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Stress Identification & Management in COTS Family Shelter Residents

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Background

- The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) is the largest service provider for the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless in Vermont.
- Between two different shelters in the Burlington area, COTS is able to shelter fifteen families at a time. Families can stay at the shelters for up to six months while they work with COTS to find employment and affordable housing.
- A major study looking at sources of stress, mediators of stress, and manifestations of stress highlighted that homeless populations experience more stress.¹
- Families living in shelters have family routines and rituals that are impacted, resulting in great distress within family dynamic.²
- Brief meditation training may improve quality of life and decrease negative psychological states in the homeless population.³

Project Objectives

- To identify major stressors experienced by homeless shelter populations in the literature and the COTS cohort.
- To understand mechanisms by which homeless individuals and families manage their stress.
- To determine how the current wellness of the homeless population impact their ability to improve their situation.
- To gauge potential interest in alternative, evidence-based stress-reduction strategies in the COTS cohort.
- To identify barriers to implementation of stress-reduction strategies within COTS.

Methods and Materials

- Performed structured interviews with seven adult representatives of seven distinct families (of fourteen eligible) that currently reside in family shelters managed by COTS over a one month period in Fall 2016.
- Questions included a mix of short-answer items and open-ended prompts to explore residents' current stressors and techniques for coping with stress.
- Responses that yielded quantifiable data were subsequently compiled.
- Open-ended were qualitatively analyzed to extract core themes and motifs.

Results

Commonly Mentioned Stressors:

- Health
- Finances
- Lack of Privacy
- Children
- Employment Status

Sample of Current Coping Strategies:

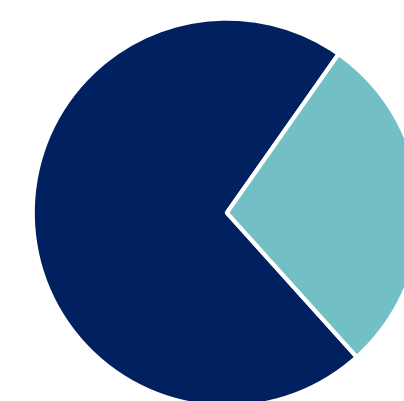
- Reading
- Counseling
- Sleep
- Art
- Meditation

Sample Quotes from Interviews:

- "The ways they soothe their stress are not the greatest."
- "Breathe it out"
- "What can you do? It's only a couple months"

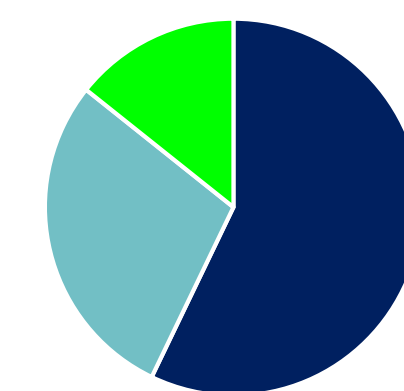
Table 1: Demographics

Variables	Total =
	7
Sex	
Female	5
Male	1
Prefer Not to Say	1
Age	
18 - 25	1
26 - 35	2
36 - 50	4
50 - 65	0
>65	0
Education	
Some High School	1
High School Graduate	2
Some College	4
College Graduate	0
Graduate School	0
Advanced Degree	0
Number of Times Displaced	
One Time	3
Two Times	2
Three Times	2
Number of Family Members Living with Participant	
One Individual	1
Two Individuals	2
Three Individuals	2
Four Individuals	1
Five Individuals	1



Interest in Learning New Stress Reduction Techniques

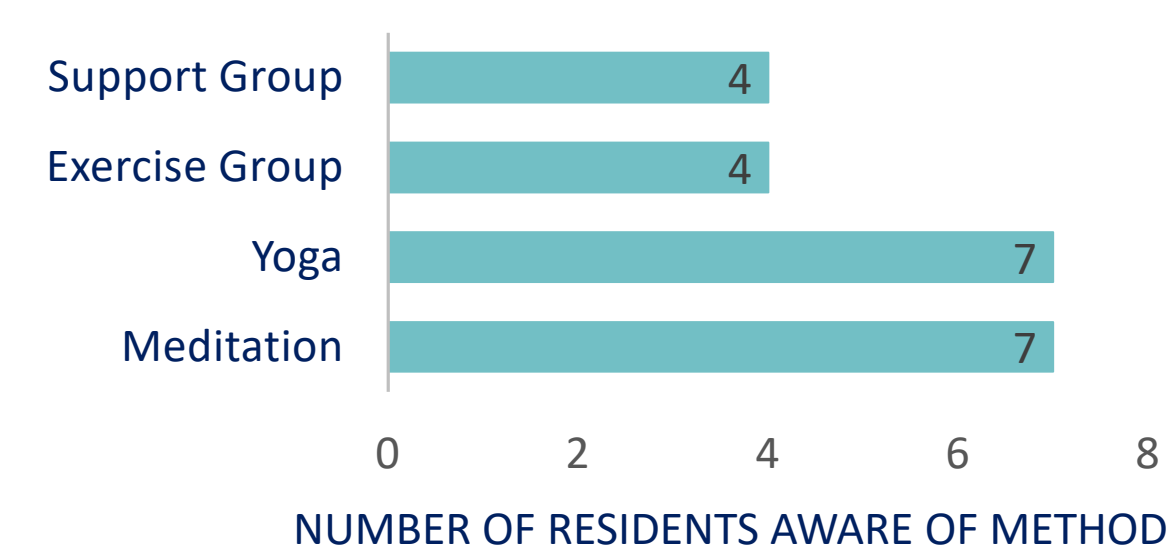
■ Yes ■ No



Stress Level Change Since Coming to COTS

■ Increase
■ No change
■ Decrease

Residents' Awareness of Suggested Stress-Reduction Methods



Discussion

- COTS residents come from a variety of cultural and experiential backgrounds.
- Composition of COTS' inhabitants, and the discrete needs of those inhabitants, are in dynamic flux.
- Most residents indicated they were at least as stressed while living in COTS as when they were homeless.
- Most residents endorsed receptiveness to some form of stress reduction.
- Our recommendations below reflect these findings and incorporate the current literature.
- Study limitations include a small sample size, interviewed at a single time point.
- Suggestions for areas of future study:
 - How homelessness impacts childhood development.
 - Strategies to reduce the impact of homelessness.
 - Parental recognition of stress in children.

Recommendations

- Offer weekly meditation class and pair with independent, free meditation apps. (Consider incentivizing attendance and app use.)
- Assign a flexible space for weekly yoga with a blend of in-person and video-led sessions
- Provide nutrition information sheets to residents and their children.
- Explore implementing a car-share program to empower residents with more flexible transportation.

References

1. Lippert, A.M., Barrett, L.A., . "Stress, Coping, and Mental Health Differences among Homeless People." *Sociological Inquiry* 85, no. 3 (2015): 343-74.
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3. Bhogaonker, Priya. "Impact of Brief Meditation Training on Stress, Distress, and Quality of Life for Homeless Adults." *California Institute of Integral Studies*, 2012.