



From Surviving to Thriving: Empowering Tomorrow's Professionals Today

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From Surviving to Thriving: Empowering Tomorrow's Professionals Today

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University students are reporting increased levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Learning emotional regulation is a protective factor for students' overall academic success. This article discusses our experiences implementing an emotional regulation learning activity with University students and strategies for student engagement around mental health issues. Incorporating activities that encourage emotional regulation skills in the regular classroom may add value to the student experience.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health among college students across the US is declining (Copeland et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2019; Elharake et al., 2022). There has been a significant increase in mental health issues among undergraduate students since 2009 (Duffy et al., 2019). Among college students experiencing concerns with mental health 50% to 80% did not seek treatment (Oswalt et al., 2020). Research indicates that common barriers to the utilization of mental health services include “the perception that treatment is not needed, lack of time, and preference for self-management” (Oswalt et al., 2020, p. 47). In many college curricula students may feel they have to “push through” the increased anxiety they are feeling because it is an expected part of the college experience.

This article describes an upstream learning intervention featuring a hands-on activity designed to increase students' awareness of their coping style, the outcome of the intervention, and recommendations for future directions. As educators it is within our grasp to address variables that may improve student engagement around mental health topics. The benefit of developing these self-management skills includes increased retention and progression as well as a better quality of life and student experience.

PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

There is a need to focus on the mental well-being of students in university settings as they are considered a high-risk population for developing mental disorders (Dawson et al., 2020). Among United States (US) college students, reports of adverse mental health outcomes and conditions have significantly increased (Linden & Stuart, 2020). Recently the American College Health Association (ACHA-NCHA, 2022) conducted a nation-wide survey of college students who reported that at some point in the year students' depression or anxiety significantly affected their academic performance. The same sample revealed that they suffer from moderate (51.7%) or serious (24.9%) psychological distress (ACHA-NCHA, 2022). These statistics point to the fact that colleges and universities face a very real and growing problem with student mental health.

Students should be empowered to self-manage by learning evidence-based skills such as mindfulness, reframing, self-awareness, and positive habit building to equip them with protective factors for college and beyond. The effectiveness of these approaches is well documented (Conley et al., 2017; Dawson et al., 2020; Ellis, 2001; Martinez-Rubio et al., 2021).

TRANSPARENT & TRANSFERABLE APPROACH TO TEACHING

A. PURPOSE

Using principles of sensory systems (Dunn 2008), two hands-on learning activities, spaced one week apart, were developed to help with emotional regulation by increasing students' self-awareness of their personal sensory patterns.

To decrease any barriers to participation, the activities were offered in the common areas of a student dormitory. The sessions were advertised ahead of time, food was provided, and student champions were used to help with recruitment.

B. TASKS

Learning tasks were as follows:

- Learn the four sensory patterns (Seeker, Bystander, Avoider, and Sensor).
- Learn the behaviors associated with each pattern.

- Determine which pattern fits the student’s most common emotional behaviors.
- Select cut-out pictures of activities that complement their own pattern.

C. CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

Students will identify their own sensory pattern and select at least three sensory activities that can be used to self-regulate within the context of their daily life.

ANALYSIS/ASSESSMENT

Students enjoyed the activity and were able to easily participate and understand the concepts involved. Group discussion was facilitated by our student champions who identified relatable scenarios and engaged the other students to apply the concepts to their daily life. All students were able to define and identify their personal sensory pattern. Moving forward, activities such as these should be embedded and integrated into the regular classroom to increase participation and engagement.

APPLICATION TO TEACHING

The mental well-being of university students can be positively impacted in the regular classroom by integrating activities that teach skills pertinent to the challenges students most commonly encounter. According to the American College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA 2022) factors that most impact university students’ mental health are procrastination, loneliness, and anxiety. Below are opportunities applicable to classroom teaching that address these issues.

Procrastination

- Challenge students in class to take three minutes and write down steps needed to start an assignment.
- Require an outline or part of an outline as a ticket to class for an upcoming paper.
- Engage the class in free writing by asking students to write about their “why” for choosing a particular topic.
- Praise their passion.

Loneliness

- Encourage and model empathetic communication.
- Use think-pair-share activities to increase one-on-one interaction.
- Consider assigning group work activities during class.
- Identify the library as a “third space” for students who need solitude without feeling lonely.

Anxiety

- Teach and use “Box” breathing before tests and presentations.
- Have students count their breaths backwards from ten to one before every class.
- “Chunk” assignments into manageable pieces.
- Identify specific tasks or a group of tasks needed to complete an assignment and
- set goals, milestones, or due dates for each task until the assignment or project is complete.
- Pay attention to affective variables in the classroom to ensure a safe, structured atmosphere where students can freely express themselves.
- Utilize a variety of teaching modalities that serve different learning styles.
- Provide positive reinforcement of learning through timely and constructive feedback.

CONCLUSION

There can be no substitute for professional care for any student who experiences mental health challenges. However, only 34% of students avail themselves of professional help (ACHA, 2022), and not all campuses have readily available counselors. To help achieve a positive impact on student mental health, faculty need only recognize opportunities within their existing classes to teach skills students need to succeed both during their college tenure and beyond.

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