-student, three-level network. Of these three levels, the school level and the department level are well developed, but the third level, the student level, has lagged behind for a number of reasons, primarily due to the unavailability of appropriate and adequate resources in the areas of systematic and scientific theoretical training and supervision. (Zhu and Chen, 2006)

Peer counseling, part of the student level of the three-level mental health network in China, has initially focused mainly on college students in the form of AIDS peer education, academic peer counseling and university peer counseling organizations such as the Psychological Union, Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Studies. These organizations provide a number of educational activities that promote mental health, such as lectures, films, salons, psychological tests, etc. (Huang, Gong, Fang and Li, 2007) The establishment of 1:1 mental health peer counseling is still fairly rare and is only just now starting to attract wider interest in China.

An informal survey of several existing university level peer counseling programs in China (Zhang, 2009) found that three broad categories of psychological health education activities had been established: 1:1 counseling or group counseling provided by full-time psychology teachers; mutual support and development groups led by students; and student peer counselors who have received some basic training through their communities and other organizations. Among universities with 1:1 student peer counseling programs, there seems to be a need for more systematic or standardized training for student peer counselors. (Zhang, 2009)

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① NAPP, <http://www.peerprograms.org/publications/Rubric.doc>