

Professor breaks new ground on counseling survivors of trauma, sexual assault

April 7 2017



University of Montana researcher Christina Yoshimura Credit: Courtesy of UM

Recent work by a University of Montana communication studies professor is drawing national attention for her approach to incorporating research in interpersonal communication with the delivery of mental health services to sexual assault survivors.

Communication studies Associate Professor Christina Yoshimura teaches courses in interpersonal [communication](#), and her research focuses on how personal relationships intersect with larger systems, such as [health](#) care or the workplace. Yoshimura also volunteers as a clinical [mental health](#) counselor at UM's Curry Health Center Counseling Services in order to bring research out of academia and into the daily lives of students at UM.

In 2013 UM received a Department of Justice grant to better address sexual assault on campus. Yoshimura joined a team at Counseling Services tasked with ensuring that sufficient services were available and appropriate for victims of sexual assault. Yoshimura specifically worked to incorporate [communication studies](#) principles and theories into her therapeutic work with survivors of sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence.

"We found that engaging verbal and nonverbal practices of strategic accommodation and divergence from clients were useful elements in building a trauma-informed approach to client care," Yoshimura said. "We were surprised to find that many of the clients we saw throughout the two-year period of this grant did not make an appointment with a stated goal of working through [interpersonal violence](#). Instead, they often presented with other concerns, such as anxiety. Through communication on our written intake form and the use of communication accommodation within sessions, we were able to convey receptivity to a client's trauma experience and respect for their own pacing for bringing it into our sessions." Yoshimura and Kim Brown Campbell wrote a report on their work and their approach, which was published in the Journal for

College Student Psychotherapy this past winter. Yoshimura also submitted the paper to the Western States Communication Association conference. The association awarded it as one of the top papers at the conference on the topic of health communication, and Yoshimura participated in several panels during the conference where she discussed the application of interpersonal communication to mental health.

"One of the exciting things about the discipline of communication studies is that our work spans boundaries across many contexts," she said. "We are finding that our research into the messages and communication patterns in interpersonal relationships are important for the work that is done in so many spheres, like law enforcement or medical care.

"There is a real movement to partner with people in these spheres to build more effective practices with them," Yoshimura said. "The enthusiasm among colleagues from across the country for the partnership I'm currently engaging in with the mental health sphere is so encouraging."

In a continued effort to blend academic research and practical interventions, Yoshimura recently established a new group at Counseling Services that aims to build the social interaction skills necessary for students to develop healthy relationships.

"In our culture there are so many things we give people specific teaching in, like how to calculate the circumference of a circle or how to drive a car," she said. "Yet even though we know from countless research studies that good relationships are essential to our health and well-being, and even though we know many communication behaviors that are correlated with healthy relationships, it is rare to find any of that taught to people outside of select university classes."

For example, people often struggle to start a conversation with someone new, or handle conflict effectively. Yoshimura's practice-based counseling allows students to get an overview of productive relational communication skills and then practice them with one another.

"This incorporates cognitive understanding of the skill with the repeated physical experience of using the skill," Yoshimura said. "Most people have room to improve their social functioning, and could experience less anxiety and more satisfying interpersonal interactions with even just a little practice."

"I see communication as a powerful frame for understanding and improving our human experiences," she said.

"Participating on the Department of Justice grant was deeply meaningful to me as a way of seeing, serving and respecting [sexual assault](#) survivors on campus. This is of the utmost importance here at UM, and it's also an issue of national importance. Providing an avenue for students to develop and refine their skills in building positive relationships is another way to serve the students on our campus.

"Using the social science research in interpersonal communication to work directly in the lives of our students is an immense privilege," Yoshimura said, "and the obligation to do that well will continue to guide my choices here at the University and within our Missoula community."

Provided by University of Montana

Citation: Professor breaks new ground on counseling survivors of trauma, sexual assault (2017, April 7) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-04-professor-ground-survivors-trauma-sexual.html>

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