

CASE STUDIES FOR ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Below are five case studies that describe issues related to mental health experienced in the university environment. An outline of each of the cases is provided below.

OUTLINE

CASE STUDIES RELATED TO STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES:

1. SEAN
2. MIKHAEL
3. REBECCA

CASE STUDIES RELATED TO FACULTY MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES:

4. TANYA

CASE STUDIES RELATED TO STAFF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE:

5. ALICE

INSTRUCTIONS

Each group will have two co-facilitators, who will lead the discussion on one of the five cases described below. One of the co-facilitators from each table will provide a brief report to the group at-large summarizing the main points arising from their discussion.

- Before the case study is read, the co-facilitators will ask the following questions:
 - What is wellbeing in a university?
- Then one of the co-facilitators will read the case study and ask:
 - How can McGill address this as an issue? What are we missing? What could we have done? What can be improved in the environment?
- Finally the co-facilitators will ask:
 - How can we create a healthy environment for...

CASE STUDIES – STUDENTS

1. SEAN

Sean is a 28 year old male graduate student in the fifth year of his PhD studies. Sean believed he had been self-medicating with alcohol (actually had been recently hospitalized for alcohol poisoning) to mask the stress he had been feeling. He reported feeling discouraged about the future and felt significant pressure to find a job after graduation, pay off student loans, and get married to his long-time girlfriend.

Over the last two semesters, Sean's symptoms became increasingly disruptive and disturbing. Sean often remained at the laboratory until 10 pm at night on a daily basis and had significant trouble sleeping. Sean reported feeling increasingly critical of himself and that the work he was doing was not good enough. These feeling of anxiety fueled his drinking and Sean began to isolate himself more and more from his friends and loved ones.

Too afraid to seek advice from his supervisor, colleagues or his girlfriend Sean floundered. His research suffered and he received an unsatisfactory yearend review. Following his unsatisfactory review his supervisor informed him that due to unsatisfactory performance he was going to decrease his stipend for the following year.

Overwhelmed with the anxiety of completing his degree, the news of increased financial burdens and growing feelings of helplessness he contemplated dropping out of his degree.

After disclosing some of his struggles to a fellow graduate student his friend suggested that he see someone in counseling services. However, Sean felt that the stress he was facing was normal for graduate school and it was only his own inability to cope that was the problem. He said that he was not comfortable seeking help because the information would get back to his supervisor and he was worried about the fallout of appearing like he cannot handle graduate school. Sean ended up not seeking any help and eventually received a second unsatisfactory progress report and was asked to withdrawal from his program of study.

2. MIKHAIL

Mikhail in his final year of studies presented himself to counselling complaining of high anxiety arising from the following dilemma: he believed he had been self-medicating with alcohol (actually had been recently hospitalized for alcohol poisoning) to mask the stress he had been feeling over expressing his sexual orientation. He had given himself permission to enjoy a gay lifestyle during his studies in Montreal but now that he was to graduate and go back to take up residency in the former Soviet bloc nation that he called "Home", he would have to forgo living "out" if he wanted to pursue the government job that was waiting for him; the one his Father had procured for him. It was illegal to be "out" in his country. He was being tortured by the thought of his having to return and continue the legacy of service that his father and grandfather had lived before him as a "straight" man. This inner struggle of family duty, sexual orientation, etc. was creating so much emotional havoc that he was not only having difficulty meeting his academic responsibilities but both his alcohol and drug consumption were increasing to alarming level.

3. REBECCA

Rebecca is a 21 year old student in her third year at McGill. She is an international student from San Francisco, living with one female roommate in an apartment far from campus.

Rebecca has been struggling with anxiety and perfectionism in her last years of high school. Her father is an alcoholic, oscillating between drunkenness and sobriety since her childhood. Despite these problems, the family is loving and supportive of Rebecca. She does not have any brothers and sisters, as her parents are both from low socio-economic backgrounds and are unable to afford more than one child. They do not own a house or a car because all of their savings have gone towards Rebecca's university education.

From the first day of classes, Rebecca fully throws herself into McGill and Montreal life. She takes five classes, and joins many extra-curricular activities. She seems to excel at first, yet halfway through the semester, she becomes depressed and anxious. The combined pressures of trying to make her parents proud; transitioning academically from high school to university; adjusting to living in a different country and culture; and her demanding extracurricular activities, make her unable to function. She breaks down in the middle of the semester, but is able to get through exams with relatively decent grades.

The pattern continues the next semester; she thrives at first, yet after a few months, becomes extremely anxious and depressed. Her breakdown is more severe, but she is still able to finish her exams.

Rebecca has to stay in Montreal over the summer, as her parents cannot afford a plane ticket home. During this time, she becomes increasingly depressed. Her friends have left, including her roommate, leaving her alone all summer. She feels increasingly isolated and alone. She works as a nanny for a French family but it is difficult to communicate them as she does not speak French very well. Her labor is exploited and she is verbally abused by the family. When September finally begins, she is excited. However, her roommate returns with a boyfriend and spends little to no time at the apartment. Rebecca's depression becomes extreme under these conditions and has a major breakdown in the middle of the semester.

Rebecca finally goes to McGill Mental Health and is given a triage appointment. During this ten-minute appointment, she is redirected to see an academic advisor or the Career and Planning Service, because her issues appear to stem from anxiety over school work. Rebecca feels as though her issues were not taken seriously and does not seek help again. Her depression and anxiety are worsened as she feels more isolated than ever. She fails three of her five classes. She does not want to return to McGill for the winter semester, yet does not want to admit to her parents her struggles. She feels ashamed of her condition as her parents have sacrificed much for her to be at McGill.

CASE STUDY – FACULTY

4. TANYA

Tanya is a young assistant professor juggling responsibilities at work and at home. Last year, there were some delays in making her startup package available to her, and the space for her lab did not become available until February. Her research program and her graduate student recruitment suffered and she did not get tri-council funding. She did get very useful feedback from the committee and from senior colleagues and is now working on her second attempt.

Although she is on a reduced teaching load this year, both her courses are new preps and demand a great deal of work. She would like to serve on a committee on teaching, but has been discouraged from doing so by her Chair, and she wonders whether she would actually have time.

She is worried about significant student debt and is wondering how to start saving now that she has a tenure-track job, but the disposable income seems not to be there. Her young son just started kindergarten in French, and she is hoping that she can learn it as fast as he seems to be picking it up so that she can qualify for her work permit renewal next year. Her partner is having a tough time finding stable employment and a social network in Montreal and has been increasingly withdrawn.

This morning, she got an email from her chair asking her to come in to discuss her reappointment application which is due at the end of this academic year. She thought his tone was formal and she is wondering whether he is worried about her case.

CASE STUDY – STAFF

5. ALICE

Alice is 48 years old. She has been working at the University, in the Faculty of Smart Kids, for the last 10 years as a systems technician. She prepares reports for internal clients with the ABC and DEF programs. She's good at her job and she receives numerous requests directly from clients who have gotten to know her over the years. For the first 8 years there wasn't much change in the unit but two years ago a new Dean was appointed to the Faculty with a mandate to review the way things were done.

In Alice's unit this review resulted in a change in the work organization. In order to offer better service to their clients, four teams were created and were to be cross trained acquiring knowledge on new programs. Therefore, Alice would be trained on programs she had never used before and she would train her colleagues on the ABC and DEF programs. There was a general meeting to present the change to all employees; the reason for the change; how it would be implemented and to obtain feedback.

Alice didn't understand the purpose of the change and had doubts about its success. When the implementation started she continued answering all the requests she received for the ABC and DEF programs (rather than submitting the requests to her supervisor for distribution). When her supervisor scheduled training sessions on other programs, Alice often said she was too busy to attend. She felt misunderstood by her supervisor; she didn't feel she was receiving any support from her.

Alice started to feel overwhelmed with her job and all the requests that were made of her. She felt tired all the time and was late for work numerous times. She was making mistakes she would not normally make. The fact that she couldn't deliver the projects on time like she used to was making her anxious. Furthermore, when she did attend a training session, she couldn't concentrate and assimilate the new concepts.

The supervisor had noticed her mood change and the fact that she seemed to have a hard time with her work but she was told that: "Alice had a reputation to always come out on top", so, she didn't address it. This went on for 4 weeks, until other members of the team started to complain about Alice's negative attitude.