

# Peer Avatars for Mental Health: A Peer to Peer Support Program

## Background

Every year, approximately 25% of American adults are living with a diagnosable mental illness. College students are a particularly high-risk group; 75% of adult-onset mental illnesses are present by age 25. Students face a multitude of stressors during college, and these stressors can serve to exacerbate underlying predispositions to mental illness. Yet, 40% of individuals who may benefit from mental health services do not seek treatment.

There are significant barriers to the delivery and effectiveness of mental health services for college students. Barriers to seeking services include feelings of personal shame, feelings of ambiguity about the need for treatment and skepticism about treatment effectiveness. The traditional manner of delivery of mental health services may present another obstacle. We expect that talking to someone in an office on a weekly basis will lead to generalization of new skills. Yet, people often need coaching and support in the precise moment that something challenging is unfolding. If that were possible, the potency of therapeutic interventions could greatly improve. However, there are also significant barriers to implementation of in-the-moment services including cost, therapist availability, ethical or legal issues and potential for therapist burnout. The use of trained teams of virtual peer health coaches (“avatars”) has the potential to address these barriers.

### Project Description

This Bass Connections project will develop and pilot an innovative way to improve the mental health of college students, through the use of peer health coaches who will deliver support via virtual avatars.

Trained by licensed professionals, the peer coaches will be able to provide one-to-one online help to students who are unwilling or unable to seek professional treatment and to students who could benefit from extra services. Students will be able to download an iPhone-compatible application that will connect them to a peer health coach. The coach, acting through a virtual avatar to remain anonymous, can provide real-time, moment-to-moment support via the phone app.

Team members will develop a curriculum to train the peer health coaches in providing mental health coaching services, with augmentation of services specifically for students with eating disorders. A website will connect students to peer coaches and other relevant mental health resources. The team will collect data on app usage, website traffic and peer coach and student satisfaction and progress that will inform further research and program service development.

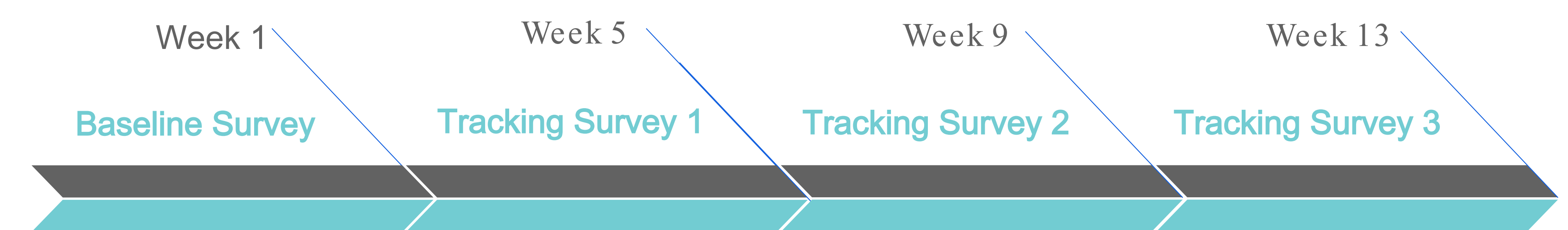
## Curriculum

Week	Topic	Resources
<b>One:</b> The Value of Peer Support Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connecting students to campus resources</li> <li>Counseling on health and wellness</li> <li>Self-care and stress management for peer health coaches</li> <li>Ethics and responsibilities of peer health coaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Counseling and Psychological Services</li> </ul>
<b>Two to Three:</b> Mood Disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Anxiety Disorder</li> <li>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</li> <li>Other anxiety and related disorders</li> <li>Obsessive Compulsive Disorder</li> <li>Major Depressive Disorder</li> <li>Other depressive and mood disorders</li> <li>Bipolar Disorder</li> <li>Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Reach</li> <li>David Wiltshire, Duke Reach Student Support Coordinator</li> <li>Tim Strauman, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience</li> </ul>
<b>Four:</b> Suicide and Crisis Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crisis Response skills</li> <li>Suicide ideation</li> <li>Self-harm</li> <li>Suicide Prevention</li> <li>Emergency response and medical care knowledge</li> <li>Crisis management</li> <li>Distress tolerance and emotional regulation skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>David Goldston, Duke Center for the Study of Suicide Prevention and Intervention</li> <li>American Foundation of Suicide Prevention</li> <li>Kevin Hine, Suicide Survivor, Author, Filmmaker, Public Speaker</li> <li>Orange County Rape Crisis Center</li> </ul>
<b>Five:</b> Eating and Feeding Disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anorexia Nervosa</li> <li>Bulimia Nervosa</li> <li>Binge Eating Disorder</li> <li>Other Eating Disorders</li> <li>Body Image</li> <li>Disordered Eating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nancy Zucker, Director of Duke Center for Eating Disorders</li> </ul>
<b>Six to Seven:</b> Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intimate-Partner Violence</li> <li>Sexual Violence</li> <li>Relationship Violence</li> <li>Sexual Abuse</li> <li>Sexual Harassment</li> <li>LGBTQIA+ specific support</li> <li>Survivor resources and support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Victoria Krebs, Associate Dean of Students, Title IX Outreach and Response</li> <li>DuWell</li> </ul>
<b>Eight:</b> Trauma and PTSD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Panic disorders</li> <li>PTSD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Program</li> </ul>
<b>Nine:</b> Personality Disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Antisocial</li> <li>Borderline</li> <li>Dependent</li> <li>Avoidant</li> <li>Paranoid, Schizoid &amp; Schizotypal</li> <li>Histrionic</li> <li>Narcissistic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mark Zachary Rosenthal, Associate Professor in Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences</li> </ul>
<b>Ten:</b> Learning Difficulties and ADHD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning Disabilities</li> <li>ADHD</li> <li>Managing academics with learning disabilities</li> <li>Supporting students through obtaining documentation/evaluations and accessing campus resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Academic Resource Center</li> <li>Disability Management System at Duke</li> </ul>
<b>Eleven:</b> Cultural Competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual and Gender Diversity</li> <li>Global Awareness</li> <li>Race and Racism</li> <li>Language</li> <li>Culture and Ethnicity</li> <li>Intersectionality</li> <li>Disability</li> <li>Religion</li> <li>Citizenship</li> <li>Socio-economic status</li> <li>Power and privilege</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity</li> <li>Duke Center for Multicultural Affairs</li> <li>Duke International House</li> <li>Safe Zone</li> </ul>
<b>Twelve:</b> Technological Competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective use of technology and information</li> <li>Privacy and data security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duke Information Science + Studies</li> </ul>

Overall Resources:  
 ● Orange County Rape Crisis Center Curriculum  
 ● Teen Line Training Manual  
 ● Georgia Tech Peer Health Coach Program  
 ● Duke Abnormal Psychology Curriculum  
 ● The 7 Cups Volunteer Listener Training  
 ● University of California Santa Barbara's "Intro to Helping Skills" Course Reading List  
 ● Students Helping Students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses (ed. 2)

## Data Collection and Methods

### Tracking Survey Timeline



### Tracking Survey Measures

Domain 1	Mood, Stress, and Problematic Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Depression, Anger, Anxiety, Burnout, Memory</li> <li>Mania, Somatic Symptoms, Psychosis</li> <li>Disociation, Personality Functioning</li> <li>Perceived Stress, Body Appreciation</li> </ul>
Domain 2	Behavioral Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suicidal ideation</li> <li>Disordered Eating</li> <li>Repetitive Thoughts &amp; Behavior</li> </ul>
Domain 3	Social Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Support</li> <li>Social Isolation</li> <li>Companionship</li> <li>Empathy</li> </ul>

## Future Directions

### Next Steps: Coaches

#### Fall 2019: semester training course

- Survey to assess mental health every 4 weeks
- Post-course: post-training mental health survey and interview with researcher

#### Spring 2020: launch

- Survey every 4 weeks about own mental health
- Weekly group meetings
- Self-schedule to be “on-call” on the app 6 or more hours per week and brief survey after each session
- Exit interview to assess mental health and experience

### Next Steps: Users

#### Spring 2020: launch

- Complete brief screener to determine mental health or other needs
- Match with coach and provide peer support with follow-up survey
- Continue receiving support
- Team tracks mental health every 4 weeks

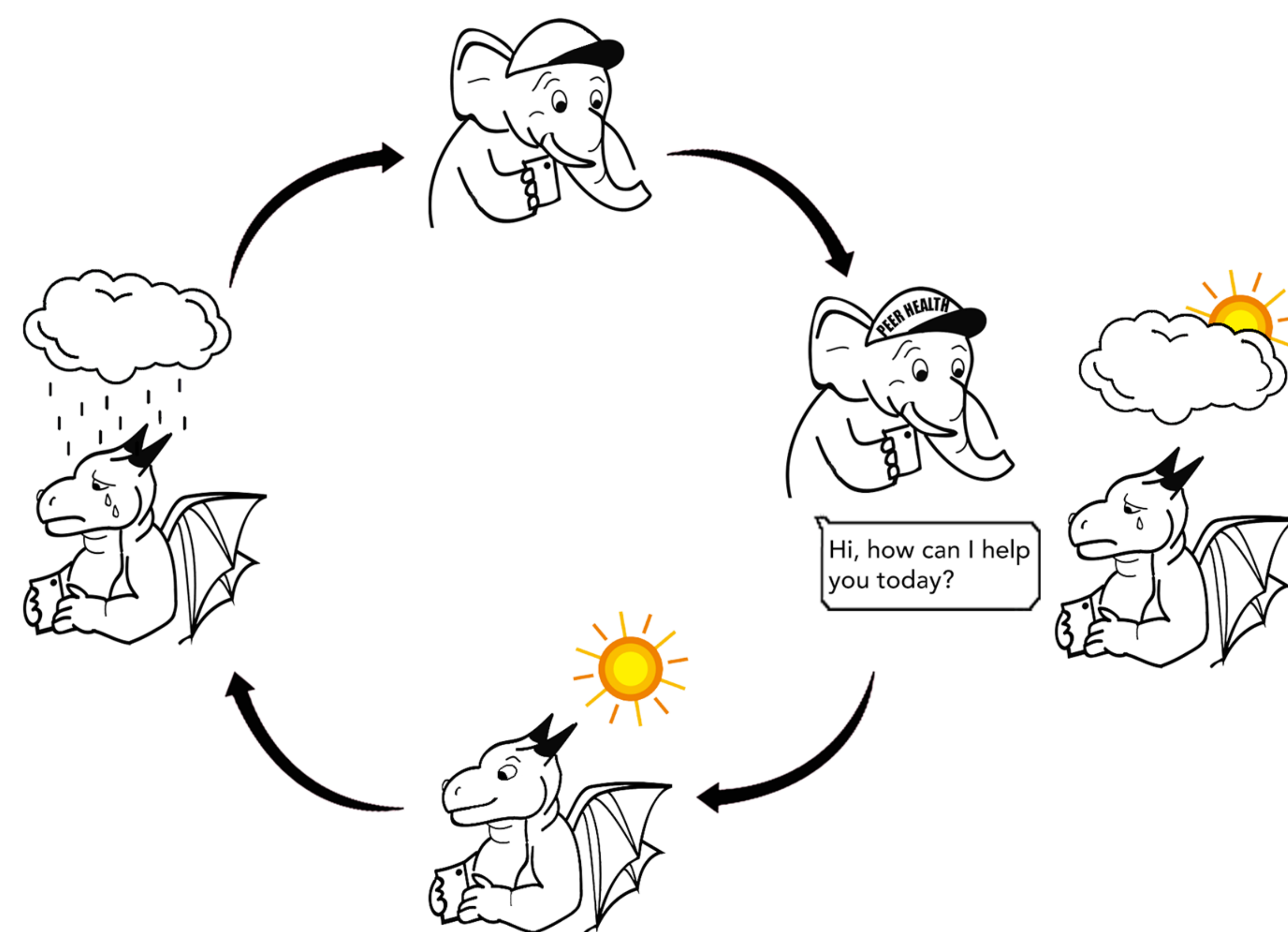
### Advertisement

Our advertisement strategy includes reaching out to student organizations such as the NAMI, the Black student’s Union, Duke International Association, Mi Gente, Muslims students association, and many more.

**Become an online peer counselor!**

Come be trained to help your peers cope with various life stressors in times when they are struggling.

- What are we doing?
- If you choose to participate, you will be trained for one semester as a peer counselor.
- What is the commitment?
- Peer counselors are committed to working [blank] hours per week and fill out monthly surveys.
  - There is no pay, but it is a valuable experience.
- What makes me eligible?
- Sophomore or above.
  - Have taken (or is planning on taking in the upcoming semester) Abnormal Psychology.



**Figure 1.** A student in need can anonymously (via an avatar – aka the dragon in this figure) reach out for support in a moment of need. Trained anonymous peer coaches are available to text responses (aka the elephants). The mental health and well-being of students that utilize the service will be tracked monthly as will that of the trained peer coaches. Students can continue to access the service as often as needed.