"Who Can I Trust?":
Mental Health Communication, Privacy Management, and Organizational Socialization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study serves as an impetus to begin discussion about how communication theories uniquely contribute to understanding mental health communication during transitions from organizational life as a college student to subsequent post-college workplaces. This case illustrates communication privacy management theory and the organizational socialization model by following a student, Valerie, as she enters college, works through mental health issues, and enters her job after college. Through conversations, internal dialogue, and events, the case reveals the ways that communication functions to shape Valerie's understanding of what and with whom she can share her mental health needs.

INTRODUCTION

College is an important organization that shapes work communication expectations for many (Kramer & Dailey, 2019). College is designed to help students enhance their knowledge base, develop skills, and prepare for future careers through coursework

(Ruder & Riforgiate, 2019) and internships (Woo et al., 2017). Additionally, college is often the first occasion when individuals live independently, necessitating the development of life-related skills for self-care. These numerous experiences inform future work communication expectations, including what emotions and information are appropriate to communicate and how to seek necessary assistance.

Importantly, college students require active, healthy minds to learn what is needed while balancing the demands of coursework, paid work, and other adult responsibilities (John Hopkins University, 2021). However, college students also experience considerable stress that manifests from many sources including academic demands (Alsulami et al., 2018) and financial strains (Student Loan Hero, 2021), among others. COVID-19 compounded mental health concerns as many students faced increased challenges related to food insecurity, unstable housing situations, and reduced technology access (Lederer et al., 2020). In 2020, 71% of students reported feeling greater anxiety over concerns about the health of loved ones, decreased ability to complete coursework, difficulties getting adequate sleep, and feelings of isolation from social distancing restrictions (Son et al., 2020). These demands contributed to mental health declines, and college student mental health issues are on the rise (Lipson et al., 2019). The 2020 Healthy Minds Study found that 39% of college students reported having either moderate or major depression. Further, Chen and colleagues (2019) shared that 87.3% of students indicated that at some point they "felt overwhelmed by all [they] had to do" and that almost 10% of students seriously considered suicide (p. 445).

Taking these statistics to heart, colleges continue to develop resources to assist students with mental health concerns (Carrasco, 2021). Unfortunately, numerous barriers prevent students from seeking help and using resources including a lack of perceived support, concern about stigmas (e.g., shame, guilt, regret, embarrassment, etc.) (Vidourek, et al., 2014), and fear of technology privacy violations (Joyce & Weibelzahl, 2011). Experiences before and during college influence help seeking behavior related to mental health concerns (Meluch & Starcher, 2020). Learning what and to whom to disclose is an essential step in locating and using resources, and these communication behaviors have implications in future organizational contexts.

This case study is designed to generate discussion about how students and new employees make communication decisions when disclosing mental health concerns using two theoretical lenses: *communication privacy management theory* (Petronio, 2010, 2013; Smith & Brunner, 2017), and *organizational socialization* (Jablin, 2001; Kramer & Dailey, 2019; Riforgiate & Kramer, 2021). The case follows Valerie as she enters college, addresses mental health concerns during college, and subsequently enters a professional organization as an employee. Through conversations, internal dialogue and events, the case reveals the ways communication shapes Valerie's understanding of what, how, and with whom she shares her mental health needs.

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