‘I’ve never been in a situation with guys talking like this before in my life’ understanding the impacts of a university-based, male student, peer support group, on its facilitators.

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'I've never been in a situation with guys talking like this before in my life' Understanding the impacts of a university-based, male student, peer support group, on its facilitators.[i]

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Key terms: 'Male' 'university' 'student' 'mental health' 'peer support'

Abstract

There is a plethora of research exploring males' reluctance to seek support for mental ill-health. At the same time, ever rising numbers of university students experiencing mental ill-health are being reported. Researchers are now looking to generate knowledge of what works for male students in terms of improving their mental health. This study reports on a small-scale evaluation of a male-only peer support group: 'Talk Club' (TC), based in one university in northern England, in order to understand the impacts on its male student peer facilitators: 'Captains.' A focus group was conducted with the three TC Captains. Data was analysed using a thematic codebook approach aligned with two research questions addressing the impacts on the Captains, and the enabling factors. Findings reveal that the student Captains experienced positive outcomes which they ascribed to undertaking their role in TCs, including improved relationships, validation of interests and emotions, and skills for the future. The Captains also encountered challenges related to establishing boundaries and navigating unexpected attendee revelations. This research offers a unique contribution to knowledge, by reporting on the impacts of the TC group on the male students who acted as peer facilitators.

1. Introduction

Much research has reported on gender differences in how mental health is experienced, with particular focus on males' reluctance to discuss (Patrick and Robertson, 2016), disclose (Thorley, 2017), or seek support for mental ill-health (NHIR, 2020). Concurrently, numbers of university students reporting a mental health condition were seven times higher in 2022 than a decade earlier (Lewis and Stiebahl, 2024). One of the most extreme outcomes of mental ill-health can be students taking their own lives, and 69% of UK university student deaths by suicide are male (NHIR, 2020). Yet, there is little evidence of what works for male students in improving their mental health (Sagar-Ourughali, Brown, Tailor, and Godfrey, 2020).

One promising approach to addressing male student mental ill-health is male wellbeing support groups (e.g. Gwyther et al, 2019; Vickery, 2022). For example, Sagar-Ourughali et al (2020), considered male students' mental health support preferences, and concluded that several factors may promote male student support seeking in Higher Education (HE), including, providing a male-only space, using male role models, normalising, and reframing help seeking as masculine, and signposting to mental health support services.

There have to date been no evaluations of Talk Clubs (TCs), and there needs to be more evaluations of male-only peer support groups within university settings. Moreover, there is limited available research that investigates the impact of peer support groups on the peer facilitators rather than the participants. As such, in this introduction, we review some of the literature on peer support for men more widely, before narrowing to *student* peer support, and finally studies looking at the impacts of peer support on peer facilitators. The rationale is to give the reader an overview of some potential benefits and challenges associated with peer support for male students and for peer support group facilitators. We then outline our intention of undertaking the study discussed in this paper, in order to extend the knowledge base on the more specific area of male student peer support group facilitators.

Peer support groups can offer men socialisation opportunities and relationship building, which can lead to improved psychological health, through for example, reduced loneliness and isolation (Laidlaw, McLellan, and Ozakinci, 2016). A distinctive component of peer support is the 'experiential similarity,' often felt between facilitators and attendees, through communication of similar experiences (Vickery, 2022). Murphy et al, (2024) were able to identify similar effects for men who listened to a men's mental health podcast, finding that participants hearing other men articulate their experiences of mental ill-health, provided a normalisation of male emotion, and reduced feelings of isolation and stigma associated with men's mental ill-health. Peer support can be viewed by men as more accessible than professionally led support groups, where inevitable power imbalances are felt (Mead, 2001). These types of men-only spaces have been found to create feelings of psychological safety (Sharp et al, 2022), enabling conversation opportunities that might not otherwise happen. This is important, given research consistently shows that male students are more inclined toward seeking informal rather than formal support (Laidlow et al, 2016; Spencer, Owens-Solari, and Goodyer, 2016).

Watson (2017) identified five underpinning mechanisms of the relationships between peer supporters and attendees that were common across various peer support programmes. These were lived experience (personal experience); love labour (ensuring emotional safety of attendees); liminality (peer supporter as receiver and giver of support); strengths-focussed social and practical support (support with routine tasks and social connections); and the helper role of the peer supporter, which promotes their own wellbeing. Of particular importance to this evaluation, which is focused on the impact of TCs on the peer facilitators themselves, is the research of Sharp et al, (2022) and Vickery (2022), who conclude in their respective studies that peer support can exploit the innate inclination of men for problem solving and helping others, in-turn benefitting their own wellbeing.

There is mixed evidence of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of peer support interventions on students. Two recent UK based systematic reviews showed a lack of evidence that peer support improves students' mental health and wellbeing (John et al, 2018; Pointon-Haas et al, 2024). Conversely, Byrom (2018) found a significant increase in students' wellbeing after partaking in a skills-based peer support intervention. Research from the USA and Canada has found some levels of improvement in wellbeing of student peer

supporters, for example through increased self-esteem and empowerment (Johnson and Riley, 2019; Suresh, et al 2021).

This paper reports on a small-scale evaluation of a university-based peer support group for self-identifying males; 'Talk Club,' focussing on the perceived outcomes and impacts on the male student facilitators. Talk Club is a UK based, male mental health charity, which runs peer supported talking groups led by volunteers, termed Captains. TC groups follow a specific and structured formula, where the Captain(s) ask participants, starting with themselves, four questions based around emotional self-assessment, gratitude, and forward planning, beginning, and ending with the question, 'how are you out of 10'? TCs were developed initially from the experience of the founder, of the loss of a male friend to suicide, and there is strong evidence for the benefits of male-only wellbeing support groups (e.g. Gwyther, Swann, Casey, Purcell, and Rice, 2019; Vickery, 2022). Use of the term 'Captains,' as opposed to 'peer facilitators' in TCs may be beneficial, as evidence from Student Minds suggests. Their analysis of social media data revealed that terms comparable to 'Captain,' such as 'champion' or 'MANbassador,' were better received by men, than for example 'peer supporter' (Maggs 2021).

A TC was set up at the university during the academic year 23/24. Introducing a TC at the university was identified by the lead wellbeing practitioner within the university as meeting a need for male students utilising the wellbeing service, to address feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a lack of peer support. A peer support group was identified as being a potentially cost effective and accessible resource for male students.

The study reported on in this paper identifies the perceived impacts on the TC Captains and what factors may be enabling these impacts. The rationale for focusing on the Captains' experience, is that a core element of the TC model is that Captains are peer facilitators as well as engaged participants, sharing their experiences and benefitting from the groups support. Through participation, the Captains model openness, vulnerability, and connection, which are integral to the intervention's ethos. However, this dual identity can also introduce complexities, such as balancing their supportive role with their personal participation, which was a key focus of the study. We show that the male student Captains experienced positive outcomes which they ascribed to undertaking their role in TCs, including improved relationships, validation of interests and emotions and skills for the future. The Captains also encountered challenges related to establishing boundaries and navigating unexpected attendee revelations.

This was a small-scale evaluation design and therefore can provide a 'snapshot' of experience from a small number of individuals involved; however, the data collected was rich and detailed, providing thick descriptions (Stewart, Gapp, and Harwood, 2017) of the Captain's experiences. As so few (if any) studies exist exploring the benefits of male student peer support, and particulalry on the peer supporters themselves, the findings bring a unique contribution to knowledge, and it is hoped that this work exemplifies the potential of this approach to benefit male students and will be built upon to explore on a wider scale for both peer facilitators and attendees.

This research aimed to understand the unique experiences of the TC Captains to try to answer the following research questions:

- What are the perceived factors to have influenced any impacts of TCs on the Captains?

- What have been the impacts on the Captains of running a university-based TC?

2. Methodology

Talk Club set up and delivery

Three Captains were recruited from the university male student population to act as peer facilitators and were supported in this role by the male lead wellbeing practitioner (LWP) from the university Student Wellbeing Service. The LWP oversaw training, mentorship, and supervision of the Captains. The LWP is also Researcher Two on this paper. There was participatory research involved in the evaluation then, in that the lead wellbeing practitioner acted as supervisor to the Captains and was involved in the data analysis process of the evaluation. The Captains were recruited and undertook training in Autumn 2023, leading the TC from February 2024. TC groups were held on a weekly basis on campus on Monday afternoons from February to July 2024. Group sizes varied from four to 12. Sessions were 'drop in' and were at least one hour long. The TC was an initiative based on a wider offer of formal and informal packages offered by the university to support all student's mental health and wellbeing.

Theoretical underpinnings

We undertook a social constructivist approach, and therefore a qualitative focus group was appropriate to enable the researcher and participants to construct meanings during the discussion (Wilkinson, 2004). Given that the Captains had worked together and therefore formed a relationship, a focus group was chosen to provide a similar supportive and validating environment where they could interact in a more authentic and naturalistic way (Liamputtong, 2011). Through the focus group discussion, the Captains' collective understandings of their experience could emerge in a way that may not have been accomplished through individual interviews (Bryman, 2008).

Ethics, recruitment, and data collection

The study was granted ethical approval from the researchers' HE institution. Participants were the university TC Captains for the academic year 2023-2024. The Captains were male, third year students, undertaking different courses at the university. The three Captains were made aware of the evaluation by the LWP at the time of their recruitment to the role of Captain. Once ethical permission had been granted, Researcher One contacted the Captains, with details of the evaluation, through an email and information sheet inviting them to take part in a focus group. All of the Captains responded positively, and the focus group was undertaken in-person, by Researcher One, on the university campus, in April 2024. The focus group lasted around 1.5 hours and was digitally recorded. A semi-structured schedule was

used, centred around the Captains' personal motivations, their perceived preparedness for the role versus the reality, the training and ongoing supervision, and any impacts the role and the TCs had on them emotionally, psychologically and practically.

Data analysis

As the aim was to understand the experience of the Captains, a thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke 2012). Once transcribed, the data was inputted into Nvivo 12 for coding and theme generation. The questions guiding the focus group schedule were specific to the research questions, and therefore a mixed approach of inductive and deductive coding took place (Roberts, Dowell, and Nie, 2019), with some codes being necessarily more descriptive, whilst others more interpretive of what the participants were perceived to be expressing (Nowell, 2017). Codes were then considered, amended or discarded based on their reflection of the data (Kiger and Varpio, 2020), and arranged by theme based on the two key research questions. There is an awareness then that researchers' subjectivity is a part of the analytical process (Moran, 2000). We feel the partnership of academic (Researcher One) and wellbeing practitioner (Researcher Two) enabled the real-world insights and understandings of the practitioner, alongside the methodological expertise and curiosity of the academic (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020).

3. Findings

Findings are presented under two overarching themes: impacts on the Captains and enabling factors. Codes and themes are illustrated in figure one. Enabling factors are discussed first to aid the flow of this section.

3.1 Enabling factors

The Captains described key factors that appeared to be instrumental to enabling the impacts described later in the findings section. These factors have been grouped into three themes: The training package and support from the lead wellbeing practitioner, the format of TCs, and the lived experience of the Captains themselves.

Training package and support from LWP

Role clarity

TCs have a standard training session for Captains, this was extended at the university by the lead wellbeing practitioner to include 'look after your mates' (LAYM) training, debrief sessions, and ongoing support from the LWP. The TC training was one online session, and the Captains felt that it provided them with the practical 'need to knows,' specifically regarding safeguarding information, and clarity on what their role entailed:

> *I definitely went into it thinking we'd just sort of be their counsellor. But they said 'no, that's not your job. You let them speak for the time, and then you move on to the next person.'* (C2)

The Captains felt that a mock session they undertook as part of the training was particularly helpful, as it gave them a feel for the 'in the room' experience of hosting a TC. It was noted however, that an in-person session would have been much more useful preparation:

Maybe it should be formalised in the training that you have one or two in-person sessions prior to actually... if we'd have jumped from just that call, straight to doing it, that probably wouldn't have gone so well. (C1)

Additionally, the Captains agreed that the time they put in to get to know each other, and do additional practice sessions, before launching TCs, were invaluable to their sense of comfort with their role.

Support of wellbeing practitioner

It was apparent, that although the Captains felt the TC training was sufficient, the in-person training for LAYMs and the additional time spent with the LWP, had made them feel much more prepared:

With the caveat that like if we hadn't had [LWP], kind of like being there, supervising us, the training wouldn't have... I would have felt comfortable, and I would have done it anyway, but like that was a big part to me... He's probably spent another, maybe like 3 or 4 hours with us, and then we did the in-person look after your mates training as well. Without that, I think I wouldn't have quite felt prepared. (C1)

The importance of the supervisory role is explained further in the code below, as well as evidenced further throughout the findings section.

Boundaries

The support and supervisory relationship the Captains had with the LWP had been particulalry important to the Captains for their ongoing learning about boundary development. The word boundary (and its stemmed words) was used on multiple occasions across the focus group transcript. The Captains' initial conceptualisations of boundaries were related to where to draw the line with TC attendees to ensure their own psychological safety:

I would love to say they're my friends, but it's like, for some of them especially, it's like there needs to be that boundary, you know, be as helpful as possible, but there is a point that it stops. It needs to stop, otherwise, they could be like knocking on your door at 3:00 AM. (C3)

However, as sessions continued, and the TC community forming took place, the Captains became increasingly aware of the challenges involved in navigating unexpected revelations from participants. When a potentially threatening comment was made by an attendee, the Captains were compelled to conceptualise the TC space as a peer support environment, with awareness that one individual could disrupt the nature of the group:

This is a place you can basically say anything, and recently I've discovered that, that's not the case… because its making people feel unsettled in the room, and it's important... although we're here for you, this room is for everyone. (C1)

The Captains emphasised the importance of having regular supervisions with the LWP to work through how they could deal with unexpected discussion or disclosures within the TC space:

It is something where we needed to talk to [the LWP] about, I don't really think we could have the right conversation without going to someone first, because it's like that professional... I mean, we're not trained for this. (C1)

The focus group was also a place of reflection for how to ensure the boundaries of the TC could be set to ensure attendees were clear on the purpose of TCs, and the Captains' role:

I'm just having this realisation now with you, where you just literally go 'This isn't a therapy group'... I don't think it is getting across to people when I say that 'OK, we're not therapists', but it's kind of missing the part where we say to them 'you aren't meant to talk to us like we are therapists'. (C1)

Summary

There was a sense that a combination of training, support from the LWP and experiential learning had combined to give the Captains the knowledge and confidence to feel psychologically safe in their role as Captain, adopt a helper rather than therapist identity, and handle situations as they arose.

The format of Talk Clubs

Talk and listen format.

The format of TCs as a peer support, talk and listen space, was described as important by the Captains, in allowing male students to access it:

I think it is very approachable, for anyone, even a few of my friends have turned up, whereas they might not have gone to counselling. (C1)

Indeed, the Captains were able to lead the group, specifically due to its more informal nature, designed for any male students to attend, whether struggling with their mental health or not:

[I try to] get the idea across that you don't have to have mental health problems to come. (C2)

I love the phrase like mentally fit or like mental strength… it could be for anyone who isn't even struggling with mental health issues, because they might in the future, like it can prove preventative as well as like prescriptive… it's a check in, it's management, it's building more strength to talk about things. (C1)

The Captains emphasised the benefits of the TC for men, being preventative as much as supporting those already in need, as it allowed men to 'build mental strength' through open conversation with their male peers.

Focus on gratitude and growth.

As described above, TCs follow a four-question structure for each attendee to answer. Two of the questions are focussed on gratitude, and actions for change related to wellbeing. The Captains reflected on the usefulness of these questions for building a positive mindset about their life each week:

I think the questions are very... it's very cleverly written and very effective, because in basic terms, it's going from what have you done? So, what is positive in life… it's very positive psychology… how are you going to build off that? It makes you think of your week and your life a bit differently… which is really beneficial for us (C3)

This formulaic approach was said by the Captains to be beneficial for several reasons, firstly breaking through any potential awkward silences of a group, and moreover requiring attendees, including the Captains, to focus on gratitude and actionable areas for change to improve their mental health.

Summary

The Captains reflected on TC as a formulaic peer support group, based on a simple premise of asking and answering set questions, enabling both Captains and attendees to voice their experience and listen to one another. This formula was thought to both enable ease of participation for male student attendees and provoke feelings of gratitude and productivity for both Captains and attendees.

Lived experience of Captains

Personal mental health experience and support seeking history.

It was apparent that the Captains' own experience of support seeking for mental ill-health was akin to a form of training for them, as they had been through a process of becoming vulnerable in front of another person, and developing the ability to share their own emotions:

That really provides the foundation for what we're able to do there. The empathy we would be able to get across, and the stories we're able to bring that let other people know that, like we've all been there. (C1)

The Captains own experiences appeared to have instilled in them a desire to help others in a similar position to them:

I wanted to learn how to encourage people to talk about everything… For me, it was a way of getting, particularly men, to talk about it as well, just because I've had that experience… it was breaking down the stigmas that surround the mental health and just providing a safe space for men to come and talk. (C2)

I know people who are just basically mentally ill like I am. It's very hard to get to people and know how to help. (C3)

The Captains' experiences had not only developed in them a level of understanding of being male, suffering mental ill-health and being able to discuss this with others, but also equipped them with an enthusiasm to help other men to do this.

Modelling vulnerability as strength

The Captains wanted to use their own experiences of speaking openly about their mental ill-health, and/or wellbeing, and model this to other male students who might be struggling. This

modelling worked to encourage TC participants to feel they could express themselves, through normalising men talking in this way:

We are really there like providing the kind of vulnerability that might not be too common for men. And then it really facilitates other people. Every week we get people who come and after we've said something, they go 'oh, you just made me think' and then we do it to each other as well. It's like some real power in that. (C1)

For me the best thing is when people go, 'oh, I feel the same way about that', because I think people can often feel really isolated in their own head or how they feel, so when they come to Talk Club, they can sort of just realise that they're just not on their own, and that other people are feeling the same way. And I think that could be quite powerful sometimes. (C2)

Even yesterday I revealed a massive bomb about myself and it does just, you know you get it out there more and more, it does normalise it, it makes everyone realise, oh, there's like people from every course of the damn university in one room, all look different, all different backgrounds, and often common themes of the same problems in everyone, like makes you feel more normal. (C1)

Through demonstrations of their own vulnerability as a strength, the Captains were able to redefine seeking support as part of being mentally strong.

Summary

The Captains' own experiences of seeking support for their mental ill-health had led them to understand the power of sharing an experience and finding validation, which in turn had engendered a desire to provide this opportunity to their male peers. Their own intentional emotional risk taking in TCs then provided a modelling experience to attendees, who became willing to do the same.

3.2 Impacts on Captains.

The impacts of TC for the Captains appeared to be based around two key themes: Improved psychological wellbeing, and skills acquisition, these are described below.

Improved psychological wellbeing

Being part of the TC as leaders as well as participants, had impacted on the Captains' psychological wellbeing in three main ways. These are explored through the codes below.

Reduced isolation and loneliness

This code encompasses a duel meaning; firstly, in a rather literal sense, and for one Captain in particular, the role of Captain enabled them to meet others at a time when they had become somewhat socially isolated:

I just wanted to meet people, because I didn't really know anyone to be honest, and that's got better. And I've met people outside this as well. So, it was more of like a social thing for me. (C3)

Another Captain discussed the regularity of the TC sessions meaning that he was guaranteed to have social interaction on that day, despite a lack of structure and routine elsewhere:

'It's like, I really struggle with routine but having this every Monday at the same time in the same place… like I spent last Monday in bed just for one reason or another, and I came into the room at half four and you get, like, just a little buzz that you're just being around people. (C2)

A reduction in isolation and feelings of loneliness also came from the experiential similarity of having encountered negative feelings and emotions, and then finding others in a similar position who are willing to share:

It definitely helped a lot because, not only does it kind of bring therapy outside of the room of just you and the therapist, it also kind of introduces you to new people as well. And it gives you those first steps of like, OK, you're used to therapy, used to talking about things, now let's try taking that out to a room of people you don't really know. (C3)

The experience of being in the group, because as a Captain you are also part of it. And so, for me, we're also a place of test, like my own ability to share my emotions. I've never been in a situation with guys talking like this before in my life… It's just happening on a weekly basis, but we just sit and share the deepest things going on in our heads. It's a weird thing because it's so unusual, but it's great. (C1)

Here the Captains articulated the removal of the sense of isolation that is experienced, particulalry by men, who may not believe that others have had similar painful emotions, providing a feeling of normalisation for how they feel.

Lastly, the Captains talked about a sense of community that had developed through TCs, both from themselves as Captains becoming close friends, and the group itself:

Definitely created a community between people…and like this is definitely a way to get that going. If you want to create a sense of community within the university, this is a way. (C3)

Facilitating TCs then provided a community feel with the regularity of a weekly meeting for the Captains, providing structure and new peer relationship opportunities.

Improved relationships

The Captains described how their existing relationships had improved through their ability to be authentic, after 'testing' out their capacity to share their feelings and emotions with peers in the TC setting:

That's the difference in the past six months, I know my friends in a completely different way, and that's because of the Talk Club, without a doubt, because it took those conversations I was having in counselling, out into the public and then it just made it feel like, ok, it's not that scary now to just be myself. (C1)

I've been more comfortable talking to my friends. I've made more friends outside of this. I've made like friends I've worked with. Just my life has improved a lot since taking this over. (C3)

Captain One, in particular, described something of a ripple effect, as once he began to communicate in a more open and genuine way with people in his life, they were willing to reciprocate, which has added a depth to his relationships:

What happens in the Talk Club room, normalising it through us talking about it, I find it happening in my friendships, it's like it's spreading out like a network. I'm learning things about people I never even knew, once you open up, they trust you. (C1).

The Captains' personal vulnerability testing within the confines of TC had led to a strengthening of their existing relationships through more authentic conversations.

Redefining and widening notions of masculinity.

Lastly the Captains experienced a validation of what they had considered to be non-traditionally masculine interests, through honest conversations that took place within the TC space:

Like you're somehow weak as a guy if you're interested in some kind of thing… The other day there was a guy, he had a tattoo of something specific and I was like 'I really like that thing' and then it just clicked in my head, I was like, OK, I'm usually embarrassed to even talk about that thing because it's not very macho (C1)

The Captains gave a number of examples of interests that they had felt were not considered 'manly' enough to discuss with other men, and therefore had kept quiet when talking to peers in the past:

I find that most of the times I've spoken to men, it's usually about football or whatever. But like recently, I think one of the main topics of conversations, is that we talk about Doctor Who a lot. It is one of the things I would rarely talk to men about, it's kind of (C1: embarrassing)… And then, like it's surprising how, like, common it is with other people as well. But it's almost like it's a taboo. (C3).

I mean, I wouldn't even tell people I want to be a therapist, because it's the same kind of connotation of like, 'oh, it's like 80% women and it's not really a very manly job'. All my mates were into finance and engineering. It's like that's got a certain kind of prowess around. Whereas now I feel like quite strong in that, quite like it's a strength of mine. (C1)

Undertaking the role of Captain had enabled these informal conversations with attendees to take place before and after the actual session, which had led to a change in how the Captains understood and internalised notions of masculinity, particularly widening their interpretations of interests that could be considered masculine.

Summary

The Captains gave examples of improvements in their wellbeing through their role, for example reducing their feelings of isolation and loneliness through meeting new people and

sharing emotions and experiences, as well as strengthening existing relationships. Lastly, they had gained a sense of legitimacy over personal interests previously perceived to be unmasculine.

Skills acquisition

The Captains' discussions highlighted the impact that undertaking their role as Captains had had on their skills development and confidence in themselves. The codes below explore two ways this appeared to have happened.

Signposting and psychological nudging

A key skill reportedly developed by the Captains was the ability to signpost other male students to appropriate help and support:

We've kind of got to know the resources that we can signpost better. At the start of the year if they said to me, 'where can I go for help?' I don't think I would have known, but now I think I definitely would know. (C3)

Captain One also discussed the slightly more nuanced approach of 'psychological nudging':

We at first were like, OK, we just want to like flag this person to wellbeing, you know, want them to jump in and do something, then you got to understand, you're taking away the person's autonomy and, it's quite complicated when it comes to signposts, it's about like sitting with that person, trying to help them go to wellbeing, let's say, or whatever is needed, even to more maybe extreme things where they need like urgent… even if we're concerned, it's still their choice. That's a difficult thing to learn. (C1)

As the quotation above suggests, the ability to know when and how to nudge without pressure was acquired through the Captains' roles alongside support from the LWP.

Work experience and future career.

For one Captain, one of his motivations for taking on the TC Captain role was related to his future career:

It is work experience. It's been invaluable. I've been able to use it already in my degree like to a small extent. (C1)

Another had moved towards the idea of a career related to mental health as a result of the role:

At the time, I didn't want to be anything professionally in mental health. But now, since doing it, I probably thought about it a bit more… I've kind of been happier to feel like I've got experience in the mental health industry… Recently I've kind of felt more confident and to act with confidence and say 'I know what to do here' because of this. (C3)

One Captain also credited his recent academic attainment and attendance, in part to his role in TCs:

My grades at uni have gone up, my attendance has gone up, everything's gone up in line with Talk Club (C1)

Summary

The Captains felt that they had developed skills specifically related to helping their peers in a practical, yet refined approach. In addition to benefitting their emotional health and psychological wellbeing, the Captains had also benefitted from acquiring skills and experience that they felt may benefit them in their future career.

4. Discussion

Returning to the research questions, this section will discuss the findings in relation to previous evidence.

RQ1: What are the perceived factors to have influenced any impacts of TCs on the Captains?

The first three themes illustrate the factors that the Captains perceived to be important in enabling them to both facilitate, and benefit from the TC. The Captains described how, the combination of training, and LWP support had made them feel confident enough to lead the TC sessions. Crisp, Rickwood, Martin, and Byrom (2020), similarly noted a slight increase in confidence following student peer facilitators training. It is clear that the continuing support from the LWP had been imperative to allow the Captains to deal with unexpected issues as they occurred in a positive way. This support appears to be a key component to the success of TCs for the Captains within this university setting and therefore is worth considering where similar models may be implemented.

Aligning with literature, such as Mead (2001), the format of TCs was felt by the Captains to be effective in enabling access by male students, owing to the lack of a mental health professional being present. The Captains emphasised that TCs were not a group solely for those considering themselves as mentally ill, but for any male students to attend in order to develop mental strength and resilience. This provides further evidence for findings from Robinson et al, (2015), who, although studying impacts on older men (45-60), found that a facilitated peer support intervention had increased male participants feelings of resilience.

The formula of TCs requires attendees to reflect on gratitude; which the Captains stated was something they might not otherwise have done but nevertheless had found personally beneficial. There is a myriad of research linking improved wellbeing measures to the practice of gratitude, for example Watkins, Uhder, and Pichinevskiy (2014), whose research also involved university students. The specific four question format of TC appears then to be an important factor in its perceived success.

Peer supporters having experience of mental ill-health has been established as a key component for individuals facilitating peer support groups (Watson 2017). For the Captains, their own experiences appeared to have strongly motivated them to support other individuals, and as Sharp et al (2022) and Vickery's (2022) research has indicated, men adopting a helping identity can play on the masculine strengths of problem solving. Further, the Captains' ability to emotionally 'risk take' through modelling vulnerability in TCs, enabled

attendees to experience a normalisation of their own emotions and experiences, and thus communicate in an openly vulnerable way, providing further evidence for the findings of Vickery (2022) and Murphy et al (2024). Enabling emotional vulnerability in males is significant, as research has suggested men are less likely to confide their vulnerability in others (Conrad and White, 2010).

RQ2: What have been the impacts on the Captains of running a university-based TC?

The fourth and fifth themes are explorations of the impacts of TCs on the Captains themselves. The Captains described the beneficial impacts they had experienced since undertaking the role of TC Captain, which further extends research by Suresh et al (2021), and Johnson and Riley (2019), who reported increases in wellbeing in peer facilitators. Firstly, the Captains found improvements in their social interactions, both through the opportunity provided for bonding with peers, and through gaining a deeper connection in their existing relationships. This finding is of particular importance, since positive relationships are key to wellbeing, as research has consistently shown (e.g. Laidlaw et al, 2016).

Providing structure and routine through the accountability of a weekly session had been of significance to one Captain, which research shows can be important for wellbeing, particularly to male university students (Wolstenholme, 2024). The consistency of a weekly peer support group such as TC, therefore, can provide some much-needed routine to male students, distinct from attendance at course related inputs. The Captains had felt their 'taboo' interests had been validated by discussions with male peers with similar interests, which is in contrast to some previous research. For example, McKenzies, Collings, Jenkin, and Rivers (2018) findings showed that men 'compartmentalized' their interactions with their male vs female friends, having more masculinized conversations with men.

Lastly, findings indicate that the Captains had acquired skills in supporting their peers through for example, signposting to support (Sagar-Ourughali et al, 2020). This further extends the work of Crisp et al (2020), who found that student peer facilitators reportedly gained 'desired graduate attributes' (p113). The Captains felt they had additionally gained experiences and skills useful to their future careers.

5. Conclusion

Leading a university-based TC appears to have led to several beneficial outcomes for the Captains themselves. There are key factors that have contributed to these outcomes, without which the outcomes may have been less positive. For example, having a wellbeing professional in a supportive role may be critical to success for the Captains. The specific nature of TCs, being talk and listen, and utilising the 4-question format, seems to provide an accessible service for male students. TCs within a university could be utilised to enable male students to communicate in a way that is often less well developed in their gender. Assisting peer-to-peer relationships as well as a sense of belonging through community building is vital to HEIs success, particularly in the current climate. The finding that TCs can reduce isolation and engender a sense of belonging in male students is of great importance then. Successful peer support groups can provide preventative support, meaning less reliance on an already

stretched university mental health service. This is an area that requires further roll-out and evaluation. Lastly the development of graduate skills for the Captains is an additional and much valued benefit.

Our study has important implications for policy and practice. We feel it provides sufficient evidence for other institutions to consider the implementation of a TC for their male-identifying students. The intervention is extremely low cost (training costs only) and appears to show positive impacts on the Captains, as well as hinting at positive outcomes for participants, based on the Captains' perspectives. Future research should also investigate the impacts of TC on its attendees. Lastly, the TC format, which originated as a form of masculine-oriented peer support, could potentially be utilised by universities for other student groups, such as ethnic minority, LGBT+, and other communities. While this intervention was designed to support biologically male students, in future, it should be extended to acknowledge the diverse gender identities within the institution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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