

Study backs approach to single-session therapy for students

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A study funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research recently reinforced what Western is already doing when it comes to counseling therapy.

The study, which included university investigators at Laurier and Waterloo, showed single-session therapy – a one-time appointment with a trained professional – has potential to provide profound relief to individuals in distress.

This treatment model was offered as a pilot program through Psychological Services at Western last year. It proved effective and, thanks to student feedback and support, it became a permanent fixture this year, said Jana Luker, Associate Vice-President (Student Experience).

"We had a staff member who was doing some training in it, so we started it as a pilot last year. I had never heard of it before. Certainly in the universities where I've worked, we've never used it," Luker explained, noting she's not aware of other institutions currently offering single-session therapy to [students](#).

"I've worked with different modalities of different types of therapy – online therapy, coaching therapy and variations around that – which all involves training. I never heard of this, specifically, as a trained modality until I heard about it here."

The study, [Walk-in Counselling versus Traditional Services](#), explored two models for delivering counselling services – a single-session walk-in counselling service provided at an agency in Kitchener, and a traditional service delivery model provided at an agency in London where a waiting list managed demand for services.

While participants from both models improved over the 10 weeks of quantitative data collection, those who attended the walk-in counselling clinic improved faster. The difference in improvement was even more pronounced for those with complex needs, which included coping with abuse, trauma, serious mental illness or child welfare concerns.

Participants of both models improved; however, those with complex needs seeking help from the traditional model showed little change over time, whereas those with complex needs who sought help from the walk-in model improved rapidly.

The walk-in model was most helpful to participants who said they were thinking seriously about making changes in their lives or had previously made changes and wanted to maintain momentum, the study stated.

Single-session therapy is quite specific, Luker explained, requiring specialized training. Students don't just see a regular therapist for one session. And, since its launch at Western last year, "it proved radically effective," she added.

"We were looking at students who were just trying to sort something out on a temporary basis. We were triaging students prior to letting them into it, and found we could see a lot of students, and give them the support they wanted, prior to the issue becoming acute, and maybe, something longer term – which is the idea," she said.

"And what's great, we have no wait times now – we have no wait list,

rather. Our experience has been, when (single session therapy) has been offered, people were very accepting of it, and they're not coming back. They still know if there is some other reason, or even if the therapist they see for single session is interested, they can always sign up for regular sessions."

That initial session is often comprised of questions, Luker continued, with students wondering, are they normal in what they are feeling? Is their situation OK? Will it go away or do they need to look for more support?

"The fact we have no waiting list – I haven't experienced that, in the last I don't know, how many universities I've worked at. And it's not because the need is decreasing," said Luker.

She is happy to see the University Students' Council (USC) take up the torch for this initiative, voting late last year to include a student service fee that would ensure single-session therapy would be offered to students as a permanent service.

"The students chose to support (single-session [therapy](#)) on a permanent basis because it's so effective, and the feedback they were hearing was so positive. So they chose – the Student Services Fee Committee – to support it. It's not 100 per cent – the university is still giving some funding, but the fee is going to allow it to be sustainable," she said. "It's a really good news story. It's exciting."

More information: Walk-in Counselling versus Traditional Services: www.kwcounselling.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Walk-in-Counselling-versus-Traditional-Services.pdf

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