

## Workshop Presentation

Topic: Youth Development and Volunteering

# Volunteering of Youth: e-counseling Service by Peer Counselors

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### Abstract

In April 2001, the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong launched the e-counseling service aiming to provide emotional support and advice on sexual and reproductive health concern via the Internet. Youth volunteers are trained as peer counselors to reply email from youth. In this paper, the service and volunteer group development are reviewed. Personal growth of the volunteers is also elaborated. The current and future challenges both to the service and the volunteers are outlined at the end of the paper.

### Introduction

Since 1986, the Association has set up Youth Health Care Centres to provide integrated service to youth, especially crisis intervention for the unwed pregnancy. While face-to-face counseling is the main model to render service, this may delay those unready to face a counselor from getting appropriate assistance. The fast development of computer technology has attracted huge growing use of Internet among youth. With this observation, e-counseling service was launched in April 2001 as to reach out to the youngsters.

E-counseling service aims to provide empathic emotional support and non-judgmental, non-directive advice to public through the Internet, especially the youth with sexuality and reproductive health concerns. With the concept of “youth to youth”, a group of youth volunteers are trained by our experienced project

counselors as peer counselors to reply youth's email. It is believed that being youth themselves, they can understand more about youth's general needs and emotional response towards sex-related issues.

### **Goals and objectives of the e-counseling service**

1. To provide counseling service related to the sexual and reproductive health problem to the youth so as to develop their sexual responsibility and to obtain proper sex knowledge.
2. To enhance self-awareness of the peer counselors toward their own sexual attitudes.
3. To provide opportunities for peer counselors to help others, which contribute to their own personal growth and development.
4. To strengthen peer counselors' communication skills and to equip them with basic counseling skills;
5. To capture potential clients whose needs may beyond the boundaries of email counseling

### **Operational procedures of e-counseling service**

Since the service is self-funded and pioneer in nature, the service relied solely on the Association's support. A central computer is equipped in the headquarters for daily administration for the service. Two counselors are assigned to be project counselors and half of their time is allocated for the service delivery. Every summer vacation, a group of youth volunteers are recruited and trained with sex knowledge and basic counseling skills. Trained peer counselors would reply emails under supervision by the project counselor.

The project counselor is responsible to assign one appropriate email without the personal data of the email sender to peer counselors each time. The peer counselors are requested to reply the email within 3 working days. The project counselor will give comment to them through the phone or email. After the peer counselors have amended the reply, the counselor will make the final edition and send out the email accordingly. The counselor is in-charge of the operation so as to make sure that the information given is accurate while the emotional support is adequate and helps to strength the service user's coping skill. All in all, confidentiality is the major concern.

## Characteristic of the peer counselors

The fourth recruitment of peer counselors for the year of 2005-2006 was just completed and 8 new peer counselors have been trained. In addition to 11 old volunteers, there are 19 peer counselors for this year. Half of them are University students and some come from faculties of helping professions such as social work and nursing. The others are working youths in fields such as computer, commercial, teaching, etc. In general, they are 20 to 25 years old. The main reason for them to participate in the e-counseling service is their passion to help the others. They feel that more work on adolescent reproductive and sexual health is needed as sex knowledge among youth is still poor and attitude towards sex is unclear in youngster nowadays. Besides, they also want to learn more or refine communication and counseling skills.

## Review of the e-counseling service and peer counselor's personal growth

The number of replied emails climbed up from 451 emails in 2001 to 901 in 2004. Up till June this year, 535 emails have been replied and 135 are follow-up emails. Most of the service users are the youth and many returned emails expressing their appreciation! To a certain extent, this indicates the success of e-counseling service.

The number of emails replied by peer counselors vary with the number of volunteers each year. Each peer counselor, in average, helps to reply 2 emails every month. The topics range from "hit" youth sexuality concern such as adolescent physical change, sexual health, sexually transmitted diseases to more urgent issue such as suspected or unplanned pregnancy, unprotected sexual intercourse or emergency contraception.

At the end of every service year, the volunteers are assisted in reviewing their personal growth for the year through group supervision and self-evaluation. As reflected from last few years, they generally find e-counseling service as meaningful. They believe that it meets the objective of helping the youth with sexuality and reproductive health problem and provides channel for the youth to express their difficulties. Through replying the email, they do not only gain the proper sex knowledge and establish proper attitude but also learn the way to show care and comfort to people in need. Most of them conclude that they improve not only

writing skill but gain the arts of words in daily life.

Peer counselors can also review their personal value and growth through on-going supervision. A Christian volunteer shared how she struggled in replying a pregnant girl seeking for abortion while her heart drove her to persuade the girl to keep the baby. This email facilitated her to examine her attitude towards abortion and rethink the value of life. Another male volunteer shared his surprise after replying a girl bothered by menstruation problem. Through the email, he really understood how the girl suffered from the menstruation pain and this helped him to show empathy to his female friend in future. Moreover, a medical student volunteer recalled how replying a woman with miscarriage experience changed her mindset. After supervision and reflection, she changed her focus in reply from solely information giving to sincere care and comfort provision. Her final reply gained the heart of the woman, who wrote back to share her suppressed feeling about her baby.

Volunteers' life experiences are greatly enhanced when sharing service users in-depth feeling. A peer counselor gave the continuous support to the pregnant girl from the discovery of pregnancy till she gave birth to the baby. This peer counselor did not only gain the satisfaction from helping others but also established emotional bond and friendship with that girl. Although the girl needed to carry on her life on own feet, the volunteer was impressed how she had walked with the girl for that period of crisis.

With experience and confidence to handle the email from youth, some peer counselors attempted to reply emails from all walks of life. They tried to help the newly wed couples with the problem of non-consummation, couples with extra-marital affair, those adults seeking for commercial sex and getting the sexually transmitted diseases, couples struggling from the family planning and fertility issue, the elderly facing the menopause.

Life exposure helps the peer counselors to understand physical and psychological changes in different stages. Accordingly, they learn to provide help and emotional support to people surrounding them. One volunteer has remarked how she eventually recognized the strong emotional needs of her menopausal mother after replied a woman suffering from the adjustment in menopause. She promised to pay more patience to her mother's complaints and provide more support to her. Moreover, different life exposure helps the youth volunteers preparing their own

developmental challenge. After replied a man at thirty, a peer counselor shares that he never thought about planning family in the past. He treasured it as an opportunity for him to think it over so that he does not need to fall into the dilemma in future.

## **Review of the volunteers group's development**

In view of the positive feedbacks from the peer counselors and the service users, regular recruitment of youth volunteers is scheduled in each summer. The number of youth volunteers is around 20 every year. In first few years, the recruitment was launched through newspapers, our website and service units. Application forms were also sent to secondary schools and universities, the recruitment target was youth under 30 years old with computer at home as well as Chinese and English typing skills. Applicants from various sources were recruited ranging from F.5 graduate to young mother. Due to the unstable performance and lack of long-term commitment, the criteria for selecting the potential members are set this year. The commitment and the time available for taking up the volunteer work are emphasized this year.

A series of training workshop is provided to the new volunteers before service delivery. Individual supervision is given during the process of drafting email reply as on-going training. Moreover, monthly group supervision is held to further improve the counseling skills and sexuality knowledge. The group supervision session is divided into 2 parts. Firstly, volunteers are responsible to present information on different topics of sexual and reproductive health. This could promote peer learning and experience sharing. Meanwhile, in response to recent experience, the project counselor will give reminders and advices on counseling skills in the second part. Last but not the least, the volunteers also have the chance to share their feelings and experiences as well as to enrich each other's learning and establish mutual support.

The concept of "youth to youth" is upheld as the main element in the team. Two years ago, some active peer counselors started forming a core group to help running the group. One of their main tasks is to give recommendation for the service development and future direction of the group. This enables peer counselors to participate more through organizing the presentation in the monthly group supervision and assisting in the recruitment and training workshop for the new volunteers.

Through working with the others, they exchange knowledge and experience, which enhanced their inter-personal relationship. The team spirit and sense of belonging of the group are enhanced accordingly. In the training workshop, they treasure the chance to meet new comers as well as refresh their counseling skills. In past few year, most of the volunteers reflected that they have learnt and improved in organization and leadership skills from the experience.

To further extend the peer counselors' exposure to the adolescent concern, an advanced training program for experienced peer counselors was planned and implemented last year. The peer counselors were arranged to observe and assist in the counter work of our Youth Health Care Centre for greater exposure to our young clients. After this initial exposure, they will be arranged to sit-in medical and counseling session for more exposure to professional management this year. Further, when appropriate, peer counselor is arranged to joint in the counseling session for the client whom the peer counselor has replied the email prior to attending face-to-face counseling.

Since the Association patronizes the idea of youth participation, the peer counselors get the opportunities to voice out youth needs in different level. Last year, a group of peer volunteers have carried out a questionnaire to collect youth's opinion on our Youth Health Care Centres services. They conducted on their own hands from designing the questionnaire, interviewing the client and the partner, to generating the result and presenting it in the Committee meeting of the Association. Every year a number of peer counselors are elected by youth volunteers as youth representatives. They are appointed as Council members of the Association. In this way, they are enabled to give out youth voice in policy-making and governing level.

### **Current and future challenge**

Though the e-counseling service does meet its original objectives, it still has areas for further improvement. Since the email replying process involves work and discussion of both peer counselor and counselor, it takes some time to send out a final reply. The average time to reply an email is about 1 to 2 weeks. This somehow affected of meeting the service need. It is hoped that the experienced peer counselor can give the reply with minor amendment. Moreover, further training in counseling skills will help to improve the quality of the email. Hence, the reply time will be shortened.

The turnover rate of the youth volunteers is another challenge. The annual turnover rate is over 50%. In regard to packed time schedule and career development of our youth, some volunteers remark that they can not get instant response like ICQ, chat room, etc. In this way, they feel distant with the service users. Further, although they try the best to reply the email, they never know the service user's response if no email is further received. Their satisfaction of helping others is thus lessened. Reassurance of the volunteer's effort and mutual support in the group are essential for them to stay in the volunteer work.

With the mixture of new and old volunteers, the problem of giving proper training to them is a foreseeable challenge. For the new volunteers, they need to absorb as much sex knowledge as possible. For the old volunteers, they find information repetitive and need advanced training. The old volunteers are trained to be trainer and as resourced person providing help to new comers. This design may hence serve to meet both needs.

## **Conclusion**

The e-counseling service provides a valuable platform for the youth to share worries and doubts in the area of sexual and reproductive health. At the transition stage of late adolescence and early adulthood, the young peer volunteers find the service not only help the other youth but also enrich their life skills and exposure! The concept of "youth to youth" service is proved to be success in reaching out the youth in a convenient and confidential ways as well as enhancing youth volunteers' communication and life skills.