

batyr: Preventative education in mental illnesses among university students

1. Summary of Impact

In an effort to reduce the stigma around mental health issues and reach out to the demographics most affected by mental distress, innovative peer-to-peer lived experience presentations (batyr@School and batyr@Uni) launched by the for purpose organisation batyr have been successful in providing preventative education in mental illnesses and changing help-seeking behaviour among university students across Australia.

To achieve this, batyr trains young people to become confident speakers and share their success stories of overcoming mental health illnesses with their peers. In addition to creating awareness, batyr then connects students with the help they need by directing them to the most suitable service.

The 2016 batyr impact report demonstrates that the program has significantly improved students' attitudes relating to mental ill health recovery, and increased their help seeking behavioural intentions. This is a small step towards batyr's ultimate goals, which are improving health and wellbeing among this high-risk demographic, as well as seeing more students graduate through supportive communities and an inclusive environment.

2. The Problem

Statistically, high school and university students are a high-risk demographic for mental health issues, predominantly due to the increased pressure to decide on career goals, manage relationships outside the family, move out and successfully handle work and study commitments.

The rate of psychological distress among university students is almost three times higher than the general population, as found by a 2010 UQ study. Despite these findings, concerning data issued by the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing demonstrates that 80% of young males and 70% of young females will not seek help when dealing with mental health issues. This has led to alarming consequences, such as a ten-year peak in the number of suicides among Australians under the age of 44 (ABS, 2016).

While much support is available to students, the main factor preventing them from seeking help is the stigma attached to mental health issues, as well as the complexity of the support system, making it more difficult for students to gain access. Batyr was formed in 2011 as a response to this frustration and isolation of living silently with mental illness as experienced by many university students in Australia, and to facilitate the process of getting support.

3. Approach to impact

David Li, a recent UTS graduate, was batyr's university manager from April 2014 to March 2017 and was responsible for the batyr@Uni program. The aim of the program is to encourage university students to proactively and mindfully engage with their mental health issues, and learn how to access help before the situation escalates to crisis point. To do that, batyr's mission is to shift the general perception of mental health issues and remove the stigma that is attached to it.

"It's OK not to be OK" is one of the key messages batyr speakers try to convey to the impact group. The program trains students with a lived experience of mental health issues to become confident speakers and share their stories with the university audience, encouraging their peers to recognise the signs of mental distress.

The speakers are trained by the batyr team, among whom are trained psychologists, mental health professionals and experienced youth mentors. One important aspect of the training is that speakers learn to safely share their stories while maintaining their personal dignity and privacy in this public forum, and narrating their experience without triggering potentially harmful reactions among the audience. Speakers also receive ongoing support from the team to ensure their safety and wellbeing during and after presentations.

The future speakers are grouped into small, focused training workshops called 'Being Herd' in which existing batyr speakers talk about their symptoms, their frustrations, how they sought help and what steps they took to overcome this challenge. Important for the success of the program has been the fact that speakers are in the same age group as the audience, and present relatable, real scenarios that are familiar to the listeners and thus encourage an open discussion.

Above all, a core value of the approach is that the messages are not gloomy or negative, but rather stories of resilience, hopefulness, recovery and positivity. In addition, speakers and the batyr team try to stress the importance of collaboration in overcoming these challenges, by seeking help, reaching out to one another and creating a support network that comprises fellow students, friends and families.

The presentations are complemented by educational programs in a similar setting to a university lecture where students can engage more interactively in the process, and receive some practical advice on how to look after their own wellbeing as well as how to approach a friend who might be in need of help. In these panel discussions, students are

able to voice questions, get advice on their particular circumstances and engage with others in a similar situation.

Another facet of the program is the recruitment and training of the ‘Student Volunteer Executive Team’, which is made up of 16 students at each University who are ambassadors for the batyr message. They plan and implement student engagement activities to reach broad audiences and promote the message of mental health resilience.

One of the key innovations is the bottom-up approach to mental health support, specifically the way in which young people access help. While many educational institutions offer counselling services, it is evident that not all students struggling with mental distress necessarily require this type of help. Through these peer-to-peer lived experience presentations (batyr@School and batyr@Uni), the students themselves open the conversation and introduce each other to various sources of help and coping mechanisms.

As individual circumstances are inherently different, the batyr team endeavours to connect students with the most appropriate service – this could simply be a one-service solution, such as seeing a counsellor, but also a range of different support systems, including helplines, apps or online tools to help students better manage day to day activities.

4. Enabling factors

The first batyr university collaboration was piloted at UTS in 2014. Despite the complexity of the university system, UTS staff from all ranks and faculties supported the cause with financial and physical resources, enabling David and his team to trial the batyr@uni program on campus.

UTS has since been one of the key partners and supporters of batyr, integrating it into welcome programs for new students and investing in the creation and promotion of this support community on campus. In addition to financial resources, the batyr team also has access to UTS facilities, office space as well as any technology needed for day to day management of the program.

The model of outreach tested and built at UTS is intended to be scaled out nationally to achieve the main objectives of reducing stigma and increasing help-seeking behaviour in students across universities in Australia.

Universities provide 50 per cent of the resources for the survival and growth of batyr, which are complemented by external donors who take interest in the university community. Contributions come from private donations and corporate sponsorship.

Partnerships have since extended beyond UTS and batyr now also works with ANU, University of Sydney, UniSA and University of New England. Further support is currently

sought from other universities across the country as well as the Departments of Health and Education to increase the outreach nationwide.

5. Impact

The key impact group for the program have been university and high school students in Australia, in light of the previously outlined issues in this particular demographic.

Since the organisation was founded in 2011, batyr has reached out to over 50,000 young people at high schools and universities across Australia through over 500 lived-experience speaker presentations. In addition, batyr has trained over 200 young people to share their stories and scaled its programs into 5 states in Australia.

The batyr team has been regularly recording student reach, number of speakers and attendees as well as surveying over 20,000 students since its launch, specifically focusing on help-seeking intention, stigma beliefs towards mental ill health, including recovery and empowerment, and satisfaction with the program.

In order to measure outcomes and the impact made, batyr engaged a researcher, Dr Alyssa Milton, to develop a detailed impact report in 2016. The study was conducted over a 3-month period, with 768 students across 2 university campuses and 4 schools. The insight gained from this research report is intended to deepen the team's understanding of the program outcomes and improve processes to reach more and more students across Australia.

Information was collected in the form of a questionnaire which students completed before, immediately after, and 3 months after attending a batyr@school or batyr@uni program. It concluded that on average, intentions of seeking help increased by 10% after the presentation and workshop, and this level was generally sustained after the 3-month period.

In terms of perception, the report demonstrates improved attitudes specifically in the areas of recovery and empowerment, indicating that many students felt more hopeful about their future and gained a stronger sense of being a capable person despite mental illness. In addition, students reported improved attitudes relating to recovery and empowerment.

Students also reported significantly higher help-seeking behavioural intentions after completing the batyr program according to the batyr 2016 impact report. Help was sought on the internet, lifelines or helplines as well as through health professionals and the school/university counselling services.

In addition, the regular surveys indicate that overall 80% of students would recommend the batyr program, and at universities in particular this satisfaction rate increased to 91.8%.

One of the initiative's ultimate goals is to make a significant health impact; by creating a supportive community and engage students in becoming more self-aware and engaging with their issues, the intended impact is to improve this demographics' overall health and wellbeing in light of the previously mentioned statistics. This is particularly important to enable students not only to better manage their study routines, but also to develop the skills required to cope in their careers and family life.

The secondary goal has been to shape public and cultural perceptions toward mental illness. The program indicates that it has been achieving a shift in opinion and decreasing the stigma of mental ill health among young people, which overall translates to wider social and cultural impact. This is an important aspect to ensure that students have self-confidence and feel capable of pursuing their goals, despite the difficulties they may face. These students in turn may be able to make an impact of their own, economic or cultural, through their studies, work and achievements.

In addition, the feedback gathered during the many batyr outreach activities shows that students hope to be able to graduate thanks to their increased ability to stand the pressure of university life. As students struggling with stress and depression are more likely to quit, the program hopes to be further implemented as part of the national university program to increase the number of successful graduates nationwide, filling important occupational gaps in Australia with local graduates.

The support provided in high schools may also have a significant impact on student's confidence in their ability to tackle a higher degree in the first place. Support like this may especially aid students from disadvantaged backgrounds or difficult family situations as they gain the strength required to reach for higher goals, resulting in more college and university enrolments, and overall more young people attaining a higher socio-economic status through tertiary education and a subsequent professional career.

With the creation of support communities in high school and in tertiary institutions, the trend of bullying online and offline may also decline as students are generally more educated about mental illness and become more aware, tolerant and inclusive towards classmates struggling with such challenges.