

LEAN ON ME

Initially developed at MIT in 2016, Lean On Me is a student-run, chapter-based anonymous service that provides text-based emotional support to students 24/7. My involvement with Lean On Me was with a chapter at Boston College (BC). With many students hesitant to ask for help, limited mental health resources on campus, and the stress of being in college, an anytime resource that requires a text for support from trained peers makes a huge difference in addressing some of the barriers to support - including distances to services, time-limited support, and stigma around seeking help.

As a peer supporter for the organization, I attended a comprehensive online training followed by an in-person workshop where I learned additional skills and role-played real and potential text line scenarios with a mental health professional. All supporters are trained in providing non-advice giving support, empathic listening, understanding common issues students face, and self-care. After training, supporters complete initial and ongoing assessments.

Through its technology, Lean On Me creates campus-specific text lines for students that make anonymous both

the texter and the supporter's numbers. By providing a non-judgmental stranger available any time someone wants to reach out, the text line helps students get through challenging times and can help guide them toward additional resources. While Lean On Me is a non-crisis text line, embedded in the technology is also the option for a supporter to connect a user to a crisis line or resources.



FAST FACTS:

- Lean On Me has 7 active chapters across different colleges and is growing!
- Lean On Me has an average wait time of just under 5 minutes and a 4.8/5 average user rating.
- Across its campus chapters, Lean On Me has exchanged over 16,000 messages.



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IT IS CRUCIAL TO REMEMBER THAT ONE PERSON CANNOT FIX EVERY PROBLEM ALONE. TEAMING UP WITH PEERS IS A FANTASTIC WAY TO PINPOINT THE BEST WAY TO CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR COMMUNITY.

GETTING STARTED

To form a chapter, a group of student leaders came together. Lean On Me suggests having individuals to fill each of the following roles: Chapter Coordinator, Recruitment Coordinator, Training Coordinator, Supporter Coordinator, and Marketing Coordinator.

It is helpful to obtain support from your university, as it can support marketing, and additional training resources. The school may be especially helpful with financial support to help cover the \$2,000 annual chapter fee that includes a marketing package, training manual, online training platform, hotline text service, liability protection in the form of legal infrastructure and insurance coverage, and a back-end panel for monitoring supporters, applicants and conversations. The national organization provides support in working with administrators and addressing legal concerns; however, they also work with students outside of university administrations.

The first step to providing support was recruiting and training supporters. Chapters must launch online applications and evaluate applications with in-person interviews. Once the supporters are selected, chapters assign the online training, conduct in-person workshop training and assign and evaluate post-training assessments. Schools generally train 50-80 students.

We then marketed and launched our text line at BC. Many members were concerned that students would not utilize the service, but we were all pleasantly surprised by the number of people who reached out in the first few weeks.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS

College students looking to start a chapter of Lean On Me, or any new mental health organization, should first research what is already available on their campuses. One of the biggest problems that I have seen is that many different individuals and groups have great ideas and intentions but end up working completely separately because they are so focused on their own projects. Before creating anything new, connect with existing clubs and reach out to other students for their input and ideas. From these conversations you can decide if it is best to start a new organization or to join forces with an existing group. It is crucial to remember that one person cannot fix every problem alone. Teaming up with peers is a fantastic way to pinpoint the best way to contribute to your community.

Additionally, you may want to reach out to administrators or faculty and have an honest conversation about your plans, concerns, and need for assistance. For Lean On Me specifically, you will likely encounter concern from administrators about contracting with a third party to provide mental health resources. The national chapter is available to provide support and guidance on answering these questions.