

# **THE IMPACTS OF A SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY MALE STUDENT PEER SUPPORT GROUP (TALK CLUB) ON ITS PEER FACILITATORS**

## **REPORT**



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# **The impacts of a Sheffield Hallam University male student peer support group (Talk Club) on its peer facilitators**

## **Abstract:**

This small-scale evaluation explores the impacts of a male-only peer support group, Talk Club (TC), on its peer facilitators (captains) at Sheffield Hallam University. The TC was implemented at Hallam to address the underutilization of university wellbeing services by male students, providing a male only wellbeing support group that was peer led. Hallam Talk clubs ran as weekly sessions led by three male student captains, supported by the Lead Wellbeing Practitioner (LWP). The study aimed to understand the perceptions of the impacts on the male student peer facilitators themselves of their role as Captains leading the Talk Clubs at Hallam.

Using a qualitative methodology, data were collected through focus groups and interviews with the Captains and the LWP. Thematic analysis revealed significant benefits for the Captains, including improved relationships, enhanced communication skills, and reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Key factors contributing to these outcomes included the structured format of TC, consistent support and training from the LWP, and the Captains' own previous experiences with mental health support.

Findings suggest that university-based male-only peer support groups can help to address the challenges male students face in discussing mental health and help to develop feelings of belonging and community amongst this demographic. Future research or evaluation work could seek to understand the perception of male attendees of the Hallam Talk Club. The TC format could also be tested with other student groups with a shared demographic

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## **Full Report:**

### **1. Who led on this project?**

Claire Wolstenholme (Senior Lecturer, STEER) and Jozef Sen (Lead Wellbeing Practitioner), with support from Alex Funnell and Chioma Ibekwe (student researchers).

### **2. When did it take place?**

December 2023 to September 2024.

### **3. What was the type of evidence?**

Empirical: Evidence has been collected which reports that there have been changes in outcomes for those receiving an intervention.

### **4. Which stage(s) of the student lifecycle did it relate to (if any)?**

Success (e.g. retention, attainment); and progression into employment and further study.

### **5. What question(s) was the project attempting to address?**

- What (if any) have been the impacts on the Captains (peer facilitators) of running a university-based Talk Club?
- What are the perceived factors to have influenced the impacts of Talk Clubs on the Captains?

### **6. What need(s) or issue(s) was this initiative addressing?**

Male students can find it more difficult than their female counterparts to talk about their mental health (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al, 2019). The Hallam university wellbeing team had found that their services were less well utilised by male students, and that when men were attending, issues of isolation, loneliness and a lack of belonging were apparent and common in their presentation. Male students were also more likely to seek support at the point that they had become severely distressed, rather than when symptoms first appeared.

Peer support within a university context has been fairly well researched (John et al, 2018; Pointon-Haas et al, 2023). However, outcomes are mixed, and impacts are usually measured in relation to attendees as opposed to the peer facilitators themselves. Moreover, university peer support groups are rarely male specific. This

evaluation, although small in scale, aimed to understand what impacts the Talk Club group had on the male student peer facilitators themselves.

## **7. What was the aim(s) of the initiative?**

The aim of the initiative was to provide a (self-identifying) male student peer support space, facilitated by male student peer facilitators (Captains). This was achieved through a bursary grant from Sheffield Hallam University which enabled the establishment and evaluation of a campus based 'Talk Club'.

Talk Clubs<sup>i</sup> are a national male mental health charity utilising a four-question format, facilitating discussion through starting and ending with the question: 'how are you out of 10?'

The evaluation aimed to understand the impacts of the Hallam university Talk Club (TC) on the male student peer facilitators (Captains).

## **8. What did the initiative involve?**

The Hallam Talk Club (TC) could be accessed by any self-identifying male student attending Hallam. Three male students were recruited by the Lead Wellbeing Practitioner (LWP) to lead the TCs, acting as peer facilitators or 'Captains'. The group ran once a week from February to July 2024. Sessions took place at the multifaith chaplaincy space at Hallam's campus on Mondays at 4pm. Group sizes varied from 4 to around 12. The LWP from Hallam organised the TC training as well as additional 'Look after your mates' training, and acted as the Captain's supervisor (mentor) throughout their time as Captains.

## **9. What was the evaluation / research methodology used?**

The study was granted ethical approval by Hallam university prior to commencement. The evaluation took a qualitative approach, owing to the need to collect in-depth experiential data from a small number of participants. The key focus was on the TC Captains, and therefore an in-person focus group with the Captains was the primary method of data collection and was undertaken in April 2024. To supplement this, an online interview with the LWC took place in May, and one to one, in-person interviews were also undertaken with two of the three Captains in August 2024. Lastly, a focus group with two newly recruited Captains took place in September 2024, prior to TC commencing in the 2024-25 academic year.

Data was analysed using a thematic codebook analysis approach.

## **10. What learning, findings and / or recommendations can be shared?**



Findings are presented related to the two research questions.

### **10.1 RQ1: What (if any) have been the impacts on the Captains of running a university-based Talk Club?**

#### **a) Improved relationships**

The Captains felt they had improved their wellbeing through cultivating new relationships through their TC roles, and having strengthened many of their existing relationships:

*My relationships are a lot better, I take a lot of conversation into my life with my girlfriend and we have like the deepest, most interesting... and yeah even beyond that, like conversations with my parents now, or like friends...it's giving me a lot more vocabulary to talk about it, which lets me tell people I'm struggling in a way that doesn't freak them out, It's been a big thing for me. (C1- focus group)*

*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- focus group)*

This ability to improve relationships through the TC Captain role had developed over time in a number of ways. Firstly, as the quote above suggests, **the role gave the Captains a vocabulary to discuss their feelings**, as well as a **test space to practice being authentic and vulnerable**:

*For me it's been a matter of taking conversations and parts of myself that were hidden from all the world and testing them out in in the light of day a little bit more and then realising, OK now you can just basically be yourself anyway you want. (C1-focus group)*

Being involved in TC sessions had **normalised and validated the Captains' feelings and experiences**:

*Yesterday I revealed a massive bomb about myself and (...) it makes everyone realise, oh, there's like people from every course of the damn university in one room, all different backgrounds, people from different countries in there and often common themes of the same problems in everyone, it makes you feel more normal. (C1-focus group)*

This normalisation helped to **reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness** that can be common with men with mental ill-health:

*I think 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 or any group, they can sort of just realise that something small that like, they're not on their own, and that other people are feeling the same way (C2- focus group)*

*Just knowing there's other people going through what you're going through (new Captain 1-focus group)*

Lastly, the Captains found that being part of TCs **validated their interests** through conversations with male peers:

*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 (P1: 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-focus group).*

This normalisation of male interests that the Captains had previously perceived to be non-masculine gave them validation to be genuine in their relationships.

### **b) Skills development**

The Captains felt they acquired skills valuable to themselves and their future careers:

*It definitely changed my idea of what I wanted to be and it kind of gave me the skills that I can now translate to it. (C3- interview)*

*It's a piece of work experience for me, like I want to go into probably therapy or clinical psychology. So yeah, there's personal and professional reasons and just helping other people. (C1- focus group)*

This was echoed by the LWP through his time as mentor to the Captains:

*They've all shared huge confidence building. It's been a massive boost for them in terms of their ability, but also in terms of their journey in their own vulnerability and feeling confident with that. It takes an awful lot to put yourself out there as a facilitator and to share what they've shared. (LWP)*

## **10.2 RQ2: What are the perceived factors to have influenced the impacts of TCs on the Captains?**

### **a) Training and support for Captains**

The Captains being **trained and supported by the LWP** was seen as imperative for the Captains' psychological wellbeing by both the Captains and the LWP:

*I think with the caveat that like if we hadn't had [the LWP], kind of like being there, supervising us, the training wouldn't have.... I would have felt comfortable, and I would have done it anywhere, but like that was a big part to me. (C1- focus group)*

*I think that it's part of this wider question of making sure that peer support is well supported. You don't know things are going well if you don't keep in contact with your peer supporters, if you don't create a relational, professional link with them. You know,*

*it's part of that kind of clinical governance, that safety and that safeguarding role is to be in regular contact, to hear from their perspectives, but also to create a really safe space yourself within supervision where they can not only bring successes but question marks, uncertainties and vulnerabilities. (LWP)*

The Captains' psychological safety was prioritised by the LWP to ensure that they were in a position to help others.

### **b) The format of Talk Club**

Being a male-only, talk and listen group was said by the Captains to make TCs accessible for male students. Having the TC at the same time and the same place on campus provided **structure and routine for both the Captains and attendees:**

*I'm really a strong believer that how we create psychological safety for people is through consistency, and familiarity, the Talk Club model is both consistent and it's familiar because it follows this structure (LWP)*

The format also revolves around 4 key questions, two of which are **focussed on gratitude and planning for future wellbeing:**

*It's the same 4 questions every week. So, no matter which Talk Club you go to in the country, they'll always ask those 4Qs. So it gives it some I guess like consistency (...) so you focus on the good things, and you'll have gratitude. (C1- focus group)*

The Captains and the LWP felt that some of the aspects of TC were particularly important for access and improving wellbeing in the male student population, namely the TC being male-only, on campus at a consistent time, and the 4-question format.

### **c) Lived experiences of Captains**

The Captains **previous experience of therapeutic interventions** for their own mental ill-health was viewed as a key factor in their motivation and ability to help others:

*My counselling experience that I had gone through (...) sort of prepared me well and all the stuff I've learned to help support other people (C1- focus group)*

This lived experiences enabled the Captains to **model vulnerability** in the TC sessions, which in turn assisted attendees to express themselves in an open and vulnerable way:

*I like the fact that we can also join in, because I think that sort of creates that closeness with other people as well. Like they probably just see you as another student (..) I'm saying things to these people who I've known for 20 minutes that I still need to tell my friends. (C2- focus group)*

*We're revealing a lot, like we're trusting all them people, even when they first come before they even answer, we're giving them so much trust like and respect by opening up to them and it that's facilitating isn't it. (C1- focus group)*

The Captains felt that their ability to be open and lead the group in sharing how they felt enabled other male students to do the same.

#### **d) Small group size**

Hallam TCs are open for any self-identifying male students to attend, however the Captains felt that **sessions worked best when the group size was around 6-8** to allow attendees time to talk, and ensure participants felt comfortable talking without the potential intimidation of a larger group size:

*For me, the best sessions we have are actually smaller...Like there's something in that. People's conversation flows better. (C1- focus group)*

*If it's 12 people in a circle, you're not really going to get as many people being vulnerable and being as open (New Captain 1)*

Having 2-3 Captains ensured that where groups sizes were getting larger than the ideal numbers, Captains could split up and form 2 or 3 separate groups.

## **11. Conclusion**

This evaluation has highlighted some of the benefits and enabling factors for male student peer facilitators in running a university-based male-only peer support group. A key finding is the ability for male students to communicate about their mental health in ways that research suggests they would usually find difficult. Findings also indicate both a reduction in isolation and loneliness for the Captains, as well as relationship building, which is imperative to students' sense of belonging and community within a university environment. This type of peer support model could be used for other student groups, such as ethnic minority, and additionally may prove to be preventative, which could reduce burden on university wellbeing services. Further research into the potential benefits and barriers to attendance for male student would be beneficial.

## **12. References**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://talkclub.org/>

**Sheffield  
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**Knowledge Applied**