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Balancing Stress, Education and Health as a College Student

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COLLEGE: BALANCING STRESS, EDUCATION, AND HEALTH

Balancing Stress, Education and Health as a College Student

Alexandra Cayot

Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

This project focuses on the balancing of stress, education, and health of college students. A large portion of college students struggle to balance their overall physical, mental and emotional health along with their education/course work and tend to stress more because of this. College students face many obstacles in general while also having to juggle both their education and health. Some of these obstacles are, “changes in lifestyle, increased workload, new responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships” (NYU). Due to this, college students' mental and physical health tends to be compromised such as their mental, emotional, and physical health while they strive to keep up with their school work. Therefore, there is a need for a workshop that provides different tips and strategies to reduce that stress while managing college achievement and personal health. The variety of coping strategies college students can adopt to balance their health, education, and stress levels ranges but can include mental/emotional care, physical care, and nutritional care. One effective practice that can be used to assist to balance and reduce stress is meditation. NYU states in their stress article that, “students who engage in meditation practices demonstrated significantly greater reductions in perceived stress than students who did not.” My project addresses this need through a workshop in which CSUMB students will be given a handful of suggestions for stress reduction in the following areas: physical, mental, emotional, and nutritional. By doing this workshop, students are given the opportunity to choose which coping mechanisms they may need and feel will work best for them.

Needs Statement

College students deal with numerous stressors that affect their ability to balance their health and education. Bulo and Sanchez (2014) found that some challenges that many college

students face are financial, environmental, and academic stressors. When these stressors are not properly dealt with, students can attain physical, mental, and/or emotional health issues.

Learning to pinpoint the major stressors and finding ways to positively cope with these stressors will help college students be more active and engaged with their education. When students do not have positive coping mechanisms to assist them with their stress, it deters the students' ability to learn. It is vital to find positive and achievable coping strategies to assist college students so they are able to balance their education, health, and stress. In order for college students to relieve their stress, they must first know what it is that is stressing them and find coping mechanisms to help them. I created a workshop where college students from California State University Monterey Bay College, a CSU in Monterey Bay will learn about a few different coping strategies which include physical, nutritional, and reflective stress relieving mechanisms.

One stressor that many college students face is financial stress and security. Many college students struggle with balancing their education while also having to maintain a job and/or taking out student loans. Though there are some students whose parents are able to financially support them throughout college, not all students have that financial assistance. For instance, a portion of college students may split their college tuition with their parents as well as pay partially for their other living expenses. This can be due to their parents being unable to afford to pay for their child's college in full by themselves. There are also students who pay for their education on their own and have to work their way through college. Even though there are systems that help support students with the financial burdens of getting an education, these systems do not pay off all of the expenses such as tuition, textbooks, living space, food, etc. The financial help does not take away the stress these college students may still feel. When students feel stressed due to

financial burdens, they can become overwhelmed and decide to cope in ways that can cause more problems than solutions.

A second stressor for college students is the life changes they must face while emerging into adulthood. Karyotaki et al (2020), proposed the idea that many first-year college students go through the transitional period of adolescence to young adulthood when going to college. College students' eating and sleeping habits tend to have a drastic change during this transition as well. They have the self-realization that they are on their own in a new environment. Students may or may not go to a college close to home which could become a problem if they are close to their family. Students must take care of themselves and organize their own life and class schedules without the constant reminders they may get from their parents or legal guardians. Hudd et al adds that college students also may not go to school with anyone they knew in their previous school years and may have to start a new social life. This can be hard to juggle while also trying to stay on top of their school work and make them feel isolated which can create more struggles for the students to face.

A third well known stressor that strongly affects college students is the academic expectations and demands they face whether it is from loved ones or the students themselves. College students face a “greater academic demand” as found by Bhujade (2017) , when transitioning from high school to college. The workload students endure increases dramatically and is required at a faster pace once they are in college. Figuring out their own class schedules can be a stressful situation in itself. Also, students may self-impose the pressure to maintain good grades. They can have an added pressure from their parents to get high grades. Gbatongoh Sesay (2019) notes that, if they do not attain these grades, it can create so much stress upon

students and cause health problems for the students emotionally and mentally, which in turn can become physical health problems as well.

College students can have negative reactions towards stressors that can affect their overall well-being. A few negative coping mechanisms that can lead to more problems are, drinking and engaging with drugs. Though these can temporarily reduce whatever is causing them stress for a night or two, students tend to feel worse and drained all around, stopping them from being focused on their education. Another example of negative behaviors towards stress that heavily impacts college students and creates overall health problems is the lack of proper eating and healthy food. When students do not eat enough or eat only junk food, they will have less energy to focus and study and their bodies can take a toll with weight gain or loss. When students are unable to attain proper eating habits, it can affect their overall well-being and education.

Coping with Stress Through Nutritional Care:

Nutritional care is a great way for students to take care of themselves overall as well as supports students to function at their full ability in their education. Ogden et al (2006) states that “a balanced diet can help students increase energy levels, promote a functioning immune system, improve their ability to cope with stress, and increase concentration and performance in school”. To help college students support themselves in their eating habits they can follow a number of solutions. For instance, college students can create low pressure meal preparations for their meals of the week. Creating a schedule to prepare meals for the week is helpful for students' time management and ensures that they will have a meal ready for them to heat up at any time. In correlation with meal prepping, college students can utilize outside resources to save money

while grocery shopping. Such as, using coupons, signing up for club savings and rebate apps like Ibotta where a person gets money back for buying certain items being sold in the store (if the store is available on the app). Using such resources college students are given as well as outside resources allows them to attain a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Coping with Stress by Physical Care:

Physical care such as exercising is another way to help students release stress. Staff from the Mayo Clinic stated that, “exercise in almost any form can act as a stress reliever” . There is no specific activity a person should do instead it is more of a free for all of doing whatever activity makes you feel joy within. Flynn et al (2009) revealed that students that have a GPA of 3.5 or greater are three times more likely to exercise than students with lower grades. This shows that students who exercise also are more likely to have good grades than those who do not exercise at all. Webmd states that “when your body feels good, your mind often follows”. One physical activity that anyone can do is yoga. There are a large amount of yoga poses that people can do to help reduce stress. Another form of exercise is breathing exercises. Webmd also states that when a person practices deep breathing, they turn on their body’s natural ability to relax. This creates a state of deep rest that can change how the body responds to stress. There are various breathing work exercises a person can do to help reduce stress. One final physical coping strategy that many people ignore the importance of is getting proper sleep.

Many college students do not get enough or adequate sleep. The NIH addressed issues between college students and sleep deprivation in the article it states that one consequence of sleepiness or irregular sleep is it negatively impacts a person's memory, learning abilities and overall performance. NIH reported that, more than 80 percent of college students say loss of

sleep negatively affects their academic performance and that college students rank sleep problems as the No. 2 cause of difficulties with academic performance. Stress being the first. A person's lack of sleep can actually also add to their stress level and cause a cycle of stress and sleeplessness. WHO states that people should be getting at least 8 hours of sleep a night and that it is good for a person's body and mind. Getting proper sleep can repair, relax, rejuvenate the body and reverse the effects of stress.

Reflective Coping Mechanisms to Relieve Stress:

Journaling has been known as a great coping mechanism in many aspects of life because it allows for a time of reflection for an individual. The University of Rochester Medical Center states that journaling can allow an individual to gain control over their emotions and improve their mental health. Keeping a journal can help a person have a different perspective in seeing what it is that may be causing them stress. Students can use journaling as one way to identify their stressors and also cope with them.

Another reflective coping mechanism students can use is the practice of meditation. Meditation is known to be beneficial for people's physical and mental well-being. The Mayo Clinic states that some of these benefits are, building skills to manage stress, give you a sense of calm, peace and balance, and gain a new perspective of stressful situations.

The final reflective coping strategy is reaching out to loved ones or group therapy. WHO states that it is essential for our own mental well being to stay in touch with loved ones. If someone does not feel as if s/he has anyone close to them looking for support groups for your stressor can also be very beneficial. WebMd mentions that spending time with a friend or family member who will listen to you is a natural way to calm you and lower your stress. When a

person connects with people physically rather than virtually, the body releases a hormone that stops your fight-or-flight response and a person is able to relax.

It is vital for college students to become aware, if they are not already, of constructive and beneficial coping mechanisms for the various stresses they may endure while getting a proper education. College students need to have positive coping mechanisms in order to push forward in their lives and to create a brighter future for themselves. Understanding and acknowledging the main stressors of the financial, academic, and overall environment that affect college students the most is the first step for students to find productive coping methods. Without these coping mechanisms, college students can mentally, emotionally, and physically create health problems for themselves short and/or long term as well as stunt their growth in their education.

Theory

One theorist whose theoretical work fits well with the targeted age group of young adults is Jeffrey Arnett. Jeffrey Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory, found that many adults ranging from the ages of 18-29 years old felt as if they were stuck in-between their adolescence and being an adult and taking responsibility for themselves. Arnett describes emerging adulthood as consisting of five features which are the age of identity exploration, age of instability, age of self focus, age of feeling in between (as stated above) and the age of possibilities (Munsey 2006).

Many people who attend college are within this age range and are experiencing these different features as well as trying to focus on their education. When a person is going through any or all of these stages at once it can have direct and indirect effects that may cause or bring up stressors. Students who are having to balance exploring their identity, feeling stuck in between

being a young adult versus adult, and having various possibilities to choose from while also trying to focus on their academic career can create a huge amount of stress upon them. This theory influenced my project as I believe it goes hand in hand for new and continuing college students who are either starting their college career path or continuing it and are still trying to figure out what it is they want to do with their life i.e. what career are they going into while exploring who they are.

Consideration of Diversity

“The enrolled student population at California State University-Monterey Bay, both undergraduate and graduate, is 46% Hispanic or Latino, 29% White, 9% Asian American, 8% Two or More Races, 3% Black or African American, 1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native” (CSUMB Enrollment). Of all the undergraduate students at California State University-Monterey Bay, 69% received financial aid through grants or loans in 2020” (Data USA CSUMB). CSUMBs enrollment fast facts stated that for the fall 2022 enrollment count 62% were women while 38% were men which included part-time and full time students. As of fall 2022 the majority of students 45% are between the ages of 21-24 years old. Closely following behind at 34% are students between the ages of 18-20. Students who are 25 years of age or older are 21% of CSUMBs student population. Almost half of the student population (41%) receive Pell grants. Pell grants are grants given to students who have financial struggles and need it to help pay for college. This leads to the notion that around half the students who attend California State University Monterey Bay may have financial struggles and their families may be between low or middle socioeconomic status’.

Learning Outcomes

After the workshop college students should be able to...

1. College students will be able to state at least one physical coping mechanism to utilize when needed/under stress.
2. Will be able to identify three healthy and stress relieving ways to balance their nutrition and education to reduce stress.
3. College students will be able to identify two reflective coping mechanisms to utilize when under stress.

Method

Location and Participants

This project was conducted in a HDFS 350 Life Development class hosted in the College of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences building on the CSUMB campus. I presented my workshop to 19 students in a meeting of HDFS 350 Development Across Lifespan. The students' ethnicities were mostly white and Hispanic and one black male student. The students' ages ranged from low to mid 20's. There were 17 female students and 2 male students in the class.

Procedures and Materials

For this project I used google slides for my presentation and google forms to create the survey assessment for the end of the workshop. The workshop presentation can be found in Appendix A and the assessment survey questions on Appendix B. I first introduced myself and spoke with the participants about why we were all together. I then went on to discuss

the word "stress"; the definition of the word, what are the most common stressors for college students and how stress can affect the body and brain. After we finished our discussion I then told the students about the learning outcomes they would learn from the presentation on how to cope with their stress physically, how to cope through nutritional care, and coping skills through reflection.

For the first lesson I spoke about a few different physical coping mechanisms the students could try to help relieve their stress. The first example was yoga, I talked about different yoga techniques that were directed to help relieve stress and then had the students try out a couple of the poses with me. Next, I spoke about breathing techniques and which ones they could do in order to help alleviate stress. For the last two physical coping mechanisms I spoke upon creating a nighttime routine that included a sleeping schedule to help balance their stress. Along with that, I expressed how simply taking time out for themselves and doing whatever activities that bring them joy will help get rid of some stress for them.

In the second lesson I talked about nutritional care and how it can affect college students' stress levels. I informed the class the importance of avoiding large amounts of junk food, alcohol, and other substances. Intaking large quantities of most things, especially the three listed can affect the body and mind as well and are intertwined with one's stress levels. I then went on to discuss a couple of other nutritional coping examples that they could utilize. For example, easy low pressure meal preparation techniques they could do as well as informed the students of resources that allow them to save money and get cheaper food that is not unhealthy.

In the third and final lesson I talked about reflective coping mechanisms for stress relief. The first example I talked about was journaling and how it helps people's stress levels decrease. I

asked the students how they were feeling and then had the students do a quick journal free writing exercise about anything they wanted. After they finished I asked them how they were feeling again and looked to see if any of their answers changed. The next reflective example I spoke about was group therapy and how group therapy may be a good option depending on the circumstances of people's lives. The last example I spoke upon was meditation and the benefits mediation can have. I had the students listen to a brief meditative video and do the exercise within the video. After the meditation was over, students then had to complete an assessment survey I created off of google forms. The survey asked for basic information such as, their names, gender, emails, and then went onto questions for the learning outcomes and finally a couple questions about whether or not they learned something new and if they would utilize any of the coping strategies I taught them.

Results

Learning Outcome 1 was that college students would be able to state at least one physical coping mechanism to utilize for stress relief. I created a survey using google forms to assess all of the learning outcomes. For the first lesson's material students were asked, "Name at least one physical activity you can do to help reduce stress." All 19 students were able to state at least one physical activity and the most common answer stated was yoga. There were some students who answered more than one activity. Since all students were able to give a correct answer, I would say the first learning outcome was fully met.

Learning outcome 2 was that students will be able to identify three healthy and stress relieving ways to balance their nutrition and education to reduce stress. Students were asked, "What are three nutritional coping strategies you can use to help reduce stress?" With the survey

I created with google forms I examined the students' answers to the second question where 6 out of 19 students, (32%), were able to identify 3 healthy and stress relieving ways to balance their stress and education. Nine out of 19 students, (47%), were able to identify 2 healthy coping strategies. Lastly, 4 out of 19 students, (21%) were able to identify 1 healthy coping mechanism. For this workshop, a learning outcome had to have 85% of the students to get 2 or more answers correct to pass. Since only 32% of students were able to get all three strategies and 47% were able to identify at least 2 out of 3 healthy coping mechanisms I think that it was partially met.

Learning Outcome 3 was that college students will be able to identify two reflective coping mechanisms to utilize when under stress. Based on the question, “What are two reflecting coping mechanisms you can utilize when under stress?”, 13 out of the 19 students, (68%), who participated were able to identify two reflective coping mechanisms. Four out of the 19, (21%), were able to identify at least one correct coping mechanism. And 2 out of the 19, (11%), students were unable to identify any of the reflective coping strategies I described to them in the workshop presentation. The majority of the answers for this question was journaling and meditation. This could be because I had the students do a quick free write journaling exercise and a 10 minute meditation towards the end of the presentation. Since this learning outcome needed students to only identify two reflective coping mechanisms and 32% of the students could only identify 1 or none, this learning outcome I believe that it was also only partially met.

Discussion

Successes

College students have a hard time being able to balance their health, education, and stress. This project revolved around college students learning about and attaining physical,

nutritional and reflective coping mechanisms to help reduce stress and find a balance for all three. It was overall quite successful though 2 out of my 3 learning outcomes were only partially met. I think the first learning outcome was fully met because I had the students do a quick yoga session where we did three stress relieving poses and all but one person did all of the poses. The second learning outcome was only partially met and I think it is due to the fact that I didn't have any sort of activity for this learning outcome for the students to participate in. For the third learning outcome I believe the majority of students were able to get it fully correct was because I had the students do a quick free write journaling exercise and a 10 minute meditation towards the end of the presentation.

I also asked a couple follow up questions as well on the survey. One question asked was, "Do you feel you have learned new and/or more ways to help support yourself when under stress from this workshop?" 18 out of the 19 students that participated said yes. The second question asked was, "Will you use any of these coping mechanisms to help support yourself when under stress in school or elsewhere?" Another 18 out of 19 said yes and the 1 person left said maybe. This could be because I had the students do a quick free write journaling exercise and a 10 minute meditation towards the end of the presentation. On a final positive note, at the end of my presentation workshop stated he hadn't realized he felt stressed until listening and doing some of the coping exercises. I thought it was nice to know that I was able to help bring awareness to the young man.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that may have limited the effectiveness of my workshop. For one, I didn't have as much time as I would have liked, maybe if I had separated the lessons

into a couple of days, it would have helped the students really attain the information. For example the second learning outcome focused on nutritional coping mechanisms, if I had more time I would have been able to really emphasize the nutritional coping mechanisms for the students as well as find an activity that everyone could have done to help them. I believe not having an activity to do learning outcome 2 could be a good reason as to why it was the least properly answered question. Another limitation was that this workshop was not as inclusive as I originally thought it would be. It was inclusive to genders and ethnicities but I didn't take into account people who are disabled or people who have a low socioeconomic status.

Future Direction

For one, during the presentation there was a majority of female students who were in the class as 17 were female and 2 were male. I feel that more men could have used this type of workshop and gained some insight around this topic. I would like to have reached more male college students as well though. I plan to spread my new found knowledge to strangers, peers, and loved ones as it isn't solely for college students and could actually be helpful for everyone such as any person with a job, family, etc... Everyone deserves to know and gain some sort of coping mechanisms to utilize when under stress. On a final positive note, at the end of my presentation workshop a young male student stated he hadn't realized he felt stressed until listening and doing some of the coping exercises. I thought it was nice to know that I was able to help bring awareness to the young man.

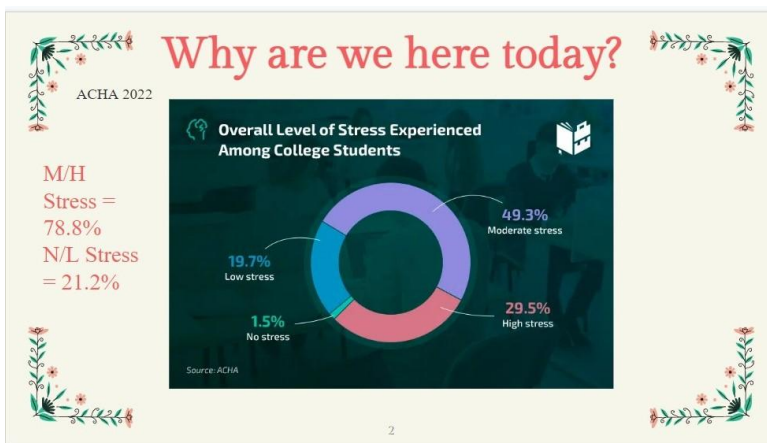
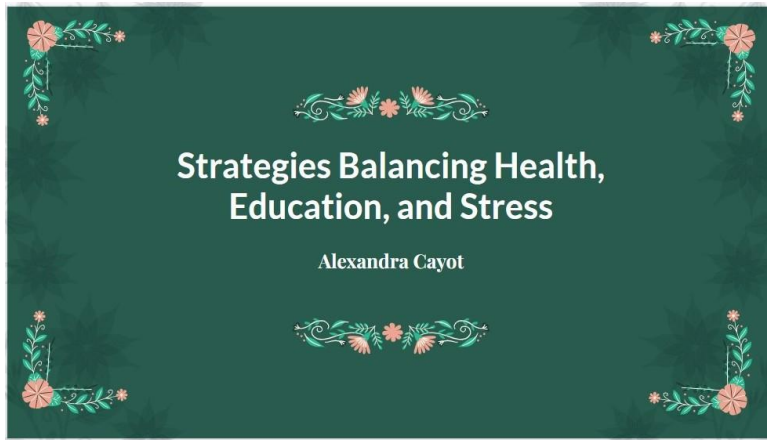
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Appendix A

Workshop Presentation



What is stress?

WHO defines stress as “Stress can be defined as any type of change that causes physical, emotional or psychological strain. Stress is your body's response to anything that requires attention or action”

3

What are some of the most common stressors college students face?

- Increased responsibilities (Exs- financial and academic demands)
- Changes in lifestyle such as eating and sleeping habits
- Environmental ie Interpersonal relationships

4

Why are we here continued.. (Stats)

- 64.5% of college students with relationship problems feel stressed because of them (ACHA).
- 41.3% of students claim stress is the biggest reason for poor academic performance (ACHA).
- Financial problems are a source of stress for 74% of college students. Where 33% of students think about dropping out of college due to financial stress (Ohio State University).
- 31% of students claim that academic demands are the top stressors for a college student. Classes and workload are the third major source of stress with 23%, while homework places fourth with 13% (Mental Health.net).

5

How Does Stress Affect You?

WHO states that, "stress affects both the brain and body. Little bit of stress is good for people to perform and protect themselves but too much stress can overwhelm them leading to fight, flight or freeze response."

Stress triggers a combination of signals from both hormones and nerves. These signals cause your adrenal glands to release hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. The result is an increase in heart rate and energy as part of the fight-or-flight response. (Healthline)

6



Learning Outcomes

After this workshop you will be able to...

1. College students will be able to demonstrate at least one physical coping mechanism to utilize when needed/under stress.
2. Will be able to identify and demonstrate three healthy and stress relieving ways to balance their nutrition and education to reduce stress.
3. College students will be able to identify two reflective coping mechanisms to utilize when under stress.

8

Physical Coping Mechanisms

{Yoga} 5 minute session

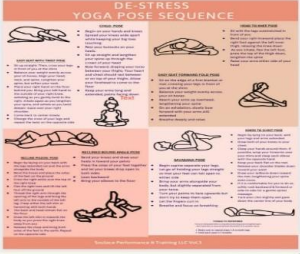
<p>Standing Forward Bend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stretches hamstrings, thighs and hips • Effective for stress relief, fatigue and mild depression 	<p>Child Pose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quietens the nervous system and lymphatic system • The resting posture eases stress and soothes the mind
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9

Physical Coping Mechanisms

Corpse Pose

- Effects: Full body relaxation by putting body at ease
- Slows breathing, lowers blood pressure and quietyens the nervous system



10

Physical Coping Mechanisms Continued..

2. Breathe work

-“Breathing is an automatic function of the body that is controlled by the respiratory centre of the brain. When we feel stressed, our breathing rate and pattern changes as part of the ‘fight-or-flight response’.” (BetterHealth.vic.gov.au)

-“Scientific studies have shown that controlling your breath can help to manage stress and stress-related conditions” (BetterHealth.vic.gov.au).

How:

- Quiet/relaxed environment
- Relax body/Untense your muscles
- In your nose ~ Out your mouth (hold 5 secs in & out)


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Physical Coping Mechanisms Continued..

3. Create a nighttime/sleeping routine 4. Any activities that bring you joy

Side effect of stress = struggle to sleep Exs: art, walk, do nothing, WHATEVER (interchangeable)

-Consistent -Quiet -Dark -Relaxing -No tech 30-60 min before desired sleep time -Try to exercise in the day but not right before bed -No large meals, caffeine, and alcohol before bedtime



12

*** Nutritional coping mechanisms to balance stress ***

- People who suffer from stress may lack the time or motivation to prepare nutritious, balanced meals, or may skip or forget to eat meals.
- Ogden et al (2006) states that “a balanced diet can help students increase energy levels, promote a functioning immune system, improve their ability to cope with stress, and increase concentration and performance in school”

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Nutritional coping mechanisms to balance stress

- 1. Mindful Eating: Avoid junk food, alcohol, other substances etc.**
 - a. Drugs, alcohol, junk food can actually stress your body more
- 2. Resources to save money when buying food**
 - a. E.g- Ibotta, grocery store rewards, coupons
- 3. Healthy Cheap Snack Ideas:**


Ex- fruits, veggies, grains, tuna salad, trail mix.



14

Nutritional coping mechanisms to balance stress

- 1. Low pressure meal prepping (Breakfast)**
 - Protein Drinks (Ensure/Boosts) ~
 - Parfaits ~ Cereal ~ Oatmeal
- 2. Low pressure meal prepping (Lunch/Dinner)**
 - Grains, protein, & veggies
 - a. chicken/rice/green beans
 - b. Shrimp/quinoa/zucchini



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Reflective Coping Mechanisms

Journaling: (5 min Free Write)

- Gain control over emotions
- Gain different perspectives of stressful situations
- Identify stressors/cope with stressors

Talk to a loved one or group therapy:

- natural way to calm yourself
- releases a hormone to stop fight or flight instincts.



Reflective Coping Mechanisms

Mediation (10 minute meditation)

Many benefits such as:

- Eliminate jumbled thoughts
- Building skills to manage stress
- Give you a sense of calm, peace and balance
- Gain a new perspective of stressful situations



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6X5oEIg6Ak>



Survey/Assessment

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gz1zOV1KzQwnbf6lIJW3vAUWEmmGhiGUYUV03VxwCI/edit>



Appendix B

Workshop Assessment Survey

A screenshot of a Google Forms survey titled "Workshop Assessment Survey". The browser address bar shows the URL: docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyo1bS7X2cwhbkTDT01-MUPWGDGQpb1B7Dxdk5Lx3g-gfhsJw/viewform. The form contains the following fields:

- Name ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- Gender? ***: A radio button selection with three options: male, female, and other.
- Email ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- 1. Name at least one physical activities you can do to help reduce stress? ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".

The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the search bar with "Type here to search", several application icons, and the system tray with the date "12/19/2022" and time "8:35 PM".

A continuation of the Google Forms survey. The browser address bar is the same as in the previous screenshot. The form contains the following questions:

- 2. What are three nutritional coping strategies you can use to help reduce stress? ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- 3. What are two reflecting coping mechanisms you can utilize when under stress? ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".
- 4. Do you feel you have learned new and/or more ways to help support yourself when under stress from this workshop? ***: A radio button selection with two options: Yes and No.
- 5. Will you use any of these coping mechanisms to help support yourself when under stress in school or elsewhere? ***: A text input field with the placeholder "Your answer".

The Windows taskbar at the bottom is identical to the previous screenshot, showing the search bar, application icons, and system tray with the date "12/19/2022" and time "8:35 PM".