

Self-Care Curriculum

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Abstract:

Authors describe a phase two of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning study exploring self-care curriculum. Evidence based knowledge on ways faculty can support post-secondary students and include self-care tools within their courses are presented. Strategies for contributing to student wellness and positively impacting their university experience are described. A qualitative interpretive inquiry approach was utilized to explore the overarching question related to using a self-care tool in classes. The researchers who taught these courses wanted to ensure that self-care curriculum was beneficial for students. Data collected from course journal assignments and semi-structured post course interviews identified two general categories of interpersonal and intrapersonal changes. Themes that emerged from self-care curriculum included: gaining perspective about connecting to others, being more open-minded and less judgemental as well as increased self-awareness and personal growth. Students overwhelmingly indicated that self-care assisted them and that it should be a part of the curriculum.

Key Words:

Self-care, Post-secondary wellness, Self-care curriculum, Anxiety.

Introduction

For the past decade post-secondary student health surveys (American College Health Association, ACHA, 2013a, 2013b, 2016a, 2016b) have suggested that students are experiencing more stress and mental health concerns than ever before. Because of this reported increase, post-secondary services and supports are also increasing and this includes faculty responses to student needs (Di Placito-De Rango, 2018). Potentially, having evidence-based knowledge about the most effective ways that faculty can support post-secondary students, while continuing to uphold rigour and expectations, could assist with increasing the likelihood that faculty will infuse courses with self-care tools.

Research is also emerging focused on post-secondary student wellness and the relationship to certain academic programs. For example, Burck, Bruneau, Baker and Ellison (2014) looked at the wellness of beginning counsellors as did Kostouros and Bennett (2018), while Ashcraft and Gatto (2015) looked at self-care related to nursing students. Many professional programs have self-care as an important concept that is encouraged, since working in human services can be stressful and self-care is important to stay healthy while caring for others. In particular, Ashcraft and Gatto (2015) noted that while students are aware that self-care is important, it can be difficult to balance with a busy academic schedule. Therefore, inclusion in the curriculum may be one way to address student wellness.

More broadly, research (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa & Barkham, 2010) has also taken place to investigate wellness of post-secondary students across their university experience. In the Bewick et al. (2010) study, researchers followed students for three years noting changes in wellbeing over time. They noted that student wellness decreased over time and stated that referring students to counselling services is only one strategy and that incorporating self-care into curriculum might help students manage their academic lives and beyond.

There is evidence that post-secondary students benefit from self-care and there is also discussion about ways in which faculty could be more involved in supporting post-secondary student wellness. According to Di Placito-De Rango, (2018) "The opportunity for instructors to engage as promoters and supporters of student mental health can be seized" (p 288), and one way to do so is for faculty to include self-care as part of their curriculum. Some programs are doing so, for example in Social Work education both Grise-Owens, Miller, Escobar-Ratliff and George (2018) as well as Moore, Bledsoe, Perry and Robertson (2011) showed how they had created assignments that focused on self-care and suggested that by including it in the curriculum students grasped the value of self-care as an on-going practice that will benefit them in their careers.

It seems that programs that are human service focused are more likely to entertain self-care in the curriculum. However, there may also be room for those programs outside of human service, such as Arts, Sciences or Humanities to also include some level of self-care in their curriculum since post-secondary student stress does not contain itself to human service programs. For example, a recent study (Khan, Poole & Beaton, 2018) looked at the impact of a fall reading break on engineering students in recognition that students in those types of programs also experience stress. Potentially,

programs beyond human service can find ways to integrate self-care curriculum if faculty we able to find space or offer extra credit.

In a recent study, Kostouros and Bennett (2017), investigated the use of a particular program known as the BreathingRoom™ (Paccagnan et al., 2012) in their credit courses and found that student benefitted from the program. Although students appreciated the mindfulness aspects of the program, students also suggested there were barriers such as time and the focus on depression within the BreathingRoom™ program. Had the program not been assigned for grades, it likely would not have been accessed. Kostouros and Bennett (2017) noted that students wanted self-care curriculum but also recognized that using only BreathingRoom™ was privileging one tool. Rather, students may have appreciated a variety of choices where their self-care was concerned. Therefore, these authors undertook a phase two of their self-care research looking at the BreathingRoom™ in Bennett's credit courses and student led self-care in Kostouros's credit courses.

Course and Curriculum

There were two section of each course that participated in this study. Change, Challenge and Choice (UGST 1002) is an Undergraduate Studies course that presents current research and strategies related to coping and wellness. Topics such as self-care, mental and physical wellness, stress and effective coping, loss and grief, and putting change into perspective are included in the curriculum. Course content is intended to emphasize the applicability of what students are learning to experiences they may encounter during their lives, particularly as students in the university setting.

Fundamental Skills in Interviewing (CYCC 1110) relates to interviewing and counseling of children and youth. One of the course outcomes in the CYCC course is about practitioner wellness and therefore, the importance of self-care was part of the curriculum. In addition, self-care is noted as part of ethical practice in the discipline of child and youth care (Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations, 1995) therefore, is promoted as necessary once in the field. In both the UGST and the CYCC courses the instructors wanted to assist students with their self-care practice but wanted to ensure what they were promoting was beneficial.

In the UGST courses the instructor continued to use BreathingRoom™ as it fitted well with the course outcomes and the grade of the BreathingRoom™ journals was 2% for each journal for a total of 16% of the course grade. In the CYCC courses the weighting of the self-care assignment was 15% of their total grade which included a self-care plan, three journals and a final reflection. Students were given four options from which to choose: the BreathingRoom™, an on-site mental health program developed for students known as Inquiring Minds, an on-line resource that shared a variety of stress reduction tools, or they could develop their own self-care plan approved by the instructor. In the previous research, one particular barrier noted from using the BreathingRoom™ was that it was time consuming, therefore, in the UGST courses time was given during the semester to complete the modules. No time was dedicated in class for self-care in the CYCC courses due to the need to cover other course curriculum. Therefore, the CYCC students had to engage in self-care outside of class time and completed journals as homework.

Present Study

For the purpose of this study, students were asked to participate by either providing copies of their journals and/or engaging in an interview conducted by the researcher and a research assistant. The data gathering and analysis was completed by the faculty member who was not teaching the course. In both courses there were four journals submitted over the term. In the UGST courses, all journals focused on the BreathingRoom™ strategies. In the CYCC courses three journals focused on the self-care tool the student was using and its effectiveness and the fourth and final journal asked for specific feedback about having self-care in university curriculum. Journal entries focused on discussions such as: how has the self-care activity or BreathingRoom™ module benefitted their wellness, how did the self-care activity impact stress management, how long did the activity take, what they liked or disliked about the activity. In total 29 journals were offered by students for the research, 12 from UGST and 17 from CYCC, this amounted to 45% of the student population from both courses. Together we received 116 journals.

In total five students participated in an interview although initially seven students agreed to be interviewed. Potentially, having interviews at the end of the term after courses are over meant that students would be leaving campus for the spring and summer and therefore, not available. Both males and females participated in the interviews and no one identified as other. Students from both the UGST and CYCC courses were interviewed by a researcher and or the research assistant.

Method

Researchers used a qualitative interpretive inquiry method for interviewing and analysis of both data sources. According to Merriam (2002), asking students about their perspectives and collecting data via interviews matches an interpretive-phenomenological methodology. By reading and re-reading the journals and the interview transcripts, the researchers deepened their understanding of the data and then compared findings with each other and the research assistant. The interviews began with one overarching question: "What was your experience with using a self-care tool (or BreathingRoom™) in your class?" Keeping a focus on this research question assisted in maintaining direction relevant to the study and in being inclusive to the participants' voices (Creswell, 2014). The interviews provided supporting rich, rigorous data to complement the journal submissions.

Data Analysis

As part of the overall theme analysis the researchers uncovered two general categories of interpersonal and intrapersonal changes. Within each of these overarching categories were themes related to those changes described by students either in their journals or during the interviews. These categories were generated after each researcher and the research assistant read and re-read the material generating broad overarching themes, these were then shared between researchers and the research assistant who then each read and re-read the materials considering the others' insights. In a similar fashion as noted by Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb (2002), once consensus was found on the overall themes these were culled to create labels and categories.

Journals were used to develop themes while interviews assisted in delving deeper into the students' experiences of their self-care program.

Findings

Students clearly indicated that self-care assisted them throughout the course and term. Whether from the UGST courses or the CYCC courses students identified similar benefits from having engaged in self-care curriculum. The following themes were identified from the journals and confirmed by the interview content. Students identified self-care in the curriculum as both intra and inter-personally effective. Themes related to intra and inter-personal changes were about gaining perspective about the need to be connected to others, being more open minded and less judgemental of others as well as self-awareness and personal growth.

Connection

Many students spoke about the importance of maintaining relationships and assisting one another when stress builds. As one student noted, "I have recently been very disconnected from the people in my life, so this module did remind me of how important it is to be caring to one another," while another stated, "Now that I started this program [self-care] I feel less alone." Quotes such as these helped us realize students may not have the support they need and potentially they do not seek assistance as they might keep their struggles to themselves. Patalay et al. (2017) confirmed young people were reluctant to seek help but engaging in a mental health program increased awareness which could lead to them engaging in supports.

Growth and Self-Awareness

In many cases students recognized that when they did not take care of themselves it impacted their self-esteem and how they perceived themselves in the world. In one case a student recognized that she was hard on herself and said, "I learned to not take things so seriously and to step back and be in the moment." The ability to be more present has been suggested as a way to manage stress by other authors (Crowder & Sears, 2016). Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has been shown to be one of the best tools for building resilience against both stress and depression. Essentially, mindfulness is a state of being in the present that when practiced can assist with psychological and physical distress. Attending to self-care and practicing mindfulness also gave another student a sense of control, "I have gained a better sense of self-awareness and control over my thoughts and emotions." This led to this student feeling more satisfied with life choices and being less reactive to the environment.

Many students recognized that by attending to self-care they could gain awareness about their stressors and deal with these in healthier ways. For example, one student stated, "When I recognize the stress I might have for the day and address it and make a plan for how to manage the stress, it reduces the stress immensely." Having this level of awareness allowed for a change in negativity and an increase in emotional intelligence. One particular quote that highlighted this change was, "Life is like a rollercoaster and we cannot stop bad things from happening, but we have the ability to control our attitudes." Many times, students made links between choosing attitudes and controlling responses in their environments which lead to healthier relationships.

Several students whether in CYCC or UGST noted that they initially engaged in the project due to it being an assignment but once they started practicing it became more important and they could see the benefits. A typical theme that we drew from the journals was captured from this student's statement, "Becoming aware of the little things lets you live in the moment," and, "After this project I realize how it should feel when you take care of yourself properly and how much easier it is to go about your day." Burck et al. (2014) confirmed that overtime students begin to see the relevance of self-care noting that it becomes a foundational practice that does change over time as people grow in their self-understanding and their careers.

When students had a self-driven self-care routine, they commented on having more freedom in their choices of how to respond to day-to-day stressors. They recognized that they had more control over their wellness than initially thought, "It really taught me to let go of the less important things that may bring me down but when it does I am able to set them free and just focus on the better things in life." We saw a change in journals over the course of the semester to see that students were taking more responsibility for their wellness choices and for many there was a sense of gratitude for having engaged in self-care curriculum.

Flourishing

Keyes' (2002) description of flourishing helps us understand that people can flourish and live well when they have social, emotional and psychological health. Keyes (2002) also helped us understand that even when someone is struggling with a mental health concern they can still flourish. Many students disclosed that they were struggling with mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety and found that the modules in the BreathingRoom™ in particular helped them realize they were not alone and that they could grow and do well regardless of their diagnosis. For example, one student disclosed, "Feeling lost and empty" with depression and anxiety. The student went on to describe how using the strategies suggested in the BreathingRoom™ helped:

I went on a walk with my dog a couple of days ago and the whole time I focused on my breathing and where I was stepping. When my thoughts got in the way and I started thinking about life and everything I had to do I quickly adjusted my thoughts and went back to walking and just thinking about where my feet were and my breathing and just relaxing... Now I feel more confident when having these anxiety attacks.

Another example shared that, "Even though depression and anxiety can eat me alive, I will still keep growing into a bigger and better person." Tools shared in various programs assisted student to take control which can lead to confidence and competence, "I feel supported and acknowledged as a holistic human being, and I can sense growing hope and validation from that feeling."

Relationships

As noted above students shared about the inter-personal impacts on their relationships from engaging in self-care. One area that stood out for us was noting that as students started to gain self-awareness and self-compassion, they also gained compassion and empathy for others. For example, one student explained, "It's also important to recognize that we all have a story and we have different perspectives. I

cannot judge others based on my perspective.” Self-compassion tells us to step back and take some perspective (Neff, 2011). To have self-compassion is to have awareness of thoughts, and those who write and research about self-compassion (e.g., Neff, 2011; Germer, 2009) understand that when we tune into ourselves we can recognize when our thoughts or behaviours are destructive whether those thoughts be about ourselves or others. In particular, research about self-compassion and mindfulness has suggested that engaging in both self-compassion and having a mindfulness practice will increase rest and build resilience (Kemper, Mo, & Khayat, 2015).

Celebrating

Finally, it is necessary to share the understanding students recognized the importance of celebrating their successes. According to Moses, Bradley and O’Callaghan (2016) academic life can cause students to focus on failure rather than success since much of their time is related to academic achievement. While not all students focus on failure for those who do, it may add to stress and impact mental health. In addition, a focus on failure or achievement can cause student to forget the successes they have had, “This has been a nice reminder that I need to reflect on this stuff [what is done well] once in a while, celebrate my successes and move past my failures in constructive ways.” According to Stallman and Shochet (2009), students will be more engaged and well-adjusted when we are able to support their wellbeing.

Discussion

Having asked students what facilitated their ability to maintain their self-care plan as many as 80% of students said that they liked having to journal about the activity or BreathingRoom™ as this keep them committed to their self-care. In terms of having an assignment, students stated that if there was not an assignment they may not have been as motivated to maintain their plan. Students also suggested as they started to feel better and experienced results, such as “lowered stress ...increased energy”, it was easier to maintain their plan and stay committed. Many students also found that once they created a routine, they could stick with it particularly as they began to “feel happier and think more positively.” Of interest was also that about one quarter of the students who participated in the study said that they had to lower their expectations to be more successful with their plans. For example, instead of saying they would go to the gym five days a week they committed to two or three times per week.

A change from the last study (Kostouros & Bennett, 2017) was the lack of complaint related to the focus of BreathingRoom™ on depression at the beginning of the program. It occurred to us that potentially this had to do with the increase in mental health literacy in the post-secondary system. According to Kutcher, Wei and Morgan (2016), mental health literacy is increasing on post-secondary campuses and Gilham, Austen, Wei and Kutcher (2018) were able to show how improving mental health literacy also improved help-seeking. Since mental health literacy can potentially decrease the stigma related to mental health, students may also see the importance of looking after themselves and to have a balanced healthy life. In addition, since the institution within which we work there is recognition that people with mental health concerns can still flourish (Keyes, 2002). Throughout the campus there are posters and signs about self-care and mental health assistance, therefore, there may be less negative reaction to engaging in a program that

has a depression focus. Another possibility for the UGST students includes a discussion the instructor had with students about the BreathingRoom™ and its initial focus on depression. It was noted to these students the findings of the earlier study were that participants' identified the benefit of completing all modules.

Since the goal was to assist students in increasing wellness, we offered the students an opportunity to provide ideas about how they would design curriculum and /or assignments if they thought it was important to have self-care as a part of a post-secondary course. Students shared a number of ideas for self-care curriculum and ways to make it relevant to them in the courses.

Student Curriculum Design Ideas

Students described the desire to hear a number of ideas and to try these out in class before making a self-care plan. Some students had a limited number of strategies and wanted to hear what others were doing. One student suggested that part of the assignment could be to have students present ideas to the class, try them and then generate a plan. About a third of the students who responded to this question agreed that talking about strategies in class would be helpful prior to creating a plan. In addition, they believed that having more discussion in class would lead them to understanding the link to course and professional outcomes.

Another student suggested that the class could generate a variety of ideas or have the teacher give a list, and then as an assignment, students would have to try several of these and write about the effect of the activity and what worked best. What we appreciated about this suggestion was that we thought it would allow for students to have a variety of tools that they could use in different circumstances. For example, deep breathing almost anywhere and exercise at planned upon times.

About half of the students enjoyed writing the journal as this caused them to reflect on what was working or not about their plan. In addition, students that discussed journaling also wanted the journal to be weekly versus bi-weekly as this "maintained a routine." Of note was one student who suggested we were privileging writing and suggested that a photo journal could be offered as an alternative to a written journal. In relation to the journals one student also suggested that the journal questions should be tailored to the self-care plan versus being general to all students. While we appreciated this notion, we also need to consider that this would create several individually tailored assignments which could be onerous on the instructor.

In relation to making the journals individually focused at least two students wanted to have at least one face-to-face, one-on-one meeting with the instructor to discuss the plan and what was meaningful about the plan. While reading student journals we noted that in some cases students were profoundly impacted by completing self-care activities. Potentially students wanted a meeting with the instructor to convey the strength of the impact, and the journal alone may not have captured their personal reasoning for the activities chosen.

Students who used the BreathingRoom™ promoted its effectiveness without question. While only two students in the CYCC course chose BreathingRoom™, they

did find it effective. The students in the UGST course overwhelmingly agreed that BreathingRoom™ gave them effective tools and strategies.

Limitations

The researchers involved in this study identified the small amount of interview data as one of the study's limitations. A total seven students from the two classes consented to be interviewed, with five being involved in the process. The timing of the interviews may have influenced the number of interview participants. The interviews were held at the end of the winter term during the spring and summer when students were no longer available. A different point of time within the academic year may have resulted in increased involvement in the interview process.

A second limitation to this study relates to the final journal entry where students were asked for their feedback on self-care curriculum embedded within university courses. Although students in all classes submitted a total of four journals throughout the course, students in the CYCC courses were asked to provide specific feedback about having self-care in university curriculum within their last journal. Each of the four journals of the UGST students covered two modules of the eight within the Breathing Room. As a result, the final journal did not specifically ask for specific feedback, although some students referred to self-care curriculum in their journal entries. Utilizing the same final journal assignment for all classes may have provided specific information regarding curriculum, regardless of what self-care tool was used.

In addition, students identified barriers that had an impact on the effective use of self-care during the semester. They described not having the time and being too busy to be involved in self-care strategies. Lack of time was also identified as a barrier by participants involved in the previous study. In response to this information UGST curriculum has been adapted, allowing students time during the semester to complete the modules. In somewhat of a blended format some classes are no longer delivered face-to-face, facilitating student completion of the modules. The CYCC courses had required curriculum to be covered so all class time was needed, and self-care had to be engaged in outside of class time.

Finally, we also want to recognize that it can be difficult to include additional and potentially tangential expectations such as self-care, particularly for those programs that do not have this as part of their curriculum or are not human service oriented. Reluctance to add another topic or assignment is understandable when courses are already full of topical curriculum. However, assisting students with reducing stress can impact their ability to be more ready to learn and potentially engage more in classes. There may be ways to include self-care in the curriculum with modifications to existing assignments. For example, an English class might have a paper about self-care, or a Humanities class focused on the human condition might ask students to consider how self-care or care about one's community members might matter to wellness. In addition, when it is impossible to include self-care within course work, there may be space in program orientations to provide self-care ideas and tools such as the BreathingRoom™.

Conclusions

Overwhelmingly students stated self-care should be part of the curriculum in post-secondary classes. They described the benefits of utilizing self-care strategies throughout the term and provided examples of how self-care assisted them. With post-secondary student health surveys report students experience increased stress and mental health concerns, faculty are being called to respond through the provision of supports and imbedding self-care tools within courses. Continuing the discussion about ways to support student wellness will benefit learning, teaching and curriculum development.

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