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Are "Stress Busters" the Solution? Teaching Wellness at the Academic Library

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Green Ribbon,
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About the Cover Image

Mental Health is represented by a green ribbon. In the 19th century, green was the colour used to label people who were considered “insane”.

The mental health community decided to continue to use this colour, but to give it a completely different meaning. Today, the green ribbon represents new growth and new beginnings.

Source: Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre (<http://keltymentalhealth.ca/>)

Topic: LIS and Mental Health

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Are “Stress Busters” the Solution? Teaching Wellness at the Academic Library

by Emily Carlisle

In 2016 the American College Health Association published a National College Health Assessment Survey of 43,000 Canadian post-secondary students, revealing that 89.5% experienced overwhelm from their workload in the previous 12 months. 64.5% of respondents reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety within the same time period, while another 44.4% had at some point felt “too depressed to function.” Taken alone, the survey’s results are troubling enough. Paired with earlier studies, however, the results point to a significant increase in reported mental health issues this decade, and in the last 5 years especially.

The striking increase in reported mental health issues has left college and university counseling offices struggling to meet the demand for their services; at times, offices have waitlists of 50+ students (Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2015). Evidently, there’s a need for more mental health support on campuses—a need that the academic library may be uniquely positioned to fulfill. After all, campus libraries are often open during evenings and on weekends, times when other campus services are closed. They’re also most populated during exam periods, when the student body as a whole generally experiences a surge in stress and anxiety.

Some academic libraries already recognize the possibility in their unique position on campus, providing support for student mental health in the form of “Stress Busters.” Often taking place during exam periods, “Stress Buster” programming includes games, snacks, and activities that encourage students to take regular study breaks. Throughout most of my undergraduate degree at the University of Guelph (2012-2016), our main campus library partnered with services across campus to provide

colouring sheets, pet therapy sessions, ice cream, and Timbit treats to students during the final weeks of each semester. When I started at Western University in Winter 2017, I was pleasantly surprised to find a “Take a Note, Leave a Note” station in the main campus library at the end of the semester, where I left an encouraging note for fellow students. Now a student library assistant at Western Libraries, I’ve learned that the main campus library also sets up a Wellness Station during exams, complete with healthy snacks, colouring materials, and opportunities to talk with volunteers from the Peer Support Centre. A cursory glance at the library websites of a few other Ontario campus libraries shows that McMaster, Queen’s, University of Waterloo, Humber College, and University of Toronto (to name only some) have hosted similar programs in recent years. Recognizing the importance that study breaks have on student mental health, campus libraries are indeed offering students the means to intentionally break from their studies.

Do students recognize the importance of study breaks, though? Student feedback regarding lack of participation in wellness initiatives at Memorial University Libraries revealed that 50% of respondents perceived themselves to be “too busy” to participate (Rose, Godfrey, & Rose, 2015). That response is consistent with theories that—upon beginning a post-secondary education—students readily replace a balanced, healthy lifestyle with increased hours devoted to study. There may, then, be a population requiring wellness support that isn’t being served by initiatives like “Stress Busters”, simply because they don’t make the time. Not always knowing or prioritizing the benefits that an intentional study break can have on one’s mood and wellbeing, students seem to favour prolonged study

over a break for enjoyable leisure.

Despite programming intended to encourage intentional study breaks, academic libraries continue to enable rigorous study. Exam “Stress Buster” programming is often paired with extended library hours and, at some libraries, the provision of late-night free coffee. Interwoven with both is a message implying that it’s acceptable to sacrifice sleep for school and studying, even though it’s now well-known that quality sleep improves both mood and academic performance. In fact, consistent with the theory that students are choosing extended study over intentional breaks, the same study from Memorial University Libraries reported that longer library hours and late-night coffee/tea were more popular among students than activities like yoga, pet therapy, and colouring (Rose, Godfrey, & Rose, 2015).

While the results in the Memorial University Libraries study cannot be generalized across the entire post-secondary student population, the academic library is nevertheless at a crossroads: its initiatives send conflicting messages about student wellness.

Where is it to go from here? I maintain that for the academic library to leverage its ideal position to support student mental health, it must be committed and intentional in its strategy.

Borrowing from *Post-Secondary Student Mental Health* (2013), an organization committed to student mental health must embed its commitment into its vision, mission, and strategic goals. With support for student wellness reflected in its mission, an academic library is equipped to develop clear policies that guide a consistent direction for library practices and programming. The more consistent and dedicated to student wellness its practices and programming, the more an academic library’s culture will foster wellness and enhance student mental health.

As per *Post-Secondary Student Mental Health* (2013),

a commitment to student mental health also requires frequent evaluation and improvement of all services. All library elements, whether intended to directly support student mental health or not, must be examined to determine the message being conveyed about the library’s perspective on student mental health—including instruction, reference interactions, spaces, and hours. Library programs and services *directly* targeting student wellness must be subject to assessments that question their impact on student mental health, with representation from students with lived mental health concerns. After all, there’s no sense expending resources on initiatives not benefiting the population for whom they are intended.

That’s not to say that “Stress Buster” programming should be discontinued. Research cites many chosen “Stress Buster” activities as effective in reducing stress and anxiety and in improving mood. Colouring, for example, has been shown to be a useful method of reducing anxiety (van der Vennet and Serice, 2012), while pet therapy has been proven effective at temporarily subsiding psychological and physiological stress in undergraduate students (Crump and Terry, 2015). Likewise, social media photos from “Stress Buster” events suggest that students appreciate the programming, tagging their friends to inform them of upcoming pet therapy programs, and sharing colouring creations produced at the library.

However, “Stress Busters” are only effective insofar as students participate in the programs. The study from Memorial University Libraries, coupled with research into students’ study vs. leisure habits, suggests that there’s a population of students not benefitting from wellness programming like “Stress Busters” because they aren’t making time to participate. Given the current student mental health crisis, and the known benefits that taking a break can have on mood and academics, the population of students *not* participating in “Stress Busters” (and their reasoning) is worthy of research.

For now, however, I’d argue that academic libraries

have an opportunity to do what they are historically known for doing well: to instruct. Putting their expertise in instruction to use, academic libraries have an opportunity to teach students about the benefits of taking intentional breaks while studying. It's a key wellness message that can be conveyed and reinforced across all elements of the library, and ultimately embedded in the library's mission to shape a library system where students are motivated to view self-care while studying as possible and productive.

My suggestions beg the final question: is it really the academic library's place to care for student mental health? In short, yes. Students populate the library in masses, making it an ideal location for wellness initiatives. More notably, the academic library's mission has always been to support student research and academic success. If the library is to continue upholding this mission, it must work to eliminate barriers to academic success—mental health concerns included.

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