

Kenyatta University, Kenya

Peer Counseling to Develop Tomorrow's Leaders

By JaneKananu Kamanja

The peer education program at Kenyatta University (KU) aims to reduce irresponsible sexual behavior, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS and drug abuse by improving the quality of counseling and service delivery for students. The peer outreach program is the highlight of the project, as it trains university students to promote responsible behavior among their peers.

I became a peer counselor because it gave me a chance to help my peers. As a peer counselor, I have been equipped with information on reproductive health, drug abuse, stress management and counseling on general issues that affect youth on campus. I counsel my peers on issues such as decision-making, love and infatuation, relationships, contraception, STIs and AIDS, sexuality, stress management, time management, study habits, budgeting, alcohol and drug use and interpersonal relations. I provide my peers with factual information that helps them make informed decisions about reproductive health.

Poor interpersonal relations and sexual relationships that develop among students on campus may cause stress and depression that can lead to mental breakdown and even to suicidal tendencies. Students most commonly seek my advice on their relationships, for instance how to foster a healthy relationship, cope with a broken relationship or repair misunderstandings in a relationship. As a peer educator I can help young people think about issues such as the difference between love and infatuation. By discussing issues like sexuality and the touch continuum, I can give students information on how to deal with problems like sexual harassment, which is common. I also counsel my peers on stress management, discussing such issues as budgeting, good study habits, time management and how to make good decisions.

As a peer educator, my main activities are:

Showing Videos once a week, with 100-300 students in attendance. The videos are on different topics such as HIV/AIDS, relationships, marriage and sexuality.

Talkshops are follow-up discussions led by peer counselors for smaller groups of students. Each talkshop features a certain topic, and the forum allows students to air their views and ask questions of peer counselors.

Door to Door Counseling of students in their dormitories gives peer educators the opportunity to educate and counsel other students. If a student has a specific problem, then the peer counselor helps them deal with it.

A **Public Lecture** by an expert in a certain area is held once a semester. Students raise questions, and get answers from the expert.

A **Quiz** is held every semester. Peer counselors prepare questions and any student who answers a question correctly gets a present. This motivates the student to get correct information on all the topics that the project covers; after all there is a reward!

The **KU Peer** magazine supports peer educators' efforts by providing information on all of the topics that the project deals with and listing the names of all the peer educators.

Peer counselors can also distribute condoms, and refer students who need contraceptives to the contraceptive depot holder, who is often a janitor in the dorm. Peers keep in close contact with the contraceptive depot holders, discuss the major issues that they have been encountering with students, and inform them of the major problems they see prevailing on campus. In this way, the contraceptive depot holder knows what to expect from the students and how to deal with them.

One critical period for peer counselors is "freshmen orientation week," during which we hold numerous sessions with vulnerable first year students on how to make responsible decisions and cope with campus life. Wearing distinctive tee-shirts and caps with catchy promotional messages on Family Life Education which we design ourselves, peer counselors have become a feature of campus life.

The project is very beneficial as it equips youth with the correct information they need to solve their problems. The program also encourages youth to interact freely, communicate with their peers, get correct information and skills, to make informed choices and decisions, and become hardworking, morally upright role models. Statistics indicate that between 1988, when the project began, and 1993, the rate of unplanned pregnancies on campus dropped by 50%. This decline is attributed to increased awareness and use of contraceptives. Since 1993, the when the peer education component was introduced, at least 120 students have served as peer counselors. The project sponsor, Pathfinder International, hopes to develop the program into a national program involving the other universities, teacher training colleges and polytechnics.

The experience I have gained so far has enabled me to become an even better peer counselor and person than I was before. My thinking and behavior has changed and my outlook on life is positive. I am now a role model for my fellow peers. Finally, I am able to make informed decisions through the skills and knowledge I have gained.

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