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A Preliminary Investigation into the Impact of a First-Year Stress Management Seminar

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Abstract

Research reveals that high stress levels in undergraduate students may negatively impact their emotional and physical well-being. Short-term approaches to introducing stress management on college campuses have been explored. The purpose of this preliminary study was to determine whether a first-year stress management seminar course helped students reduce their stress a year after completing the course, identify which stress management skills students preferred, and assess the effectiveness of specific teaching techniques on student learning. Participants included students enrolled in two sections of a first-year stress management course. A survey was administered in 4 waves during the 2020 to 2021 academic year. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Positive trends emerged regarding students' abilities to cope with stress. They preferred an active approach to learning and used cognitive techniques, support, and humor to manage stressors. Furthermore, this study provides instructors with stress management techniques they can incorporate into their classes and share with their students.

The transition from high school to college is a very stressful time for young adults. In fact, college bound students ranked starting college as one of their top three life stressors (Bland et al., 2012). In addition, the American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019 report indicated that since 2015 college freshmen have experienced increased levels of physical and emotional distress (Stolzenberg et al., 2020). Although the report did not identify a specific reason for this trend (Stolzenberg et al., 2020), several studies have shown that stressors such as finances, relationships, social media use, academic performance, and the challenge of balancing schoolwork with social activities impact a college student's

overall wellbeing (Dvořáková et al., 2017; Modrego-Alarcón et al., 2021; Wyatt et al., 2017).

The role of acute and chronic life stressors is detrimental to a college student's emotional well-being as they have been strongly associated with suicidality, mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019). Additional results from Karyotaki et al. (2020) indicated that stress related to one's own health predicted an increased likelihood of having two of these mental health disorders. These findings coincide with previous research that showed mental health for college students was worse during 2019 and 2020, as they were focused on avoiding exposure to Covid-19

(American Psychological Association [APA], 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020). More specifically, depression, changes in sleep, and dietary patterns were also reported (APA, 2020).

Due to the high prevalence of stress and the undesirable effects it has on students' minds and bodies, various stress management approaches have been implemented on college campuses. For example, some universities provide free access to self-help courses, mindfulness-based apps, and incorporate wellbeing practices into their coursework (Eva, 2019; Roy, 2018). Yusufov et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the efficacy of stress reduction interventions employed on college campuses and determined that the most commonly used interventions were cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), psychoeducation, relaxation training, coping skills training, and social support. Results showed that irrespective of the combination of stress management techniques used, college students reported reduced stress and anxiety levels. However, the studies included within the meta-analysis did not incorporate a long-term follow up component. Therefore, the extent and duration to which the various interventions impacted the participants' overall well-being remains unknown.

Sommerville et al. (1984) were among the first researchers to conduct an empirical research study on the long-term benefits of a stress management course for college students. Participants in their study learned about a variety of coping skills throughout a 16-week course. Somerville and colleagues collected data from their participants at the beginning of the semester, at the end of the semester, and one year later. Results from this study showed that following this course, students' stress levels decreased, and they maintained lower levels of stress over time.

Students attributed their success to increased awareness of personal stressors, learning about the relationship between stress and one's body, and practicing coping skills techniques.

A more recent study (Jafari, 2017) also supports the long-term benefits of a college level course aimed at teaching students' skills to reduce their stress. In this study, undergraduate students were enrolled in a full semester Life 101 course; whereby, the content focused on promoting the development of a healthy lifestyle. After taking the course, Jafari (2017) reported that students succeeded at incorporating positive habits into their lives, as they ate healthier, exercised more, and experienced less stress. These changes were sustained after a one-year follow-up assessment.

To our knowledge, limited research exists on whether a first-year cohort of students benefit from a stress management course or seminar. The above-mentioned studies recruited undergraduate and graduate students without specifically focusing on their year of study (Sommerville et al., 1984; Yusufov et al., 2018). Others, Jafari (2017) and Russler (1991) examined the benefits of teaching students stress management techniques to students from specific majors, such as health sciences and nursing, as those are perceived to be very stressful career paths.

Purpose

The present study addresses these gaps by exploring the impact of a first-year seminar that focused on teaching stress theory and stress management techniques to students from a variety of majors. Participants were followed from their freshman year through their sophomore year of college. More, specifically first-year students took this

seminar in Spring 2020 and reported their levels of stress at baseline (two weeks into the semester), at the end of the Spring 2020 semester, two weeks into the Fall 2020 semester, and finally towards the end of the Spring 2021 semester.

We established three goals for this study. The first was to determine which coping skill students most often chose to manage their stress. The second goal was to determine which of the evidence-based teaching techniques students perceived to be the most beneficial in learning course material. Lastly, we wanted to know whether a semester long stress management seminar was helpful to students to manage their stress levels.

Course Overview

Course Outline

The stress management seminar was intended to be taught in-person two times per week. Each class meeting was scheduled for 75 minutes in duration. However, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the students returned home in March 2020 and completed the course in an asynchronous on-line format. Jerrold Greenberg's (2013) *Comprehensive Stress Management* textbook was recommended for students to use as a reference but was not a required text. Each stress and stress management topic covered within the course included a didactic component and an active learning component (Table 1). Prior to moving to a fully asynchronous course in March 2020, the lead researcher provided a brief lecture and then showed a video that either reinforced the material or demonstrated a specific technique (i.e., diaphragmatic breathing). After the presentation of the material, the lead researcher either guided the students through

an experiential exercise or in small groups they worked on various exercises (i.e., reframing potentially stressful situations worksheet). In addition, all students completed an in-person presentation on a health problem that is potentially exacerbated by stress and discussed evidence-based coping skills.

Mid-March of 2020 the course transitioned from in-person to an asynchronous format. In this format the lead researcher asked students to watch short didactic lectures created by the researcher and continue to watch videos demonstrating various stress management techniques. Instead of meeting in small groups, students completed weekly discussion posts. The prompts were specific to course material learned that week and students were required to respond to at least one peer. The last two weekly discussion posts required students to try one stress management technique of their choice and reflect on their experience. During the final six weeks of the semester, students interviewed an individual who had experience in their field of interest. They inquired about the stressors of that job and researched evidence based coping skills that individuals can employ to effectively manage those stressors. Subsequent to the interview and completing their research, they wrote a paper integrating their findings.

Course Content

Smith (2021), one of the researchers for this current study, developed an evidence-based model for teaching a first-year stress management seminar. Based on stress reactivity theories, students were taught how to manage the physiological and psychological manifestations of stress. According to Hans Selye (1956), a pioneer in the field of stress and stress management, a universal answer to managing stress does not

exist. Therefore, throughout the semester students were introduced to a variety of stress management techniques. Class assignments were designed so that through the trial-and-error process students identified the stress management tools that worked best for them.

Stress and Physiological Reactivity

During the first two weeks of the first-year seminar, students were taught the following regarding how an individual's body is affected by short-term and long-term stressors. In the beginning of the seminar, students were taught that an individual's body is affected by short-term and long-term stressors. Walter Cannon (1932) first identified the fight-or-flight response, which is an individual's physiological reaction to an immediate stressor. Hans Selye (1956) went on to detail a three-phase process referred to as general adaptation syndrome that explains how an individual's body is negatively impacted by prolonged stressors. Following this lesson on stress theory, students learned about the relaxation response which is an evidence-based strategy used to counter the negative physiological reactions of a stressor (Benson, 1974). It is elicited by repeating a word, phrase, or a prayer for approximately 10-minutes per day. When other thoughts arise, individuals say "oh, well," and return to their chosen word. In addition, students also learned the benefits of diaphragmatic breathing, as this stress management tool also reduces the physiological effects of stress on the body. When individuals take slow, deep breaths, the process aids in calming the nervous system (Hamasaki, 2020). Students were provided with written material about these strategies, shown videos demonstrating these techniques and had an opportunity to practice them within the classroom setting. In addition, they had access to written materials and videos on the class Learning

Management System (LMS), Blackboard, throughout the semester so that they could practice these stress management techniques independently.

Stress and Psychological Reactivity

As the semester progressed, students also learned that an individual's stress reaction has a psychological component; whereby, when a group of individuals are presented with the same life event, they may have different perspectives or viewpoints. For example, in the case of students, exams may be perceived as very stressful, or they can be perceived as an opportunity to show their instructor that they have mastered the course material. More specifically, students within the course were taught about Lazarus's model of appraisal (1984) and how it applies to stressors within their lives. Lazarus referred to the initial evaluation of a life event as the primary appraisal process. The second step of this model is known as the secondary appraisal. If a stressor is deemed to be threatening, an individual then evaluates whether they possess sufficient resources to respond to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

It was the intent of the lead researcher to provide students with cognitive coping skills, such as reframing and self-talk so that when they are confronted with a perceived obstacle, they have the tools to modify their unhelpful thought patterns. Although students might not be able to avoid a stressor, such as an exam, they can change the way they think about it. In doing so, they learn that they have more control over the stressor than they initially thought. When individuals do not believe they have control over an event, it can lead to an increase in their stress level (Hughes et al., 2011). After reviewing the cognitive model of appraisal with students they were provided with scenarios in which a

college student encountered potential stressors. Together they shared ideas for reframing the situation so that it was perceived as manageable and less overwhelming.

Coping Skills Mind and Body

Students were also introduced to yoga and mindfulness, as these are evidence-based coping skills that address both the physiological and psychological component of stress. Yoga (Villate, 2015) and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 2013) are examples of mind-body practices; whereby, individuals are encouraged to keep their minds focused on the present moment rather than think about their past or their future. This course material was taught in an asynchronous fashion during the second half of the 2020 Spring semester due to COVID-19 protocols. Therefore, instead of these students participating in an in-person group yoga class, the instructor assigned a yoga video for students to follow along with on their own. Students also completed mindfulness activities independently, such as mindful eating and scheduling time during their day to pay attention to how their mind and body felt.

Humor

In contrast to yoga and mindfulness, the use of humor as a coping skill does not focus as much on increasing an individual's self-awareness about their mind/body connection. In fact, several studies demonstrated that when humor is used in an appropriate fashion, it does not significantly reduce stress but helps people cope better with their stressors (Bartzik et al., 2021; Moran & Hughes, 2006; Moran & Massam, 1997). Shirley (2015) proposed that humor allows individuals to perceive stressors as less threatening and in turn increases their confidence to manage

stressors more effectively. Moreover, Moran and Massam (1997) asserted that humor leads to improvements in an individual's physical well-being, communication with others, and social bonding. The instructor provided students with articles that discussed the relationship between humor and stress, but a specific activity related to these coping skills was not assigned to them.

Social Support

Social support can come from individuals, groups, or communities. Ratelle et al. (2013) and Thoits (1995) found that support from family members, friends, and significant others are an essential component to improving an individual's emotional well-being. In addition, a strong social network increases an individual's self-confidence and belief in their abilities to overcome various obstacles (APA, 2022). Throughout the course, the importance of having a trusted support system was reinforced, as students researched evidenced-based coping skills for their health-based projects and written reflections.

Methods

Participants

The initial sample included 34 college freshmen. The sample was self-selected, as it consisted of students who chose to enroll in the stress management seminar. Two sections of the course were taught by the same instructor, a psychology professor and lead researcher of the project. Students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and their decision would not impact their final

Table 1

Topics covered during the 16-week stress management seminar

Week	Topics	Week	Topics
1	Syllabus review and define stress and stress theory	9	Cognitive interventions: Reframing and self-talk
2	Stress psychophysiology and stress and illness	10 & 11	Discuss how to conduct an interview and write final paper: occupational stress and coping skills, review occupational stressors
3	How to find, read, and review a research article and how to develop and deliver an effective presentation for evidenced based health paper and presentation	12 & 13	Yoga and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
4 & 5	Define stress management begin to review stress management strategies: lifestyle, sleep, diet, relaxation responses	14	Discuss family stress and cultural stress
6 & 7	Health problem and evidence-based coping skill presentation	15	Meet with professor to review draft of final paper
8	Assertiveness Training	16	Turn in final paper

grade. There were two males enrolled in each section of the course; therefore, to ensure their comfort in answering survey questions and maintain perceived anonymity gender data was not collected. Students were informed that they would be asked to complete a survey four times over the course of the 2020/2021 academic year. Due to attrition of participants the sample sizes were different for each wave: time 1, $n = 34$; time 2, $n = 31$; time 3, $n = 16$; time 4, $n = 11$.

Measures

The researchers created a survey specifically for this study. The survey questions were based on the principles of stress theory, stress management, and effective course instruction. Three areas were assessed: the awareness of physical, cognitive, or behavioral changes students experienced when stressed, the choice of coping strategies students utilized when feeling stressed, and the evidence-based teaching techniques students found most useful. The researchers first piloted a preliminary survey. Based on the results we obtained, we subsequently made revisions to create a final survey. Our data are based on the final survey.

The preliminary survey was piloted in Fall 2018 by students enrolled in two sections of the stress management seminar taught by the lead researcher. Based on students' responses, several of the questions were reworded to better capture the students' experience in the three areas being investigated. An open-ended question was also added to give students an opportunity to share additional feedback. In Fall 2019 this revised and final survey was administered to students enrolled in two stress management sections also taught by the lead researcher. Data that were collected from these students

appeared to better assess the information the researchers wanted to explore.

The final survey consisted of scales measuring the awareness of physical, cognitive, or behavioral changes students experienced when stressed, the choice of coping strategies students utilized when feeling stressed, and the evidence-based teaching techniques students found most useful. An open-ended question regarding whether or not students found the stress management course helpful was also included.

The awareness of changes and the teaching techniques subscales contained multiple choices from which participants could choose multiple options. The awareness of changes scale had five options, for example "I experience physical changes in my body (e.g., increased muscle tightness or pain, stomach discomfort, headaches, racing heart)." The teaching techniques scale contained eight choices, for example "Trying the technique in class (e.g., deep breathing, yoga)." The coping strategies students utilized subscale contained eight questions which were answered utilizing a 4-point scale, 0 (I am not familiar with this coping strategy) to 3 (I always use this coping strategy). An example item from this scale is, "I use breathing techniques (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing)." The 4-point scale was collapsed into a dichotomous response, 0 (0 [I am not familiar with this coping strategy]; 1[I never use this coping strategy]) and 1 (2 [I sometimes use this coping strategy]; 3 [I always use this coping strategy]), for data analysis purposes.

Procedure

This longitudinal study was conducted at a private university in the Northeastern part of the United States and was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. One of the university's curriculum requirements requires all freshmen students to participate in a first-year seminar course during their Fall or Spring semester. Any instructor at the university may teach a seminar course; therefore, the course content is specific to their respective discipline. The lead researcher, who has expertise within the field of health psychology, taught both sections of the course.

The students in the first-year stress management seminar completed the first survey at the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester. This first survey contained two subscales: 1) the awareness of changes students experienced when stressed subscale and 2) the different coping strategies students utilized when feeling stressed subscale. The third subscale, the teaching techniques scale, was omitted during the first wave, as the students had not yet completed the course. All three subscales were administered in the following three waves of survey administration: end of Spring 2020 semester; end of Fall 2020 semester; end of Spring 2021 semester. The survey was administered via SurveyMonkey with students being emailed the link to the survey for each wave to their university emails.

Results

A multiple response analysis was conducted utilizing SPSS. This method of data analysis was conducted due to two of the subscales, the awareness of changes and the teaching techniques subscales, each having one multiple-response question with several binary variables available for participants to

choose from when answering. The data for the third subscale, coping strategies students utilized, were transformed into dichotomous data in order to analyze using the multiple response analysis. This was done as the researchers were interested in knowing the proportion of participants who selected the various choices. We were unable to conduct Chi Square analysis in order to find statistical significance as the format of data collection did not meet the requirements for conducting such an analysis. Thus, multiple response analysis was conducted as the percentages in multiple response analysis indicate the occurrence of an option among the participants.

Awareness of Changes Subscale

As can be seen in Figure 1, the highest proportion of students within each wave of the survey experienced changes in thoughts (Time 1: 79.4%; Time 2: 90.0%; Time 3: 81.3%; Time 4: 90.9%). This was followed by experiencing physical changes (Time 1: 76.5%; Time 2: 60.0%; Time 3: 50.0%; Time 4: 54.5%). In the first three waves, participants reported experiencing changes in behavior the third most (Time 1: 41.2%; Time 2: 43.3%; Time 3: 43.8%). This change was prevalent the least in the fourth wave (18.2%). Just feeling stressed, was reported as the third most prevalent experience in the fourth wave (27.3%) but the least reported as prevalent in the first three waves (Time 1: 35.3%; Time 2: 16.7%; Time 3: 12.5%).

Coping Strategies Used When Stressed Subscale

As can be seen in Figure 2, there were three strategies used by participants at different waves of the survey with 100% "I look for different ways of viewing the

Figure 1

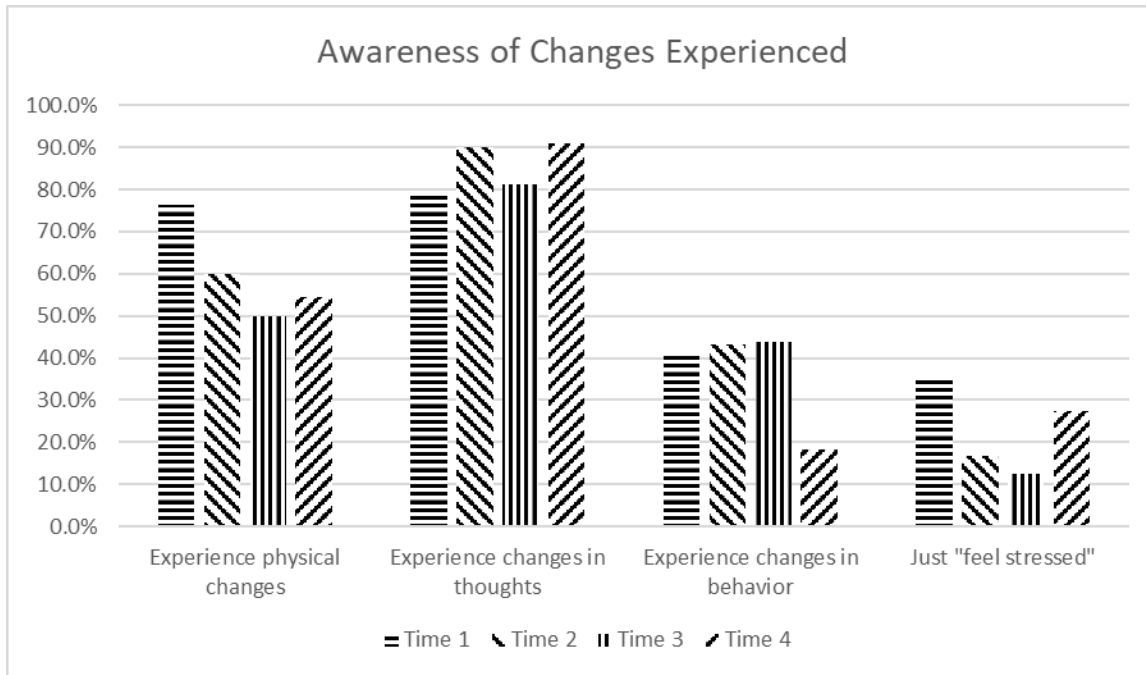
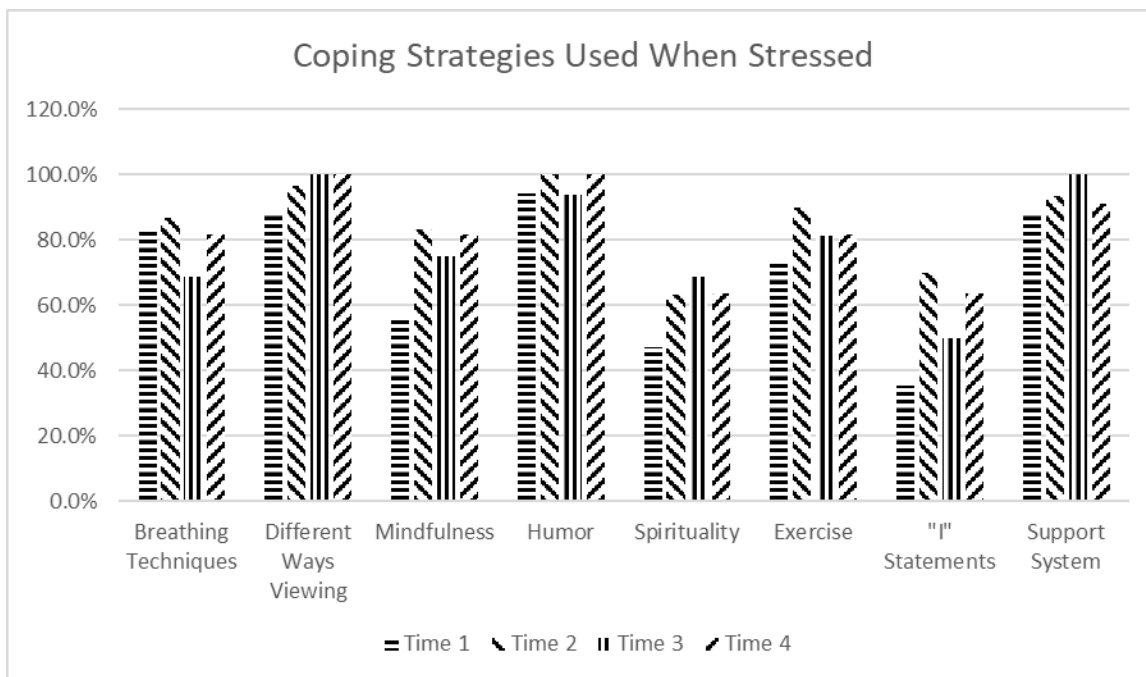


Figure 2



stressful situation” Time 3 & Time 4; “I use humor” Time 2 & Time 4; “I look to my support system for comfort or advice” (Time 3). The next prevalent strategies within the waves included, “I look for different ways of viewing the stressful situation” in Time 2 (97.7%); “I use humor” in Time 1 (94.1%) and in Time 3 (93.8%); “I use exercise, which includes yoga” in Time 2 (90.0%); and “I look to my support system for comfort or advice” in Time 2 (93.3%) and in Time 4 (90.9%). The least prevalent strategies, those reported by less than 50% of participants, as being used included “I use spirituality” in Time 1 (47.1%); and “I use “I” statements” in time 1 (35.3%).

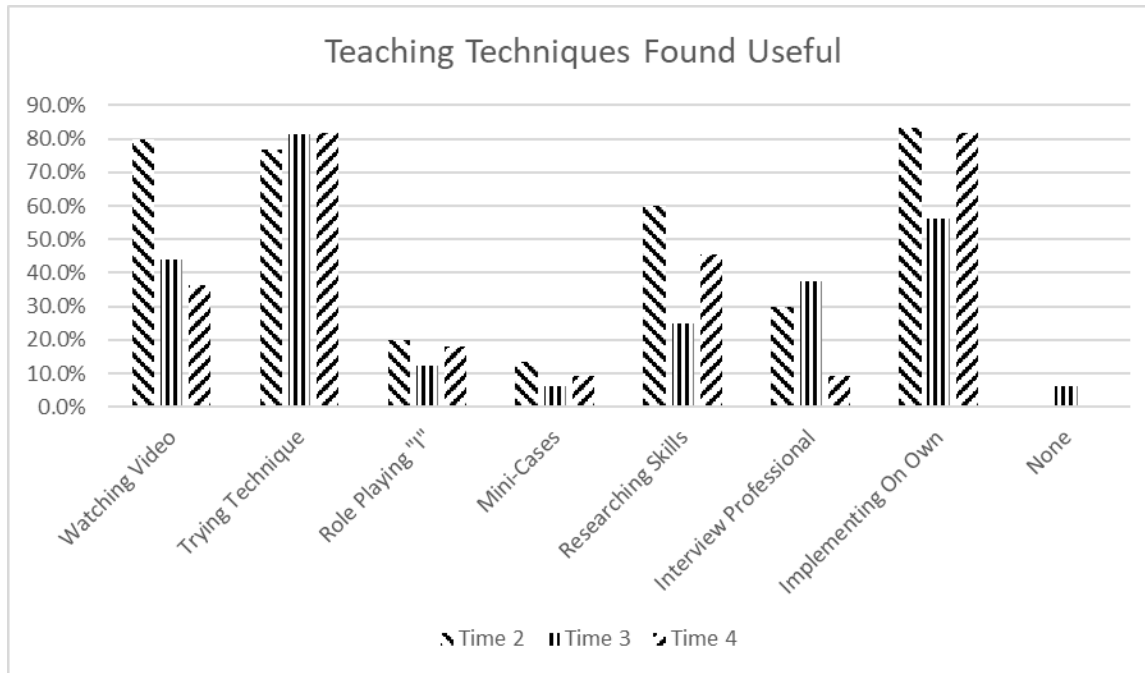
Teaching Techniques Found Useful Subscale

As noted previously, this subscale was not given in the first wave of the survey due to the students having just started the class at the first survey. As can be seen in Figure 3, the highest prevalence of teaching techniques students found useful included: “Watching a video about the technique” in Time 2 (80.0%); “Trying the technique in class” in Time 3 (81.3%) and Time 4 (81.8%); and “Implementing stress management techniques on your own for discussion board assignments” in Time 2 (83.3%) and Time 4 (81.8%). The least useful techniques reported (less than 50% in prevalence) included: “Watching a video about the technique” in Time 3 (43.8%) and Time 4 (36.4%); “Role playing the use of “I” statements” across all three waves (20.0%; 12.5%; 18.2% respectively); “Working on mini-case studies” across all three waves (13.3%; 6.3%; 9.1% respectively); “Researching coping skills related to a medical condition” in Time 3 (25.0%) and Time 4 (45.5%); “Completing the interview with a professional in your field of interest” across all three waves (30.0%;

37.5%; 9.1% respectively). Finally, only one participant (6.3%) in Time 3 found none of the teaching techniques useful.

Content Analysis of Open-Ended Question

There was one open ended question asked at the end of survey, “How has this class helped you in coping with your stress?” Content analysis of the written comments for this question was completed for each wave separately. There were no written comments for the Spring 2020 wave as this was the pretest and therefore the students had just started the course with no content having been provided. For the post Spring 2020 wave there were 29 comments made, there were 11 comments for Fall 2020, and for the Spring 2021 wave there were eight written comments. Content analysis of the comments led to four major themes emerging over all semesters. One theme that emerged had to do with how the students managed stress and learned techniques from taking the class. For example, students stated “Learned a variety of coping strategies.” A second theme had to do with the student’s ability to identify and be aware of stress. For example, multiple students stated, “More aware of my stress.” The third theme that emerged had to do with specific skills learned. For example, one student stated, “Look at stress as not lasting as long as it seems in the moment, so make lists, organize life, and keep doing what I’m doing to get through day.” A final theme had to do with how the class changed their view or had a pandemic reference. For example, one student stated, “I think it [the class] helped me look at stress and think that even though in the short run it feels like a big deal, in a week I probably won’t feel like this.”

Figure 3

Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence-based teaching strategies that the lead researcher implemented during the seminar were intended to help students cope with common stressors they experience during their undergraduate studies, such as roommate compatibility, course grades, and length of time it will take to secure employment following graduation (Bland et al., 2012). COVID-19 intensified these worries and added new concerns that could not have been anticipated (APA, 2020). Students were expected to quickly adapt to changes in course structure, prepare for learning at home, access technology and broadband, follow health and social distance protocols (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Lopez-Castro et al., 2021). With the onset of COVID-19 and the combination of unique stressors and circumstances, the researchers

wondered whether the results would be consistent with those of previous studies.

Preferred Stress Management Techniques

The first goal of the current study was to determine the specific stress management tools first-year college students used to cope with their various stressors. Our findings indicated that students preferred to use cognitive psychology techniques, support, and humor, which are similar to the meta-analytic findings from Yusufov et al. (2018). Results from the meta-analysis concluded that cognitive and social support interventions were the most effective stress management tools for undergraduate students. Although our findings cannot be generalized due to the small sample sizes within the four waves, they are important as they align with prior findings.

Preferred Teaching Strategies

Based on the data in this preliminary study, students found the experiential exercises to be the most effective in learning stress management techniques. This result is consistent with research conducted by Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009) and Hughes et al. (2011) who reported that students prefer active methods of learning. More specifically, the students in the present study indicated more enthusiasm for applying information they learned in the classroom or online via videos to real world scenarios. The students who provided qualitative responses reported that mindfulness, diaphragmatic breathing, and yoga were new strategies that they could implement into their daily life. One student asserted that the opportunity to practice a variety of techniques, “Helped me realize which techniques work for me to deal with it [stress].” In addition, the data indicated that students found completing discussion board assignments requiring them to write a written reflection on their experience using one of the stress management techniques to be worthwhile. Moon (2004) reported that it is important to provide students with time to process their learning experiences and consider how it might generalize to settings other than the classroom.

Impact of a First-Year Stress Management Seminar

Overall, based on the limited qualitative data obtained from the participants in this current study, a positive theme emerged regarding students’ ability to cope with various stressors. In waves 2, 3, and 4, the researchers asked students to describe how the stress management course helped them cope with their stress. Students reported in the comments that the course was beneficial in navigating the various

transitions that occurred throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. The course material provided them with a variety of different coping skills they could utilize. One student wrote in Spring 2020 (wave 2), “This class exposed me to many different ways to manage stress that I was not aware of before. Especially in a stressful situation like the current pandemic these coping skills are especially useful and I find myself using these skills often.” Among the participants who completed the survey in Spring 2021 (wave 4), the written feedback appeared to be consistent with Spring 2020 (wave 2). For example, one reoccurring theme was that students were more conscious of when they were experiencing stress and learned multiple ways to manage it.

Study Limitations

The current study has several limitations. The students were a sample of convenience; they chose to sign up for the course. As a result, these students might have been more motivated and receptive to learning about stress management techniques. They might have also been more inclined to use them. Furthermore, this study was conducted over a one-year time frame; therefore, attrition was a factor thus we are unable to generalize our findings, but we believe our findings are important as we were able to analyze the data trends. For example, students continued to report using coping skills beyond the conclusion of the Spring 2020 semester, as they found them beneficial in reducing their stress levels and transitions related to COVID-19.

The timing of survey administration may have also impacted study results. Except for wave 1, which was administered at the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester, the other three follow-up surveys were

administered towards the end of each semester. During the last few weeks of the semester students wrap up their course work and prepare for finals; therefore, our students may have experienced higher levels of stress and been even more aware of their stress. However, the timing of these surveys may have been beneficial to students, as they may have been reminded about the variety of stress management tools they learned and could utilize to reduce their stress.

Additionally, study results may have been impacted by the transition from teaching in-person to an asynchronous format, as the instructor could not confirm that all students participated in the assigned stress management activities. For example, prior to the onset of the pandemic, students were scheduled to attend a yoga class; whereby, the course instructor intended to take attendance and monitor their participation. Following the shift to online learning, the instructor held students accountable by requiring them to write a reflection following a course lesson about a specific stress management technique. However, it is possible that not all students who wrote reflections practiced the stress management technique or practiced the technique correctly.

Future directions: Implications for educators

College instructors can play a role in improving the mental health and wellbeing of their students. When university students were surveyed about strategies for addressing this need on campus, one of their suggestions included incorporating mental health awareness into the curriculum and the classroom (Baik et al., 2019). Although the stress management seminar described in this study addresses these topics throughout a semester, not all instructors may be comfortable teaching the course material for

an entire semester. Therefore, there are several supportive stress management techniques they may implement into their courses. For example, instructors can create a module within their course shell that lists the mental health resources and support services offered on and off campus. They can remind students of these resources at the beginning of the semester, prior to midterms, final exams, or when other stressors arise. In addition, instructors can help students identify supportive individuals in their lives by asking students to complete a gratitude exercise. In this exercise students write, on an index card, the name of someone in their life that they are grateful for and why they chose that individual. Students can share their response with a peer or keep the index card in a visible spot so they can refer to it when needed. Lastly, for those instructors interested in introducing relaxation and mindfulness-based strategies to their students, John Kabat-Zinn and Herbert Benson created short instructional videos that guide individuals through their respective relaxation techniques. Instructors may also consider including such resources within their course shell so that students can easily access them on their own. Similar to students using the trial-and-error process to determine which stress management techniques work best for them, it may take time for instructors to figure out which techniques work best within their classroom setting.

In conclusion, the results of the current study indicated that a full semester first-year stress management seminar may be beneficial for first-year students immediately following the completion of the course and one-year later. Consistent with previous research, students increased their awareness of how they experience stress and learned a variety of techniques for managing stressors, including COVID-19. As one student noted,

“It [the course] has helped me manage my stress instead of letting stress overcome me.” Empowering students to believe they can overcome stressors using stress management tools they acquired in a classroom setting may be important in building confidence in their ability to mitigate future stressors. As stress levels among students increase, undergraduate institutions may want to consider offering this seminar style course to their incoming freshmen cohorts. Further research is needed to determine whether this proactive approach to stress management can improve students’ emotional and physical well-being throughout their four years of college.

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