

# Peer Helping: From Academics to Action

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For those students interested in a career in Clinical Psychology, volunteering as a university Peer Counselor is a wonderful way to apply the knowledge gained from psychology undergraduate courses.

It is a way to acquire “hands-on” experience in the field of counseling, allowing you to evaluate and direct your future goals. In addition to providing an opportunity to practice my counseling skills, my experience as a Peer Helper at the University of Victoria (UVic) has reaffirmed my desire to attend graduate school in Clinical Psychology.

In mid September, all the UVic Peer Helpers attend a weekend retreat where they begin to learn various skills. Professional counselors lead seminars on practical skills such as active listening, reflecting, body language, referrals and stress management. The retreat is a great opportunity for students to become acquainted with other students who share similar interests. Although the program is not limited to psychology students, the majority of the Peer Helpers are majoring in psychology and many intend to continue their studies in graduate school.

After the retreat, the program commences and the Peer Helpers begin to make their mark on the university community. Weekly micro-skills groups led by Clinical and Counseling Psychology Graduate students enhance skills training. These training sessions cover topics such as ethics and

relaxation strategies, as well as offering an opportunity to practice skills learned at the retreat. In addition, each Peer Helper chooses to join one of five committees: the Drop-In Office, the International Peers Committee, the Learning Skills Committee, the Wellness Committee, or the Career Committee. Each committee focuses on a different part of campus life. For example, the Drop-In Office offers a confidential space for students to talk to Peer Helpers about problems they are experiencing. It is more casual than UVic's Counseling Services, and is often utilized by students who are embarrassed to seek “professional” help. Common issues addressed in the Drop-In Office are relationship issues, stress, loneliness, and school difficulties.

The other committees are more action-oriented, and function by reaching out to students rather than waiting for students to seek help. The International Peers Committee helps integrate international students into the university community by sponsoring social events, and by offering opportunities for them to get to know one another as well as other Canadian students. The Learning Skills Committee members, who are trained in study skills, staff a table in the main library where students can obtain information about improving their study skills or essay writing. The Wellness Committee focuses on enhancing the emotional, physical and social health of UVic students. I was a member of this committee during my first year as a Peer

Helper, and was particularly involved in organizing a Disordered Eating Awareness Day and Body Image art show on campus.

In addition, UVic Peer Helping employs two students each year to organize and manage the program with a counselor from Counseling Services. Last year, I was a Student Coordinator, which allowed me to take on a different role in the program. I was given the responsibility to help train the new volunteers and coordinate the entire Peer Helping program, in addition to participating as a Peer Helper. I found this job to be very challenging, yet extremely rewarding!

Finally, it is important to note that this program is not “all work and no play!” As well as sharing common goals and interests, the UVic Peer Helpers socialize throughout the year at various events. For these reasons and more, I would highly recommend that Psychology students consider joining their school’s peer counseling program! If your school does not currently have a peer counseling program, talk to some counselors at your school and ask for their input and help. Starting a valuable program at your school not only helps many other students, but also can improve your skills and help prepare you for a future career in psychology.