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End the Stigma: Strategies to Improve Mental Health

Mental health is a rising concern among college students. College is a particularly stressful time when students are learning how to be independent, as well as manage a new environment and course load. It is the first time many of them are living on their own which brings new responsibilities. Students do not always have the tools necessary to be able to cope with stress in healthy ways (Roming & Howard, 2019). This can lead to a decline in mental health (Shermeyer et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, there is still stigma associated with mental health. This can prevent students from acknowledging that they are struggling with their mental health for fear that they will be viewed differently. If students are not open about their mental health concerns, they will be less likely to cope effectively and seek the necessary help (Roming & Howard, 2019). When an individual is struggling with mental health, taking care of themselves becomes increasingly difficult. Without lifestyle changes or resources, other areas of their life and overall health may begin to decline as well.

The goal of this project is to normalize open communication about mental health while promoting awareness of positive coping strategies and resources that are available to students free of cost. Establishing positive coping skills is essential to build and maintain the overall well-being of students. The strategies included to promote mental health are physical activity, mindfulness, social media use, implementing routines, as well as identifying resources available in the community. No individual deserves to suffer alone and in silence; there is help waiting to be utilized.

Methods

The project began by identifying that improving the mental health of college students would be the focus of this project. This was due to my passion for mental health. As a nursing student, I understand the importance that mental health plays in overall health and well-being. I thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to spread awareness of strategies and resources available to improve mental health in college students.

Prior to implementing the project, I gathered information from articles on the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) library databases. The literature search was centered on mental health among college students as well as evidence-based coping strategies that improve mental health. The main themes that I found involved physical activity, mindfulness, social media use, and routines. In addition, I familiarized myself with the mental health resources available at GVSU. I decided that my deliverables for the project would be five fliers to distribute to incoming freshmen accompanied by a paper discussing the overall process.

After completing my senior project proposal, I began to create the five fliers: physical activity, mindfulness, social media use, routines, and resources within the community. I utilized the graphic design website Canva to design the fliers. Each flier was developed with the aim that they would be emailed out to the incoming honors students during their welcome week. One flier would be emailed out each day, so the students have available information on how to help cope with their new environment early on.

When creating the fliers, I kept in mind that my target audience would be students who are already quite busy. Therefore, I wanted to keep the fliers as concise as possible so that students would be more likely to read the information. I included key points such as benefits of the strategy along with tips for how they could be incorporated into their day to day lives. I also provided links to websites and videos for more information if the students are interested. Once

the fliers were complete, I spent the remaining time working on writing the paper to further

discuss each strategy in greater detail.

Flier Topics

Physical Activity

Physical activity is commonly known to improve physical health, but it has been well

established as a key factor in maintaining and improving mental health as well. Some of the

benefits are that it can reduce depression, anxiety, and stress while improving sleep and

cognition due to the release of endorphins (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). To receive the most benefits

from physical activity on mental health, it is recommended to get between 2.5 to 5 hours of

moderate intensity activity each week (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). It is best practice to spread the

activity out over the week and maintain a schedule to develop a sustainable habit.

When physical activity is incorporated into daily life, it can help improve depression and

anxiety (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). Students who are experiencing depression can benefit from

physical activities in many ways. One being that it can provide them with an activity to look

forward to. If they are exercising in the form of a club, they will also be increasing their social

interactions. Exercise can be utilized as a coping mechanism due to its ability to relieve stress. If

a student notices that they are becoming anxious or overwhelmed, they can take a break and go

on a 10–20-minute walk (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). Physical activity provides a positive distraction

allowing students to recenter and refocus.

Physical activity also promotes sleep. Humans are active beings, however, currently it is

common for lifestyles to promote sedentary behavior. This is relevant to college students who sit

in classes and do homework for extended periods of time. When students participate in physical

activity, they get their body moving which reduces stress and tension. In turn, this promotes

relaxation and improves the quality of sleep. Since many college students do not have a good sleep schedule this can prove to be beneficial to their mental health. If the student is receiving better quality sleep, they will feel more energized throughout the day which also helps improve cognition and focus.

It is important to start small and build up the intensity and frequency gradually. This allows the habit to be sustainable while preventing injury. If an individual exercises too much in the beginning, they may become exhausted and feel that it is not something they can continue to do regularly. The process of becoming an active individual looks different for everyone, finding what is enjoyable is key.

Within the physical activity flier, I discussed benefits, campus resources, physical activity guidelines, tips, and links to more information. The campus resources include the gym and free exercise classes, as well as clubs like dance, rock climbing, running, etc. Students can utilize these resources, or they can exercise on their own. One great form of physical activity is walking. To encourage walking, I listed the distance between known campus landmarks.

Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness has become more mainstream, but the concept itself is not always clear. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment non-judgmentally. It is a skill that can be practiced in many forms. Mindfulness is known to have many benefits. These include decreasing stress, anxiety, and depression while promoting positive self-talk and emotional awareness (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018).

Meditation and breathing exercises aid in anxiety and stress reduction by slowing the heart rate and promoting relaxation in as little as 10 minutes (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018). Taking time to sit and meditate first thing in the morning can alleviate stress while allowing time to set

intentions for the day. Practicing meditation at night can be useful to destress and promote sleep while allowing time to reflect on the day. The university has a Meditation and Mindfulness club and there are also many guided meditations and breathing exercises on YouTube that are free and easy to follow. Grounding techniques, such as the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 technique, reduce anxiety by switching the focus to noticing the five senses. By paying attention to the immediate surroundings, it cultivates a sense of safety in the present moment. A common misconception of meditation is that the goal is to sit in silence without thinking. However, the goal is to allow the thoughts to present themselves freely and evaluate them in a nonjudgmental way. Gratitude journaling is especially useful if one is struggling from depression (Petrocchi & Couyoumdijan, 2016). This exercise is done by writing down things one is grateful for. It is an intentional act to notice the good in life no matter how big or small. There is always something to be grateful for, and intentionally looking for the positives in life promotes feelings of happiness.

As mindfulness becomes a habit, emotional awareness will develop. Emotional awareness is the act of becoming aware of feelings and understanding where emotions are coming from. Emotions do not have always have to be labeled as positive or negative. One way to shift this mindset is to begin to explore thoughts and emotions with curiosity. With practice, negative self-talk can be shifted into positive self-talk. This is done by noticing negative thought patterns, reviewing them, and reframing the thoughts into positive ones (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018).

In the flier that I created for the students, I included the definition of mindfulness, benefits, examples, and campus resources. The examples that I chose to include were meditation and breathing exercises and gratitude journaling. To keep the flier simple but still contain useful

information, I provided links to where students can learn more about each technique as well as videos that explain how to practice the skill.

Social Media Use

As technology has become a prominent aspect in society, people are spending more time on their phone. Browsing on social media accounts for a large amount of this time. It is recommended that 30 minutes a day or less is allocated to social media use, however, on average, people spend over two hours per day on social media (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021). Increased social media use limits time for self-reflection. This can be detrimental to college students particularly because it is common to continuously scroll through social media feeds and lose track of time. Social media allows people to feel more connected to others, however, it can also take away from in-person interactions and has several negative effects. The negative effects include low self-esteem, loneliness, depression, decreased productivity, disrupted sleep, and anxiety (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021).

Low self-esteem, loneliness, and depression can occur if one begins to compare their life to what they see others post on social media (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021). This is because when students are sitting down and scrolling on their phones, they are seeing other people's life highlights. In addition, many photos are drastically edited which can perpetuate negative body image in those viewing the content. This can make students feel like they are missing out or not good enough. Ways to improve use is to choose the content that is consumed. Students can do this by unfollowing accounts that make them feel bad about themselves and follow positive accounts that align with their values and goals or challenge them in a beneficial way. It is also important for students to recognize that not everything on social media is truthful. Content

creators pick and choose snapshots of their day to day lives to make it seem more glamorous. It is important that they remind themselves that they do not need to change who they are.

Decreased productivity and anxiety are common effects of social media use as well. This is due to the amount of time spent on social media. When students spend more time on social media, less time is spent doing homework. Therefore, students may quickly become overwhelmed and feel as if they do not have enough time to complete homework assignments. It is important to use social media time meaningfully in a way that does not impede on obligations to minimize anxiety, increase productivity, and allow one to focus on themselves.

In the flier, I included the negative effects of social media, reminders while using social media, and how to monitor and limit screen time. One tip that I included to enhance productivity is that it is best practice to put phones out of reach and sight while doing homework. This improves productivity and decreases the amount of time spent on assignments due to not getting distracted by notifications. It is common that when a notification is opened, students find themselves answering that notification and then scrolling through social media. If the phone is out of sight, distractions are minimized, and work can be accomplished more efficiently. It is okay to not reply to notifications immediately, the notifications will still be there later once the student accomplishes their work.

Another negative aspect of social media is that it disrupts sleep. Students commonly stay up later than necessary to complete homework because they get distracted by their phones throughout the day. Another factor that causes sleep disruption is that instead of trying to fall asleep right away, students will bring their phones to bed and scroll through social media. One tip I included is for students to not go on their phone at least one hour prior to bed. This allows

them to stick to a sleep schedule and prevents them from staying up later than intended due to the endless scroll.

To mindfully use social media, I recommended that students monitor their screen time. Phone settings typically have a screen time breakdown that lets one see exactly how much time they are spending on each app. From here students can see which apps they may be spending too much time on. Within the phone settings, there is also the ability to place time limits on apps. Students can set time limits for apps they need to cut down their use on. When the time limit is up, a notification will send them an alert that they have reached their time limit for the day and the app will be unavailable until the next day. This helps prevent the mindless scrolling on social media and loss of valuable time.

Routines

Humans are creatures of habit. Establishing routine creates a sense of purpose, belonging, and comfort. Adding routines into daily life gives students the space and time they to take care of themselves and their responsibilities. The benefits of routines are that they aid in time management and organization, decrease stress, and improve overall health and well-being by staying accountable to oneself (Murray et al., 2021). In the flier, I included the benefits of routines and then I discussed morning, bedtime, and weekly routines, as well as, how to start and tips.

Those who are struggling with mental health may be far removed from a sense of routine; making even getting out of bed and starting the day difficult to do. This is where morning routines come in. When students develop morning routines that are mindful and meaningful to them, it will be easier to get out of bed and take those first steps. With a morning routine in place, the student already has a plan on exactly how they will begin the day. This minimizes

decisions in the morning and reduces the stress and sense of being rushed. This allows students to focus on themself and get ready in a peaceful way that starts their day off calm. I included that it is good to establish a set wake up time and have an order for daily hygiene tasks and breakfast to ensure that students are taking care of themself. To add a mindfulness aspect to this, I included that it is beneficial to minimize screen time in the morning and use this time to focus on themselves and the day ahead.

For bedtime routines, I stressed the importance of having a set bedtime to promote a regular sleep schedule. I also included the importance of setting aside time to relax and reflect. One of the tips I included here is to get a journal and plan out the next day before going to bed. This helps students stick to routines and can also reduce anxieties about the next day because they already know what needs to be done.

Weekly routines are especially important. This is a good practice for students to make sure their life is well-balanced, and they are intentionally making time for things that bring them happiness. College can be stressful, and it is essential to take breaks to enjoy life. Topics that I included were self-care, chores, homework, and socialization. Self-care is important to decompress after stressful weeks and maintain happiness. I included a link on the flier to self-care ideas in case students do not know where to start or what self-care may look like. As for chores and homework, incorporating these into weekly routines allows students to reduce stress and stay organized. It is a good idea to set aside specific times for homework and chores throughout the week. This makes it more likely that all tasks will get accomplished, and students will be less likely to live in messy dorms or worry about when they will get their homework done. Messy spaces create messy brains, so it is good to create habits to keep spaces clean. As

for socialization, is also important that students are scheduling in times to see friends or family each week. No matter how stressful college may get, everyone needs to take breaks.

One tip that I included is that it is important for students to take an inventory and check in with themselves to see how they are currently managing their time. Students should note areas that they would like to be spending more or less time in. Another tip I included is to create a detailed monthly calendar at the beginning of the semester with class times, due dates, work schedule (if applicable), and important event dates. I recommended that students check this each night when they create a plan for the next day. This helps them stay on top of obligations, decrease anxiety, and stick to their routines.

Resources

For the last flier I included resources that students have access to in the community. I find that many students do not always know what resources are available. The university has great resources to help students work through their difficulties, but the resources are not always utilized. The goal of this flier was to bring awareness to students early on in their college career on the resources available.

I included six resources in the flier. I added a short description of the resource as well as a link that students can click on to access more information about the resource. The first resource I included was the University Counseling Center. Here students can receive both individual and group therapy, free of charge. Therapy can be expensive, and therefore not always accessible to college students. The counseling center allows all students to have access to professional help in times of need or extra support. The website also has many additional resources on ways that students can improve their mental health. The next resource I discussed was the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. This is a hotline that is available 24 hours per day and provides free and

confidential support for those who are experiencing distress. The next resource I include was a

page on stress management from the Student Academic Success. Increasing knowledge about

tools to manage stress is beneficial to help students effectively cope with increased stress during

busy weeks. I also included the counseling center's podcast on mental health called "I'm Doing

Fine" where the group discusses mental health topics. This can provide entertainment and

education on how to deal with mental health as well as make students feel less alone. In addition,

I included the university CARE Team as a resource. This resource is for those who know

someone who is struggling with mental health issues but do not know how to help. The link I

included takes the students directly to the page which explains what they do and the link to

filling out a CARE report. The final resource I included is Alcohol and Other Drug Services.

This is a branch of the counseling center which screens students for substance dependency and

provides aid to support them. It also includes what to do in the event someone has an alcohol or

drug overdose. Even if students do not think that this is a situation they will encounter, it is best

to spread awareness so students know what they can do to help. It is important that incoming

students are aware of the medical amnesty act, so students are willing to call in an emergency

without fear of being reprimanded.

Conclusion

Although mental health is becoming more of an accepted topic, mental health still holds

stigma. It can be difficult for people to admit to themselves and others that they are struggling.

The goal of this senior project is to help continue the conversations on mental health. The more

open we are about mental health as a community, there is a greater that lives will be saved. It can

be difficult to keep up with the day-to-day tasks of living, especially when life gets stressful. It is

key that students know how to take care of themselves and their mental health while using

positive coping strategies.

Resources

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