

Online Distressed Services offers alternative outreach to students

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News Writer

The University of Alberta Students' Union Student Distress Centre has been using the Internet to help those in need of support for the past three years, but the phenomenon of online distress services has only just begun to garner any significant attention.

Elaine Greidanus, a U of A grad student in educational psychology, explained that she saw the lack of research in that area and decided to do a descriptive study of how adolescents seek, receive, and provide support online.

In monitoring one message board, which she wishes to keep anonymous, Greidanus noticed several important facts about cyber-support.

"First of all, I found that teens are indeed seeking help online," she said, adding that they "develop a sense of community through sharing with their peers. Meaningful connections are being made."

Greidanus also noted that her observations tend to shock people who don't regularly go online.

"Adults, or people of a generation who don't go on the Internet as much, tend to find it very surprising because they feel like you're not talking to 'real' people online. [They feel that] online relationships are 'not real.'"

However, she added that once this initial surprise wears off, the results seem to point to a logical step in

adolescent behaviour.

"People will first go for help where they feel the most comfortable and familiar—and teens are really comfortable and familiar with the Internet," said Dr Robin Everall, chair of the Department of Educational Psychology and research supervisor.

"The reality is that adolescents are online; this is a fact. They're online a lot, and if you want to reach them, then you have to go where they are."

ELAINE GREIDANUS
GRAD STUDENT
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

"The reality is that adolescents are online; this is a fact. They're online a lot, and if you want to reach them, then you have to go where they are," Greidanus said.

Because her study focused on content analysis rather than generalizing trends, Greidanus said her results are not prescriptive, and was careful to add that cyber-support isn't a replacement for face-to-face counselling. Rather, it's only another venue for providing services easily and quickly.

The SU Student Distress Centre is already taking advantage of web support: currently, their website provides a

crisis chat room and a link to YouthOne online forums, both of which are monitored by volunteers trained by the Support Network.

Diane Nhan, the director of the Student Distress Centre, said that these features encourage more people to reach out for help if they need it.

"Even though you can call distress lines anonymously, when you're talking online, it's a different level of anonymity," Nhan explained. "Also, sometimes people just feel more comfortable with internet lingo; it's more appealing to them, and it's how they interact with the world."

But like any other medium, cyber-space also has its disadvantages.

"If you're posting on an online community, it is dependent on when other people are logging on, so you might not get an immediate response. And as with any kind of online service, there can be the perception that it's dangerous. Conversations with volunteers are kept confidential and private to make sure people are safe, but it's always a personal decision whether to reach out using that service," Nhan said.

In the end, cyber support is just one of several different services that work together to help distressed youth. Greidanus stressed that it isn't a singularly superior service.

"What's important about Elaine's research is that it brings attention to the fact that there is the possibility of providing services in a different way than traditionally," Everall said.

NEWS BRIEF

ART OF LIVING FOUNDATION OPENS U OF A CHAPTER

People may all want different things in life, but according to the Art of Living Foundation, the pursuit of happiness remains the universal goal.

The foundation, which has programs in approximately 140 countries and is involved with a few of the United Nations' Non-Governmental Organizations, came to the University of Alberta last fall. The course they're offering right now is the Youth Empowerment Seminar (YES).

Gopika Prabhu, an instructor with the foundation, explained YES's brief history. It started with a 17-year-old boy named Sri Sri Ravi Shankar who was moved by all of the poverty-stricken youth on the streets of India. One day, he brought 75 of them home with him, and his parents accepted them with open arms. They fed, clothed, and provided shelter for them and counted on the food donations of neighbours.

"Eventually, one of the neighbours who had a really big home down the street came by and said, 'I'm leaving town. Please take the keys to this home, and make it a school,' so that's what he did," Prabhu said.

Now, Prabhu says that more than 25 000 rural children in India are educated through the Art of Living Foundation. Though the program provides yoga courses that encourage holistic health, meditation, and breathing, she said that it wasn't the main attraction for her.

"All of that's there, but for me, it wasn't so much about that as much as it was giving my life a deeper meaning or purpose, and I couldn't find that in anything else," she said.

Prabhu added that the foundation's goal is to uplift individuals, communities,



NADIYA BALUKH

CLEARING MINDS Prabhu and a student meditate during her time at the U of A.

and the world. She also mentioned that the foundation celebrated its 25th anniversary last year in Bangalore, India. Until then, she didn't understand the foundation's vastness: Prabhu was surprised by the state leaders sitting next to villagers, and religious leaders sitting next to one another, having a good time.

"It didn't matter who you were, where you're from, what language you spoke, [or] what colour your skin was. People were celebrating and living life. That was incredible," she explained.

According to Prabhu, Shankar's message to youth is that anything is possible if you put your mind to it. A volunteer with the foundation, Joanna Bull, added that since she got involved with the program, she feels much more invigorated and grounded. A few years ago, Bull was working in a coffee shop

in Halifax, unsure of what to do with her life. Through a friend, she took an Art of Living course and enjoyed it.

"I was becoming more centered and more aware of what's going on. When things happen, instead of knocking me off my feet, I've been able to deal with it better," she noted.

That's why Bull would encourage students to get involved with an Art of Living program. According to her, the program has something to offer everyone, and she's very enthusiastic about its benefits.

"Realize that you can do anything; be limitless. I think that's something that everybody really wants, but nobody knows how to do it. This course gives you tools and skills to make that a reality in your life," she said.

—Catherine Scott, News Staff

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