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WELLBEING ELEVATED: A PSYCHOEDUCATION PROGRAM TO BOOST WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

**Merry Ann Joseph (Faculty Mentor: Dr. Nick Galli)
Department of Department of Health and Kinesiology**

RESEARCH SUMMARY:

Mental health needs continue to rise across the United States, especially amongst college students. According to a survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), nearly 73 percent of students reported having a mental health crisis while in college (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012). From 2009 to 2017, the rates of major depressive disorders amongst 18- to 25-year-olds increased by 63 percent. These alarming figures have led many to call this trend “the college student mental health crisis” (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012). With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forcing universities to operate mostly virtual, the mental health needs of college students have further increased. Subsequently the American College Health Association in partnership with the Healthy Minds Network found that nearly 60 percent of college students indicated that the pandemic had made it more difficult to access mental health care (The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). The surge in mental health needs and the inability of college counseling services to keep up with this increased need underscore the importance of more accessible prevention interventions for college-aged individuals (Blanco et al., 2008).

Hence, psychoeducation could play an important role in helping college students to learn how to cope and thrive with their mental health conditions while also meeting the increased demand for mental health services on college campuses. Psychoeducation is a standard part of treatment for many mental health disorders as it provides people with information regarding the causes, symptoms, and what they can do to improve their mental health condition. A growing body of research provides evidence that psychoeducation programs improve the outcomes for those suffering from mental illnesses and reduces patients’ stress and anxiety levels (Miklowitz et al., 2021). However, this practice has not been extensively studied in a college student population.

The aim of our research is to assess the effectiveness of a psychoeducation program at the University of Utah in promoting subjective well-being and reducing anxiety and depression among college students. The psychoeducation program used in this study is called Well-being Elevated (WBE). WBE’s content and curriculum is adapted from the ENHANCE program developed by world renowned psychologists Drs. Ed and Carol Diener (Kushlev et al., 2017). Randomized control trials testing this program showed that these evidence-based interventions when administered to 155 community adults through a psychoeducation group program produced increased subjective well-being in participants, whether administered in-person or online (Heintzelman et al., 2020).

This upcoming fall semester (Fall 2021), we are interested in examining if college students enrolled in our WBE program also see an improvement in subjective wellbeing, anxiety, and depression. Participants will take preparticipation and post participation surveys which measures their subjective wellbeing, anxiety, and depression levels through scientifically verified and published scales. Then, we can calculate participant change scores to see if there is a difference in student mental health and wellbeing after participation in the WBE program. We received IRB approval for this study in May 2021. We are also interested in comparing the effectiveness of this program when administered virtually or in-person to students. This may help us not only understand the program effectiveness across two modalities but also student participation preferences across the modalities. This report serves to provide an introduction to the Wellbeing Elevated program, its structure, and general facilitation thoughts from a WBE facilitator who facilitated sessions for college students at the University of Utah during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters.

Wellbeing Elevated Program

Last fall, WBE transferred elements of the ENHANCE content onto an engaging app-based platform and 6 bi-weekly group sessions where the lessons are further discussed among students enrolled in the program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all group sessions were conducted virtually via Zoom so as to ensure participant and facilitator safety. Approximately 110 students participated in the WBE program during the Spring 2021 semester with an 80% attendance rate after 6 group sessions. Students received \$75 compensation for fully participating in the WBE this spring (attending 5/6 sessions and post weekly gratitude lists on the app).

Group facilitation sessions:

In each 1 hour Zoom group session there are 2 WBE facilitators who lead the discussion and 7-10 students who share their experiences and thoughts on the week's lesson. Program facilitators clearly delineate that WBE sessions and lessons are not mental health treatment of any kind. Rather, they are sets of skills from the ENHANCE curriculum that participants will learn together through practice in a group setting and then can go on to use throughout life as part of habit formation.

WBE program covers six lessons on the following topics: mindfulness, smart goal-setting, maintaining healthy relationships, strengths finding, restructuring negative thought traps, and meditating. Each lesson and its accompanying group discussions are structured first by learning, then by practicing, and finally by reflecting. For example, the Strengths lesson that participants are taught during a session will look as follows:

- **LEARN:** Students have been asked to do a strengths survey as part of the week leading up to the strengths group lesson
- **PRACTICE:** During the group facilitation session, the facilitator recaps the learning material from the week, and then invites participants to share their experiences around learning and applying their strengths
- **REFLECTION:** Participants take turns sharing this with the group, and acknowledging the sharing of others', creating reinforcement, accountability, and a sense of community.

App-based platform:

All college students participating in the WBE program gain access to the phone app which houses the program lessons and content online and also allows them to communicate in real-time with other participants and the WBE program facilitators. This spring, we used the

“Uplift” platform; however, we are currently developing our own application which will be available by the end of the year. Participants can only communicate on the app with other participants who are also in their specific facilitation groups. Each week, participants are prompted to share three things for which they are grateful for (gratitude list) on this chat and receive a reminder about the next week’s lesson. This app also serves as a platform where participants can encourage one another and discuss attendance for the group sessions. The Uplift app is free to download and use for all participants in this program.

Facilitation Thoughts

As a facilitator, it was extremely beneficial to have a co-facilitator during each session to help with student prizing and the technical components of each Zoom session (sharing slides, copying discussion prompts onto chats etc.). During the first 1-2 group sessions, it did seem like the facilitators did the most sharing and talking. Participants would only unmute their microphones and speak when they were specifically prompted or when it was their turn to share.

In the first couple sessions, facilitators expect to take on the responsibility to prize each student after they share so as to make them feel valued, listened to, and encouraged to share again. My facilitator peers and I expected students in our groups to over time model this behavior and prize or chime in with shared experiences after their peers share something. While some facilitators noticed this happening by the fourth session, I did not see this phenomenon happening quite as frequently in the groups I facilitated. When students decided to prize students in my sessions, I noticed the same students often assuming this role. This may be due to the larger size found in my facilitation session. With 8-9 students in one Zoom session, it may be harder to establish a sense of closeness or connection than in a smaller session with just 4-5 students. For WBE facilitations in the future, I am interested in exploring new methods to increase and encourage students to prize the peers in their same WBE session.

It is also interesting to note that most students followed guidelines, established during the first session, to keep their cameras turned on throughout the session. Although we could not meet in-person, seeing students faces via Zoom throughout the session was useful. It helped me see if students were engaged with the material I was sharing and if anyone felt similarly with another student’s experience. Overall, I found facilitating this psychoeducation program on Zoom (virtual medium) to be accessible for facilitators and although it seemed complicated at first, it became much more straightforward after the first session.

Citations

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