



I Get By With a Little Help from My Friends

Examining the Efficacy of Peer-Driven Emotional Support in a University Context

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Background

- Research by UNICEF indicates that Ireland has the fourth highest teen suicide rate in the EU¹
- Because the majority of Irish students pursuing a tertiary education are between 18 and 22 years old, student mental health is a concern for universities across the country
- The demand for college counseling has jumped 40% in the last decade²
- Much of the existing research about the efficacy of peer support only focuses on programs at the graduate or the professional level
- **My research focused on examining the existing literature about the efficacy of peer support programs in a variety of contexts and then determining the benefits and recommendations of implementing peer support programs at the undergraduate level**

Methods

The systematic review was selected in order to enhance transparency, replicability, and credibility while also reducing bias when selecting literature. The search was conducted on the database Web of Science, which has access to over 9 million peer-reviewed articles.

Search Terms

ts=("peer support program*" OR "peer emotional support" OR "peer listening program*")

Primary Criteria

- Empirical studies published in English between 1990 and 2017
- Document types must be articles or book chapters

Secondary Criteria

- Participants must be over 18 years old
- Studies cannot focus technology-driven peer support or programs that exclusively promote academic or professional success
- Abstracts must be readily available

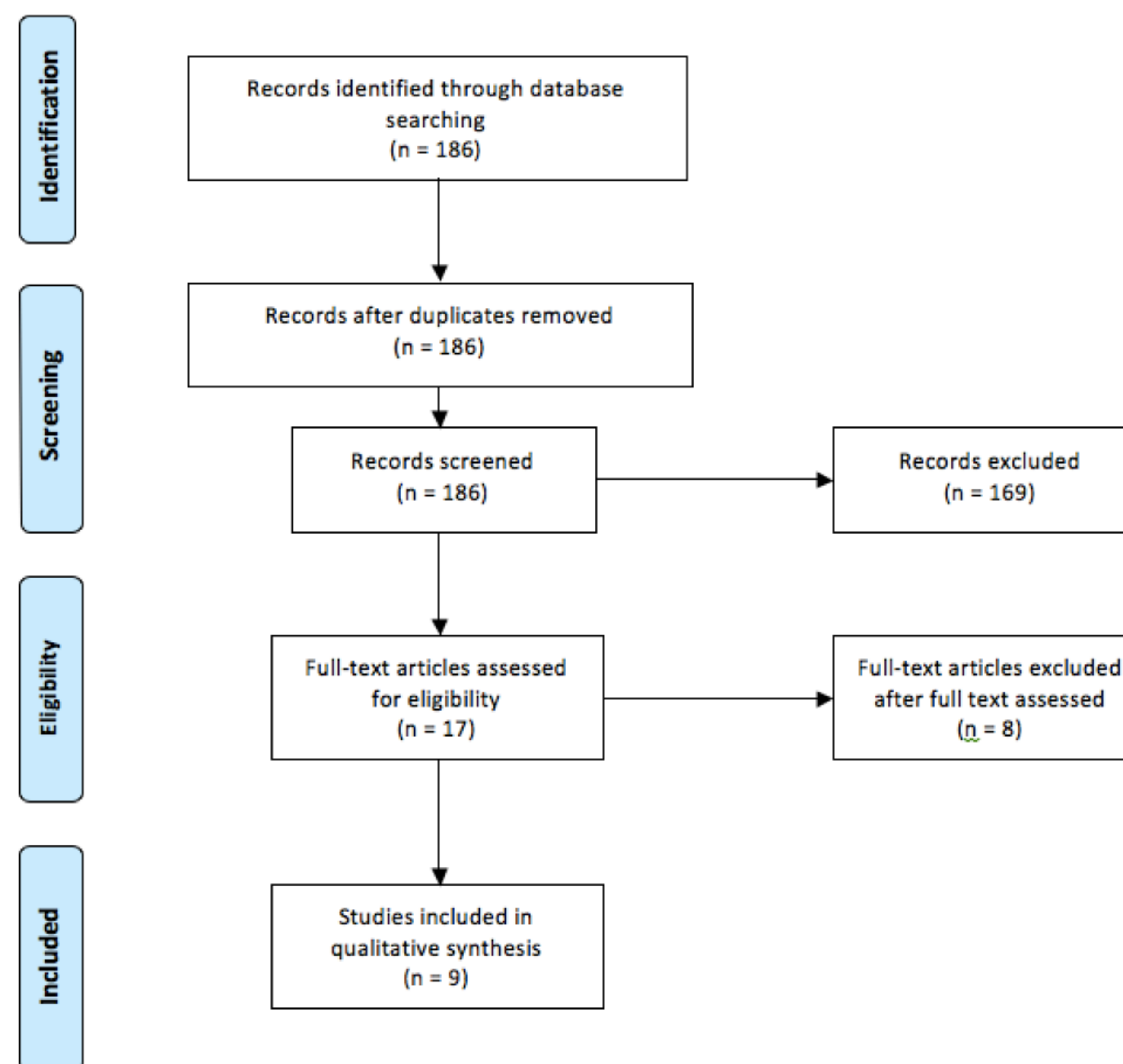
Procedure

- The primary search criteria procured 186 results
- Secondary criteria were applied to further refine the sample, which reduced the results to nine relevant studies
- Studies were scanned for program rationale, outcomes, and implications
- Relevant information was categorized based on shared elements for examination

Limitations

- Grey literature excluded
- Overrepresentation of studies that examined peer support programs within the medical and health fields

Systematic Review Flow Chart



Results

Almost all of the studies included in the sample demonstrated that peer support programs are of immense benefit in their respective settings. Examples of the findings include:

- **Barlow et. al (2010)** found that clients reported peer support to be almost as helpful as formal counseling and as much more helpful than group counseling³
- **Spielman, Hughes & Rhind (2015)** found that supporters gain lifelong skills that contribute to their personal, academic and professional development⁴
- **McCormack and Katalinic (2016)** found that peer supporters with experience in battling and recovering from mental health issues are extremely important for program success⁵
- **Messmer Uccelli et al. (2004)** found that patients who suffer from chronic illnesses do not benefit from peer support⁶
- **Shapiro & Galowitz (2016)** found that implementing peer support groups is "one way forward away from a culture of invulnerability" that can often foster in high-stress environments (pg. 1204)⁷

Results Cont.

- In their study on peer support for doctors in Norway, **Isaksson Rø, Veggeland & Aasland (2016)** found that the emphasis on informality plays a crucial role in clients seeking help⁸
- **Boothroyd & Fisher (2017)** found that successful peer support programs offer emotional, social and practical assistance for how to achieve and sustain complex behaviors that are critical for managing health⁹
- **Power & Hegarty (2010)** found that the key attributes of successful emotional support programs were emotional, informational, and appraisal support¹⁰
- **Guay, Tremblay & Goncalves (2017)** supported Shapiro's finding that peer support programs are critical in high-stress environments¹¹

Key Recommendations

Recruitment

- Selection process can vary, with peer nomination being preferred⁷
- Supporters should include students of different ages, races and genders in order to provide adequate representation⁴
- Supporters should be able to speak to their own experiences with mental illness in order to normalize the client's feelings and to set an example⁵

The Peer-Client Relationship

- The relationship is characterized by its informality⁸
- Mutual sharing between supporters and clients is critical¹¹
- Confidentiality is key to program success⁴
- Supporters must make clear to clients early on that they are functioning as peer listeners, not as licensed therapists⁷

Meetings

- Appointments should be made within two days of initial contact⁸
- Flexibility in terms of time and location are a must, neutral locations preferred (library, student union, coffee shop, etc.)³
- Meeting in a public setting enhances the casual atmosphere of the conversation but the chosen location should still protect confidentiality⁸

Conclusions & Future Research

- Research suggests that peer support programs should be implemented at the undergraduate level to enhance wellbeing for both clients and supporters alike
- Future research should take the form of case studies to evaluate the few existing undergraduate peer support programs, such as the University of Limerick's Peer Listening Network

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