

## Interview with Dr. Maysar Sarieddine

By *Mirna Fawaz*

### Comment [1]:

The title will be different and more appealing for sure

### Introduction

#### 1. Can you please tell us more about this new position and the main role of a university counselor?

No matter how well-educated we become, we all could use a hand in facing the challenges that life presents. College is a very unique time in a person's life, yet it can be very lonely for some students. It isn't like how it's portrayed in the media. Some find it easy to adjust, but others find it more difficult. It may be the first time they've lived away from home. They may regard certain events in their life as being the norm, then they get to university, see other ways of living and question their own experiences. Other students may be going back to school with the responsibility of a family to start a new career. Inevitably, some students will face life challenges such as stress, academic difficulties, relationship issues, etc., that if dealt with appropriately, can facilitate emotional growth & maturity.

Good mental health is vital for a successful college experience. Trying to balance school, work, relationships or other personal issues could easily cause a student stress. Statistics show us that 80 percent of college students report feeling stressed on a daily basis and many said they felt depressed. Despite the high number of students who experience stress or depression, not many seek help and this could be detrimental to their mental & physical health. I strongly suggest students who are in search of help not to be discouraged and to reach out because that is what I'm here for. Moreover, I'd like to highlight that a university counselor is often the first line of communication between students and a university. My priority is to promote greater wellness among our student population.

According to the American Counseling Association "Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals." Counselors are vital members of the education team. They help all students in the areas of academic achievement, career and social/emotional development, ensuring today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow. In a nutshell, my concern is to guide students to live more joyful, productive lives.

Students should put aside any assumptions of what they think counseling will be like. The only way to find out is to experience counseling services first hand.

This is a very exciting opportunity for me to mingle and interact with students and staff, and to create a peaceful atmosphere that is conducive for inner growth and joy. So please don't shy away from dropping by to discuss whatever is on your mind, or just to say hello!

### Comment [2]:

It'll be better if we introduced you to the audience first

## **2. What is your approach to counseling students to help them comprehend and overcome personal, social, or behavioral complications distressing their lives?**

Effective counseling addresses the body, mind, and spirit. Emotional and mental health, physical health, and spiritual health are all part of total wellness. The mind and body are connected, so when wellness in one area is lacking, other areas of health might be affected.

There is now widespread interest in the role of spirituality in both assessment and treatment. Spirituality and religion are critical sources of strength for many clients, are the bedrock for finding meaning in life, and can be instrumental in promoting healing and well-being. There is growing empirical evidence that our spiritual values and behaviors can promote physical and psychological well-being. Exploring these values with clients can be integrated with other therapeutic tools to enhance the therapy process.

Counseling can help clients gain insight into the ways their core beliefs and values are reflected in their behavior. Clients may sometimes discover that they need to reexamine these values. Clinicians must remain open and nonjudgmental, recognizing that there are multiple paths toward fulfilling spiritual needs. Counselors can make use of the spiritual and religious beliefs of their clients to help them explore and resolve their problems. To effectively be able to address spiritual concerns in assessment and treatment, counselors need to have competencies in working with values.

I personally follow a Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy. My approach is holistic, which helps clients to heal by taking the entire human being and their life experiences into consideration for assessment and treatment purposes. In other words, where traditional counseling methods consider the psychological ramifications of issues and behaviors; holistic counseling assesses and treats from physical and spiritual contexts--as well as a psychological or mental ones.

A holistic counselor is conscious of clients in their totality; they take an integrative approach to healing the mind. Their work takes them into the multiple dimensions of human experience; the physical, the spiritual and the psychological. Ultimately, they seek to heal by helping their clients to break free from destructive behaviors and enjoy a new and improved state of mental, spiritual and physical health. These counselors do not consider the client as damaged and in need of repair; they instead focus on helping the client release the spiritual perfection which lies within.

The most important thing I tell clients as soon as they come to me is that, "There is nothing wrong with you. You are already whole, perfect and complete. There are just some little pebbles stopping the flow in your life. Those pebbles (Ok...some are boulders.) are beliefs and behaviors that might have been true at some time in your life, but are no longer true and are not working for you. It's our job to figure out what they are, change them and get you unstuck."

**3. In Lebanon and especially in the south, it is difficult for students to open up to someone in their academic and social setting. What would you say to encourage these students to seek your help?**

I can very much understand the difficulty when students come from a culture that is not familiarized with counseling and may see it as "alien," or "Something that just crazy people need to look into." Unfortunately, in our country, seeking counseling or going to a psychologist is a taboo.

Students should be aware that the counseling service provided at PU is totally confidential. Ethically speaking, the counselor is required to respect the privacy of his/her clients under any circumstance. The only exception to the rule is when I feel that the student is very distressed and may have suicidal thoughts or ideas of hurting others. In this case, I would need to inform the Chancellor to take further action to protect both PU and the student.

On a personal level, I think I am blessed with the ability to make students feel relaxed because, in the end, psychotherapy is a talking therapy. Everyone needs to talk and to feel heard. And, to make it easier for students to share their stories, I always bring in my traumatic experiences, my weaknesses and vulnerabilities, to show students that it's not only them. There is no shame to talk about anything you want to talk about. It happens to the best of us! Don't be afraid to allow a specialized therapist to assist and guide you through your challenging times. Silence really doesn't help!

At *The InnerSpace*, which is my practice, we are working on a campaign to help people break the silence. We want to encourage people to verbalize their distresses and work on improving their connections with their inner selves and the magical universe around them. So let's drop the labels and just call it a talking therapy.

**4. As mentioned earlier, university life can be stressful that one might not be sure if what they are going through is just a phase or if it's something that is serious and requires personal help. What are the warning signs that a person should look out before they seek counseling or even suggest counseling a friend?**

We know that college students often see friends in need, but don't know what to do. It's normal for all of us to act a little unusual at times. But certain behaviors, when they occur frequently, suggest more serious psychological concerns. The following are some common signs that a person may be facing some difficulty and could benefit from counseling or from your concerned questions:

- **Mood:** Depression, or extreme sadness or hopelessness; anxiety; anger; mood swings.
- **Physical signs:** Deteriorating grooming habits or physical state; pronounced weight change; signs of substance abuse, such as dilated pupils, unsteady gait, slurred words, or the smell of liquor on breath.
- **Performance:** Concentration difficulties; unexplained lateness or absences; deteriorating work habits or academic performance.
- **Social behavior:** Extreme or inappropriate withdrawal or dependency.

- **Speech:** Irrational or unusually rapid or slow speech; frequent references to problems, or to feeling guilty or worthless; references to death or suicide.

It can be frustrating when we want a person to get help, but he/she refuses. Patience and persistence are both important in these situations. You can sow the seeds for the person to get help, but he/she has to decide when the time is right. Follow up with the person you're concerned about. Ask whether he/she has thought any more about getting help. Brainstorm about the different sources of help that might be available. If the person is reluctant to access the Counseling Service, how about the Health Service? How about off-campus help?

If you don't know what to do, please let me know and I will take care of the rest!

#### **5. What do you hope to change in Phoenecia University with your counseling?**

I like to focus more on building relations with the students, building a strong community where there are no strict boundaries among administrators, professors and students. If you've attended any of my classes, you will realize that I tell my students not to call me "Doctor"- my name is Maysar. I don't want to feel that I'm different or superior in any way, and I want to be part of the class. Both the professor and the students are engaged in knowledge sharing, and that is the true essence of education.

Ideally, we want to create a supportive community that assists everyone. We want to learn and grow, we want to belong, and we want to care for one another. That's our humanity, isn't it?

#### **6. What is one advice you would give to students who are dealing with confusion about their careers.**

I would put it in simple words. Give it time! Even if you slip deep down the rabbit hole, do not stress over it because when you do, you create havoc around the issue. It's as if someone throws themselves in muddy water, and then complain about that the water is not clear. Of course it's not clear, it's muddy water! You have to wait for the mud to settle until you can see clearly once again. Sooner or later you will definitely find the answer. Live the moment, be present, allow yourself to go through the ups and downs of life, and always remember that "this too shall pass!"