

# YOU'RE NOT ALONE: CLEMSON

The program I helped start at Clemson University is You're Not Alone (YNA). It's a peer-led, mental health awareness club that provides a safe space for people to talk about their experiences and be heard in a non-judgmental fashion. There are chapters at the University of Georgia in Athens, Samford University in Alabama, and Florida State University in Tallahassee.

What we do as a club varies from week-to-week. Some weeks we have topics provided anonymously by the members that help guide a conversation related to mental health, while other weeks we simply do check-ins to see how everyone is holding up in the at-times crazed college environment. We also spend some of our time pursuing projects, such as writing inspiring cards to people who are part of an in-patient mental

health program. This idea was brought to me by a fellow member of YNA and we call it "Project Affirmations." However, the biggest annual project for YNA is raising money for the Out of the Darkness Campus Walk put on by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at our campus every Spring. This past spring, YNA contributed \$2,500 to an overall record-shattering \$16,000 for suicide prevention efforts and research. These walks happen every weekend all across the United States so I highly encourage hosting one or getting involved if you are trying to form a club similar to ours!

Our program fills the need for student support for mental health at Clemson University. Our counseling center does a great job in treating mental illness, but

the center is unfortunately understaffed, so many students are put on a waitlist to see a therapist or psychiatrist. This lack of consistent professional support has left a gaping hole in our student's ability to get the help they need, making YNA a safety net of sorts for the students who could not get immediate treatment. However, it is crucial to highlight that we, the peer leaders, are not professionals in what we do. We are not clinically trained to treat mental illness like those at the counseling center are, but we provide a safe place for students to simply talk with like-minded and supportive people. Many students who are struggling want is to simply be heard, and we do exactly that.



## FAST FACTS:

- YNA has over 75 registered student members.
- Raised over \$5,000 for suicide prevention efforts in the past two years.
- Sent over 300 inspiring cards to local in-patient mental health facilities in the spring semester.



## DANIEL SOLOMON

 @clemsonyna

  
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## GETTING STARTED

After taking a leave of absence to address my mental health, I returned to campus frustrated by the way mental illness was still stigmatized and not discussed among students. I tweeted to see if anyone else felt the same way, and a person who had lived in my residence hall responded that they wanted to do something as well. We then looked for other students who wanted to create something new on campus, and developed an executive team to explore what resources would be the best fit at Clemson.

We determined it was necessary to create a space for students to receive support, especially if they did not have access to counseling services. By combining specific topics with time for check-ins, we brought together the traditional elements of a peer support group with space to explore specific ideas selected by students. We created a mission statement and developed a constitution that laid out everything about the club, including our how new executive members can be added, how we would get funds, who our faculty advisor would be, and more. We took special care to address liability concerns by noting that we are not a clinical service and making sure that was clear in our groups and messaging. From there, we got approval and started scheduling our meetings.

To get our name out there and students involved, we tabled at events for incoming freshman to learn about clubs on campus and at busy places on campus. We also engaged our group by making sure to also have fun! YNA is as much of a community as it is a safe place. We all hang out outside of club meetings, get ice cream, and have social events. Talking about mental health all the time can weigh heavily on the conscience, so it's great to hold events like this frequently to further build the bond between the members and executive board.

## POTENTIAL BARRIERS

One major issue is safe messaging. When facilitating a group of students who are opening up about their experiences, you want them to be as open and honest as they are comfortable being. However, it's important to keep in mind that when a student begins to open up about an experience they had in a rather graphic manner, it can be triggering to other members of the group and can have consequences. This is why we aim to keep the atmosphere of the club solution-focused.

Another issue is staying on topic. As a college student, it is extremely easy to get sidetracked from the topic and begin talking about the stress that the academic workload is causing. While this does in fact effect many students' mental health, everyone is dealing with the stresses of school and we want to focus on more specific issues related to mental health (such as developing healthy coping mechanisms, how your physical and mental health are related, etc.) There's no need to forcefully control the conversation when someone gets sidetracked talking about school, last week's football game, or the season finale of a show. It is ok to let the conversations roll for a bit because it's part of the bonding aspect to the club, but it certainly shouldn't take up the majority of the hour you spend together. I like to keep things at about a 40/20 ratio (40 minutes focusing on topic/ 20 minutes talking about miscellaneous things). It gives those people who have had a rough week plenty of time to talk, but also gives some time to lighten the mood for those who haven't.

One last issue to keep in mind is if you feel a member is a threat to themselves or somebody else, get a professional involved. While our counseling center is understaffed, if a student is in crisis or suicidal, they will see you immediately regardless of their schedule. So, it is important to check in with members to make sure they're doing okay mentally and if they're really struggling, again, get a professional involved. Remember that you merely a student too, not a licensed counselor or therapist.