

Co-Creating the Future of Mental Health Services at UofT St. George Campus

In summer 2021, Health & Wellness partnered with the Innovation Hub to conduct co-creation sessions with over 40 students on St. George Campus, during which students gave feedback on and designed what they want their mental health supports on campus to look like. From these sessions, we discovered core needs that must be addressed to improve the experience of mental health support on campus. Key findings are summarized below.

A New Vision: Empathy Helps Students Feel Safe When Accessing Mental Health Supports

While empathy can be such a small thing, it helps set the tone for students' interactions with mental health services on campus.



Main Themes



EVERY INTERACTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE: Students need every interaction they have with mental health services to be genuine and empathetic, from the first point-of-contact to the follow-up. If the interaction is positive and empathetic, then it will encourage students to continue with the process. If it is not, it will impact whether students continue to engage with the service.



EVERY MINUTE MATTERS: Students need to be able to spend their time with mental health services addressing the issues that are most important to them. Students who are prevented from having effective counselling appointments might need to come back for a second appointment, when one should have sufficed. In particular, BIPOC students and international students might not have enough time during their appointment because they have to provide lengthy explanations contextualizing their backgrounds.



UNTANGLING THE WEB OF SERVICES: Students need to be able to navigate mental health supports with ease, both via online platforms and in-person services. This need becomes especially acute for crisis situations during which students' navigation skills may be compromised.



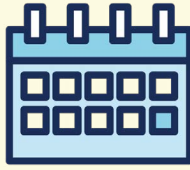
REPRESENTATION MATTERS: Students need access to mental health services that reflect their diverse personal life experience. When students do not have access to such diversity, they report feeling isolated and misunderstood. Diversity in services is especially pertinent for BIPOC and international students.



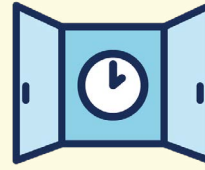
TRANSPARENCY BUILDS TRUST: Many students expect that seeking mental health support will be difficult, time consuming, and will require each student to fight for themselves. Students need to trust mental health services so that they can start to believe that their best interests are being prioritized and that seeking help will not be a mistake or a waste of time. One way to foster transparency through trust is to be upfront with students about the wait times for services so they know what to expect and understand why they may have to wait.

What's Most Impactful for Students?

Our recommendations align with the first points of contact that students have with mental health services on campus. These points of contact are important to the student experience, for they are often the most daunting, and facilitate students' entry into the service.



INITIAL CONTACT

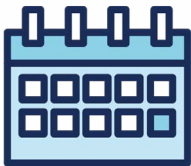


FIRST INTERACTION



ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

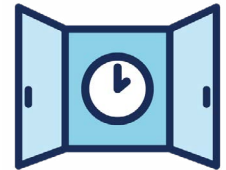
INITIAL CONTACT: Make it Empathetic, Diverse, and Informative



- Clearly inform students about the services available to them and what will happen during their appointment
- Communicate to students that you recognize the courage it takes to seek mental health support
- Offer students a variety of identity-based support and programming

FIRST INTERACTION: Ensure Validation, Warmth and Safety

- Ensure that students wait in an area that is private, warm and comfortable
- Communicate to students that they are safe, their well-being is top priority, and their concerns are valid



ONGOING ENGAGEMENT: Be Sure to Keep in Touch



- Give students the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback after their appointment
- No matter whether students continue to seek mental health services on campus, make sure they are aware that they will continue to be supported and are welcome to connect back with the service whenever they need to

Students need to feel safe when accessing mental health supports on campus. Experiencing positive and empathetic interactions is an important first step in facilitating this safety. When students experience empathy and feel safe, they are more ready to continue with the process of seeking help.

