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C.A.R.I.N.G.: A Conceptual Model for Promoting Student Well-Being

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Abstract: From our own experiences as educators, we found that many college students seemed overwhelmed and stressed from a myriad of academic and personal responsibilities. The C.A.R.I.N.G. model provides a new lens for promoting student well-being through the utilization of adult learning principles.

From our own experiences as educators, we found that many college students seemed overwhelmed and stressed from a myriad of responsibilities from academic concerns to personal issues. Many new students seem to fear the appearance of failure and inadequacies while attempting to acquire a new skill set to prepare for the rigors of college academics. Also, many college students may lack preparation for handling the typical barriers faced in the college classroom such as the application of theory and strategy, the ability to use critical and analytical thinking skills, and the adjustment to a higher level of academic coursework.

According to Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Madejski (2004) “a relatively small body of work has sought to examine the relationship between academic success and emotional and social competencies” (p. 164). Furthermore, “a potentially important resource for successfully accomplishing this life transition [the college experience] is positive psychological functioning, otherwise known as positive well-being (PWB)” (Bowman, 2010, p. 180). Based on this gap, the focus of this research project is to explore how positive emotions can influence student success.

We have found that focusing on positive aspects versus negative experiences will lessen the anxiety and stress during this new stage in their lives (Bowman, 2010). By creating an environment which focuses on character strengths, we believe that using positive interventions will improve transition into the academic setting and improve adaptability to academic stressors acquired during course work. In efforts to improve this transition, we discovered that in order to practice positive well-being, an intervention using reflection could be used to help (1) build personal and social resources, (2) increase student engagement, and (3) alleviate negative emotions associated with a sense of failure or attrition (Joseph, Linley, & Harris, 2005). With this process, we have created a conceptual model that provides a way for developing strategies which promotes student well-being through proactive coping. Proactive coping “reflects efforts to build resources that facilitates promotion toward challenging goals and personal growth” (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003, p.396).

The C.A.R.I.N.G. Model

In our model, we selected the acronym C.A.R.I.N.G to describe the steps for developing proactive coping to overcoming academic stressors (see Figure 1).

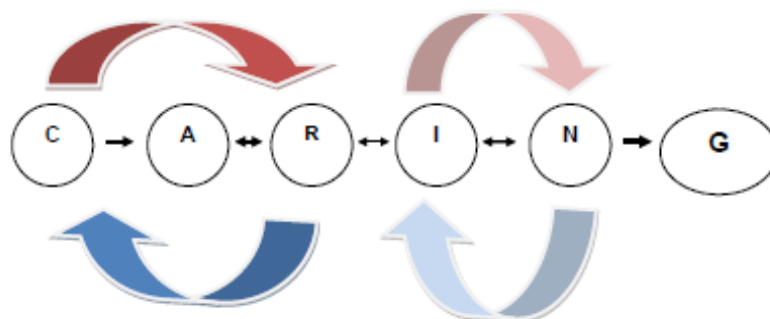


Figure 1

Self-Compassion - “entails acknowledging that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the human condition, and that all people—oneself included—are worthy of compassion” (Neff, 2003, p. 224). By understanding self-compassion, one can begin to appreciate their strengths versus weaknesses on their journey to subjective well-being.

Acting and Reflecting- entails acting on one’s strengths through reflection. This allows students to create a sense of awareness of their own emotional boundaries. This is a recursive cycle of acting and reflecting (Peters, 1991) to build positive relationships between self and others.

Intentionality- refers to action that is taken deliberately by a person to achieve an outcome (Bandura 2001, p. 6). In the intentionality phase, students engage in a planning process for developing well-being.

Navigation- entails an improved level of appraisal for interacting with one’s environment. This new appraisal gives the student a sense of control over how he/she responds and reacts in their learning environment. By having this control students can draw on their strength instead of their weaknesses.

Self-ReGulation- entails “regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions” (Parks, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 606).

The process begins with self-compassion to increase one’s awareness of his/her strengths versus weaknesses. Then, during the action and reflection stage, the participant begins to write, think, and reflect positively on his or her learning experiences. This allows the student the time to view each experience, even the negative experiences, in a more positive way. Also, this reflective time is oriented to drawing out the positives from the learning experience. As this process builds through repetition, the participant builds or accumulates positive feelings leading to a more positive outlook. With a growing positive outlook, the participant’s intentionality leads to more prosocial behaviors. The acting on one’s positive emotions leads to effective navigation in one’s environment. Therefore, as one continues to make prosocial choices and is able to navigate through one’s own environment, one is able to become more and more self-regulated. Finally, the connection between self-regulation and proactive coping is helping the students develop skills for “[seeking] out opportunities, showing initiative, taking action, and persevering until they reach closure by bringing about [positive] change” (Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002, p. 1539).

In order to help students become self-regulated, we propose a positive approach to adult learning strategies. Examples include: reflective journaling, art, music, writing one’s life story, blogs, podcast, verbal journals, poems, or short stories. These adult learning strategies focus on individualized options for helping adult educators facilitate student well-being. Currently,

positive interventions or strategies focus on activities such as writing letters expressing gratitude, creating lists of items to be thankful for, or counting one's blessings to enhance one's level of gratitude (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Simple lists such as writing about five items one is thankful or grateful for can also yield feelings of positivity and well-being (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). Over a period of time, the process of using these strategies can produce positive outcomes such as fostering growth in coping skills, building cognitive and social resources, and developing positive outcomes in daily social and professional relationships (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). Students can use these strategies to structure and find meaning in their experiences, and by looking at the experiences with a positive approach, students can resolve issues by managing their emotions (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) In addition to managing their emotions, students are more likely to be proactive in maintaining a positive environment (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). Overall, students who practice and rehearse positive intervention strategies exhibit more positive well-being and are more likely to become self-regulated learners.

Therefore, one specific strategy which we believe should be used for the C.A.R.I.N.G. model is reflective-gratitude journaling. This type of journaling focuses on writing about personal ideas related to thankfulness and appreciation (Hernandez, 2009). As students write, reflect, and discuss how gratitude shapes their worldview, they can make greater connections between their past experiences and their ideal future selves. By learning how to connect their worldview to their own experiences, students learn how "to find out more about themselves, to appreciate the support that is available to them, and to recognize that the situation is making them more patient, empathetic, and less judgmental" (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). By using reflective-gratitude journaling as a tool to move through the C.A.R.I.N.G. model, students can make opportunities to reevaluate difficult situations, to develop a sense of courage, and to create spiritual, and personal growth (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). Also, reflective-gratitude journaling can "hone students' reflective skills, help students process experiential learning activities, and encourage personal growth and professional development" (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Finally, by focusing on events from a positive perspective, students can learn to process experiences in a more productive way (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006).

When students write about these positive experiences, the reflective nature of "focusing on relieving, replaying, and rehearsing positive experiences sustains and maximizes pleasure related to positive events" (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). Furthermore, Toepfer, Cichy, and Peters (2011) suggest that reflective writing on memories of gratitude positively influences the overall health and well-being of the individual. When reflective-gratitude journal writing is focused on describing a positive event and developing a mindset of gratitude, students found the enjoyment and satisfaction of reflecting on gratitude higher than analyzing past mistakes as a learning process (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). The power of reflective-gratitude journaling is that students take ownership of aspects of well-being (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2011). Reflective-gratitude journaling also provides a safe place for students to write about life circumstances or situations they appreciate which can later be used as a tool for evaluating problematic experiences without being negative or derogatory (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Overall, reflective-gratitude writing helps students gain a sense of understanding and meaning, provide a sense of control over emotion and experience, and integrate ideas of self-understanding (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2011).

By focusing on events from a positive perspective, students can learn to process experiences in a productive way (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). According to Toepfer and Walker (2009), writing multiple letters over a substantial amount of time provides young adult college students a tool for self-growth and overall improved well-being. Also, by using reflective-gratitude journals, students can find opportunities for reevaluating difficult situations, developing a sense of courage, and creating spiritual growth (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). When reflective-gratitude journaling is used as a strategy to improve self-regulation, students have the opportunity to learn about their inner selves in a positive light by reflecting on more positive approaches to their priorities, motivations, and goals (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Barriers to the C.A.R.I.N.G. Model

Although we believe reflective-gratitude journaling is a proven strategy which would work well with our model, there are some possible barriers and risks. One issue is that some students may have had issues with writing journal style assignments in their academic past, and these students may fear that their thoughts or feelings will be ridiculed, or students may feel intimidated (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Furthermore, some students may be concerned with writing narratives which reveal personal traits and feelings about gender, race, sexual orientation, and past family experiences. Students may not want to look back at past memories due to possible trauma (Kerka, 1996). Another possible problem could be a lack of understanding the purpose for reflective-gratitude journaling. For example, students could view writing in a journal as “busy” work due to the instructor failing to direct the reflective process in such a way that students fail to recognize and appreciate their progress in gratitude (Worthen & Isakson, 2007).

Time can also provide problems for both instructors and students. Writing reflective-gratitude journals can be time consuming because the amount of journals over a long period of time can be overwhelming (Jarvis, 2001). Due to the limited amount of time, an instructor may respond in “an unfair, inconsistent, and problematic way,” which can cause students to become frustrated and disinterested in journaling (Dymont & O’Connell, 2010). Also, some first year students have not had any experience with any style of journaling, and instructors must find time to help these students learn how to write in a reflective-gratitude journal (Hettich, 1990).

To overcome these barriers, students need a nurturing environment with stronger connections between its purpose and expectations between instructor and students. By establishing a strong connection between the instructor and student, students will likely be more apt to attempt deeper reflection and positivity because there is more trust involved (Lew and Schmidt, 2011). Finally, despite these barriers associated with reflective-gratitude journaling, Emmons (2007) found that adult students who journaled regularly and reflected upon gratitude reported less illness, better general livelihood, and greater optimism about future goals.

Future Directions

College success courses may be one area where the C.A.R.I.N.G model and the aforementioned proactive coping skills may help with developing student well-being. In addition to increasing student well-being, there is a potential for lower attrition rates. Empirical testing of this model is needed to evaluate the usefulness of the caring model in real-life context. Currently,

research has shown that improving student well-being through positive affect improves self-efficacy and lowers stress and depression (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2011). As researchers, we propose that future research can utilize this model as a viable framework for framing positive interventions in the classroom setting. In regard to influencing the classroom culture, we propose that the C.A.R.I.N.G model provides a new perspective for promoting the positive aspects of this life transition by aiding the student in not only developing proactive coping skills for degree completion, but also important skills for future learning and career goals.

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