The Effects of Self-Care Relating to the Overall Well-Being of College Students

Abstract

This research paper focuses on the benefits of self-care practices and education experienced by university students. Mental health is a topic that has gained importance in society, and many universities and educational institutions are highlighting the importance of teaching students' self-care skills to improve their well-being. Studies have shown how educating students about self-care practices, and the implementation of these strategies, can improve the mental and physical well-being of university students. However, there are many barriers and stigmas that affect a student's access to self-care resources, such as lack of awareness, accessibility, as well as systemic and attitudinal barriers. Through a thorough review of the literature elucidating study results, which included mindfulness strategy education and online surveys, data showed that self-care practices lead to improved physical health outcomes, increased self-efficacy, and promote autonomy in self-care interventions.

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Introduction

Mental health has become a topic of increased importance in today's society because of the many complications mental health issues can impose on the wellbeing of an individual. As a result, many universities and educational institutions are emphasizing the importance of mental well-being of college populations and have extended health and wellness resources and curriculum to the community. According to data retrieved from "A May Student Voice" survey by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse, around 30 percent of students ranked mental health supports as their highest priority among wellness services offered by prospective colleges or universities (Mowreader, 2023). More importantly, research is being conducted to show the benefits of implementing self-care techniques and practices into the lives of students (Ambizas et al., 2014). Practicing self-care has been shown to improve physical health, and strengthen our resiliency for stressful events, which can lead to improvements in cognitive abilities, lower risk of potential illnesses or disease, and improve stress management techniques.

Advancements in the Field of Self-Care Practices

Many changes are occurring within the educational field on self-care therapeutics. Different delivery forums, such as virtual instructions or face-

to-face demonstrations, are making self-therapeutic topics for further discussion. Face-to-face teaching is still prevalent however, opportunities for hybrid teaching are continuing to grow. According to the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, curriculum for nonprescription medication and self-care therapeutics has expanded significantly (Ambizas et. al., 2014). Nonprescription medications are becoming more available to the public, which removes a potential barrier to treatment methods. Alleviating this potential barrier is significant, as access and availability of nonprescription drugs can influence educational opportunities regarding nonprescription drug therapy and self-care practices in the community (Ambizas et. al., 2014). Another beneficial aspect to the growing curriculum is that communication, critical thinking, and other skills are being challenged from an emotional standpoint. This aids in developing social emotional competences, which will help students interact with others and further develop other skills (Ambizas et. al., 2014).

Health and wellness are also projected to become a topic of discussion as college populations continue to grow. Today, more individuals are adopting healthier lifestyles, and are realizing the importance of prioritizing mental health (Galante et. al., 2017). Universities can accommodate the growth of self-care curriculum by collaborating with the student population in order to see any possible needs within the community. Additionally, as the self-care field continues to grow, it is imperative that colleges and schools meet the challenges of future students in the area (2014). College students can face many challenges, both academically and personally. With educational populations continuing to grow, and with how diverse these populations are, the need for mental health resources will grow as well. Understanding how to support college students with self-care options can lead to health promotion, increased self-efficacy amongst students, and preventive interventions students can implement when experiencing psychological distress (Galante et. al., 2017). Through collaboration efforts with the community, university institutions can continue to develop accessible self-care interventions.

Benefits of Mindfulness Education & Mental Health Support

A case study completed at the University of Cambridge, UK., highlighted the need for making mental health resources available to students (Galante et. al, 2017). The goal of the study was to offer mindfulness courses to randomly assigned students and see if there was any impact or growth on their resiliency. One randomized group of students were enrolled in mindfulness courses with additional mental health support, while the other group received mental health support alone. Both groups had to self-report any psychological distress that they experienced throughout the case study.

Between September 28th, 2015, and January 15th 2016, 616 students were randomly assigned to the mindfulness skills for student's groups (Galante et. al., 2017). One group of students received mental support in addition to the mindfulness course, while the other group received only mental support. The results of the study showed that implementing mindfulness courses or training could have a beneficial effect on student mental health. Evidence has shown the efficacy of mindfulness training in improvement of symptoms of common mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Galante et.

al., 2017). This case study emphasizes the need for increased focus on the health of student populations, especially mental health. It also provided students with tools such as sessions on overall well-being, self-compassion, and resiliency.

Potential Barriers to Self-Care Therapeutics and Education

With the growth of self-care and therapeutic field comes new opportunities for university populations. According to Conrad and Riba (2021), who conducted research on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected mental health, college students are an increasingly high-risk and vulnerable psychiatric population. There are several mental health disparities that students face, such as anxiety, depression, and many other psychological disorders. After the COVID-19 pandemic, student populations experienced considerable setbacks in regards to mental health. Survey data collected in June 2020 by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) showed that the mental health of individuals aged 18 to 24 was worse than any other age group that was reported during the pandemic (Conrad, C., Riba, M., 2021). Alongside stress students experienced from the pandemic, students can face other stressors that can negatively impact their mental health. These can include moving from home, course load, social circles, amongst other things.

These factors which can include lack of awareness and resources, accessibility, and stigma can also create barriers to quality mental health services. Students can face many barriers to care, such as no prior access to care or education on mental health resources. Unfortunately even prior to the pandemic, most college students reported that they do not know how to access mental health services. In order to serve students in a way that educates them on self-therapeutic strategies, universities must collaborate with the students and the community to assess the need for resources.

Furthermore, barriers to quality care may not have an effect on the utilization of self-care strategies and resources. University students experience different mental health conditions or disorders, which cause and can lead to psychological distress and overall elevated stress levels. High levels of stress can interfere with bodily functions, and can create physical health problems. Although mental disorders and suicidal thoughts-behaviors (suicidal thoughts and behaviors) are common among university students, the majority of students with these problems remain untreated (Ebert et al., 2019). Untreated mental health problems of college students were investigated further by the World Mental Health International College Student initiative. Web-based self-report surveys were obtained from 13,984 first-year students in eight countries around the world; only 24.6% of students reported they would definitely seek treatment if they had a future emotional problem (Ebert et al., 2019). While barriers such as lack of resources and access were included in the survey models, many students indicated they would feel humiliation if they asked for help. Upon the conclusion of the survey, it was found that attitudinal barriers and not structural barriers were found to be the most important reported reasons for the hesitations and negative emotions surrounding mental health resources (Ebert et al., 2019).

Self-Care Interventions for the University Student Population

In order to provide university populations adequate education regarding self-care strategies, interventions must be put

in place to ensure treatment for this diverse population. A randomized study done within the German sector of the World Mental Health International College Student initiative placed students with either a control condition or an intervention condition. Both of the condition groups were asked questions that assessed any potential mental disorders and conditions, however, the intervention group received personalized feedback based on symptoms, behaviors and available mental health resources (Ebert et al., 2018). After the study case concluded, researchers found that the group of students that received intervention services and feedback experienced significant effects mentally, but in increments. A simple acceptance-facilitating intervention can increase intention to use mental health services (Ebert, et al., 2018.)

In regards to self-care strategies for the mental health of university students there are many different challenges that individuals experience, which can include pre-existing mental conditions, substance abuse, as well as systemic and attitudinal barriers to health treatment (Zhong and Xie, 2023). While mental disorders continue to grow and increase in prevalence, the same can be said in regards to the implementation of self-care techniques. The benefits of implementing these strategies show a positive correlation to positive mental health trends in university students.

Implementation of Self-Care Interventions Amongst University Populations

Researchers in Beijing, China, recognized the mental health disparities that college students are faced with as they embark on their educational pursuits. As a result, the "Joy Pie" intervention was developed, which is an intervention designed to help college students improve their mental health condition through self-care (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Different from regular interventions in which participants receive the treatment with the help of a professional guide or therapist, self-care interventions involve personal coping strategies and are informed by conceptions of self-care that emphasize personal autonomy, resilience, self-efficacy, self-control, self-actualization, and self-stewardship (Zhong and Xie, 2023). The "Joy Pie" intervention strategy gave students a five-step plan on how to remain positive, which emphasized a need for communication with others, personal reflection, and avoiding personal criticism.

The five strategies of the "Joy Pie" interventions included (a) delay worries; (b) initiate a chat with others; (c) be less critical; (d) create one's own self-care strategies, and (e) weekend reflection (Zhong and Xie, 2023). This strategy encourages individuality amongst student strategies, emphasizing the need for students to develop personalized self-care strategies. To test this procedure, two groups of students were selected in 2021 and 2022, and surveys were sent to the chosen students. Once the students completed the surveys, a design study was implemented to assess the effectiveness of the proposed intervention strategies in improving mental health conditions (Zhong and Xie, 2023).

The overall study findings showed a positive correlation with the implementation of the "Joy Pie" intervention and the mental health of university students. The data showed that college students generally reported the "Joy Pie" interventions to have a moderate to high effect on their mental health management (Zhong and Xie, 2023). The results of the study also showed that students who used any of the five listed strategies within the intervention improved their self-efficacy and knowledge of

self-care techniques. Theoretically, the current research has expanded the previously proven significance of self-efficacy by adding new evidence that relates to youth mental health management (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Research gathered in the study further supports the need for education of self-care practices, and highlighted the number of benefits that students can receive from implementing self-care strategies into their day-to-day lives.

Another strategy analyzed by researchers was meditation practices. Meditation can be used for decreasing anxiety, stress levels, and can influence self-reflection. As a non-pharmacological self-management solution, meditation practices aim at training one's self-awareness of the present experience, including one's thoughts, feelings, and sensations without any judgement, filter, or expectations (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Along with meditation, communication, self-reflection, and thought reframing are also listed strategies to combating high levels of stress. Implementing these strategies, or creating personalized self-care techniques, can prevent elevated stress levels, which can prevent further mental and physical health problems from occurring in the future.

Overall Benefits of Self-Care Techniques

Existing research relates self-care interventions with reduced depression, anxiety, and stress amongst college students (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Amongst those benefits, the study findings show that while many individuals experience mental health disparities, self-care interventions can help students live positive lifestyles (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Many structural models have been tested within the broad population of university students, and researchers have continued to discover the benefits of implementing self-care practices. The finding of a positive relationship between self-care, self-efficacy, and mental health supports and extends the work of previous investigators who established that self-care efficacy is an important factor for the quality of life (Zhong and Xie).

Current research has shown that self-care practices are essential to the overall well-being of university students (Zhong and Xie, 2023). Practicing self-care techniques not only can improve an individual's mental well-being, it can provide physical health benefits as well, which can include improved blood circulation and quality of sleep. Further education on the benefits of self-care on stress-management and overall well-being will eliminate further barriers and stigmas related to care.

Self-care techniques provide college students with stress-management techniques. Continuing to educate, advocate, and provide resources for students will help reduce stigmas concerning mental health issues. University institutions can continue to strive for community collaboration in order to meet the needs of the student population.

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