

12 November 2021

PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS IN NEED OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Dear Registered & Provisionally Registered Psychologists of Alberta,

This letter is a plea and call to action on behalf of psychology graduate students in Alberta. **Psychology graduate students are in significant need of accessible psychological care.** Here we are sharing an overview of the problem, proposed solutions, and our ethical imperative to be involved.

Psychology graduate students need accessible and affordable counselling from registered and provisional psychologists.

Despite growing recognition of the need to address mental health concerns of Alberta students rates of depression and anxiety in graduate student samples remain persistently high (American College Health Association; 2019; Chirikov et al., 2020; Peluso et al., 2011). In a recent survey of graduate and professional students during the COVID-19 pandemic, 32% met clinical cut-offs for major depressive disorder and 39% for generalized anxiety disorder (Chirikov et al., 2020). Graduate students in the social and behavioural sciences ranked among the highest in prevalence of depression and anxiety (Chirikov et al., 2020).

Psychology graduate students navigate multiple stressors including clinical training, research, academic coursework, financial barriers, work-life balance (El-Gohroury et al., 2012), and organizational stressors (Levecque et al., 2017). Moreover, clinical trainees are susceptible to profession-related emotional problems, such as burnout, vicarious traumatization, and compassion fatigue (Schwartz-Mette, 2009).

Studies also indicate that minoritized students from oppressed groups contend with microaggressions, discriminatory behaviours, higher attrition, lack of representation, decreased job and workplace satisfaction (Alsulami & Sherwood, 2020; Campbell et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018), and report feelings of isolation in the post-secondary environment (Duquette, 2003; Evans et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, 2021), a well-established contributor to poor psychological health. Culturally sensitive, accessible, quality psychological care with an awareness of the environmental and systemic factors of health disparities is crucial.

Alberta's graduate psychology students (particularly those in applied programs) consistently seek therapeutic support during the course of their training but **face significant and unique barriers to accessing affordable quality care.**

These students are mindful of the ethical considerations of entering into a therapeutic relationship where there could be a future overlapping relationship (potential future mentor or colleague) exasperating barriers to accessing university counselling centers or Alberta Health Services (potential or recent placement settings). A better option is private practitioners but with limited funding or insurance coverage (often less than \$500.⁰⁰ annually) this poses financial barrier.

The psychological needs of psychology graduate students warrant support from registered and provisional psychologists.

Be Part of a Solution

We are witnessing persistently high rates of depression and anxiety in graduate students -- particularly among students from minoritized and historically excluded social groups. Students in Alberta's graduate psychology programs have additional psychology training and personal growth requirements.

The need for psychology graduate students to access affordable and confidential psychological care during their academic and clinical training is supported by our professional code of ethics (2017), as well as our provincial standards of practice (2019).

Students who experience psychological difficulties without accessible services may experience increased risks of violating our ethical principle of responsible caring. Specifically, items under Principle II – Responsible Caring – state the need to “seek **appropriate help** and/or discontinue scientific, teaching, supervision, or practice activity for an appropriate period of time if a physical or psychological condition reduces their ability to benefit and not harm others” (II.11). Principle II also stipulates that psychologists need to “engage in self-care activities that help avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgement and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others” (II.12). In the absence of appropriate help (i.e., help that is confidential, accessible, and affordable), students are often placed in the position of having to choose between pushing through on academic, research, and clinical work to the detriment of themselves and their clients, or dealing with the personal and professional consequences of disclosing their mental health to their program directors and clinical supervisors.

As students often have limited financial means and low insurance coverage, financial accessibility is often a barrier to quality services. Offering psychological support at a reduced rate for students is supported by the CPA code of ethics under Principle IV – Responsibility to Society, which states that psychologists would engage in beneficial activities and “contribute to the general welfare of society and/or the discipline, including improving accessibility and offering a portion of time in which they receive little or no financial return” (IV.12).

CALL TO ACTION

Are you a registered psychologist or provisionally registered psychologist in private practice or in an organization where graduate students can access psychological services? Do you want to contribute to the future of our profession by supporting services for psychology graduate students?

This call to action is a unique opportunity to form meaningful therapeutic relationships based, in part, on directly relevant shared knowledge and experiences between those in practice and students – the future of our profession.

Ways to Become Involved

1. **Offer a targeted discount for psychology graduate students** (part of your pro-bono contribution to the profession).
2. **Market this for Students in Need.** If you are on the PAA Referral service, update your profile by adding “student discount”. And/or post on PAA's Collaborate Student Community of Practice to promote your discounted services. This makes it easy for graduate students to search out matches that also provide that discount.

3. **Consider Access Options.** If you offer telehealth advertise that alongside other access considerations. Distance and telepsychology may reduce overlapping relationship risks.
4. **Encourage Peers.** Share this letter drafted by Albertan graduate students with colleagues and those involved in the training of psychology graduate students. To help spread the word on the need for more affordable and accessible mental health services for graduate students to exist.

I appreciate you considering the unique role you can play in the development and support of future psychologists.

Sincerely,



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