

“Can you give me some tips about this?”

Task-shifting and just-in-time training for camp counselors supporting camper mental health

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Background: Camp counselors play an important role in the lives of youth (Johnson et al., 2011). As the prevalence of mental health challenges among youth rises (AAP et al., 2021), so too does the expectation that camp counselors be prepared to offer appropriate support to their campers (Owens & Browne, 2021). However, training is up to the discretion of each camp’s leadership team.

Methods: This qualitative study examined the ways in which camp counselors supported their campers’ mental health. Ten young adults who worked at U.S. summer camps in Summer 2022 participated in semi-structured interviews. Analysis utilized a dualistic technique of inductive thematic analysis and deductive consensual qualitative research (Roberts, Dowell, & Nie, 2019; Hill & Knox, 2021).

Participant Information		Camp Demographics		
Pseudonym (Age)	Pronouns	Format	Region	Description
Alice (18)	she/her	Day/ Overnight	Southeast	Christian
Ben (19)	he/they	Overnight	Northeast	Jewish
Cameron (20)	he/they	Day	Northeast	General
Connor (20)	he/him	Overnight	Midwest	Christian
Damian (21)	he/him	Overnight	South	Free of charge
Jessica (18)	she/her	Day	Midwest	YMCA
Kirk (19)	he/him	Overnight	Northeast	All boys
Mae (19)	she/her	Overnight	West	Nature
Nicole (20)	she/her	Day/ Overnight	South	Spanish-speaking
Rose (19)	she/her	Overnight	Midwest	Jewish

Youth are coming to summer camp with more mental health challenges than in the past.



Camp counselors are expected to support their campers, yet do not always have adequate mental health training.



Teaching cognitive and behavioral coping strategies to camp counselors can help them better meet the needs of their campers.

Results

Camper challenges included depression, anxiety, self-injury, and disordered eating. Many interviewees did not anticipate the intensity of their campers’ emotional challenges.

“I had been kind of blindsided by the like, the gravity of what I had faced as a cabin counselor, which seems like such an easy job from the outside.” – Ben

The most common ways that interviewees offered support were validating feelings, approaching concerning behavior with curiosity, and suggesting coping skills.

“I would always reassure them that, like, it’s OK. I understand you’re feeling this way. Always try to validate the kids and what they’re feeling.” – Jessica

Interviewees felt effective when they could utilize skills learned in pre-camp training or receive just-in-time training (JITT).

“Obviously [pre-camp training] can’t cover everything, but they can tell you where to go if you do need help with something. So when my kid showed up and started kicking things and I was like, ‘Oh, nobody warned me about this,’ I knew who to go to and be like, ‘Can you give me some tips about this?’” – Kirk

Some camps (n=4) had mental health specialists onsite who were available for hand-offs when situations became too difficult.

“If it’s a situation we’ve been trying to deal with for more than 30 minutes, we would call the care team because they have more skills than us. I mean, yes, we have training, but also, we’re teenagers, we are not professionals.” –Rose

Discussion: Transferring knowledge from clinicians to paraprofessionals, known as “task-shifting,” has been effective in youth mentoring (McQuillin et al., 2019, 2021). Equipping camp counselors with cognitive and behavioral strategies through pre-camp training and JITT can increase quantity and quality of campers’ mental health support.