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Humanity and Resilience Project: The Development of a New Outreach Program for Counseling Centers at Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

When determining how best to help reduce the distress that exists among today's college students, it is believed that proactive, on-campus programming is a beneficial supplement to on-campus resources that are often utilized after concerns already exist. Helping students develop resiliency skills is one proactive measure that is believed to improve students' well-being and ability to cope with adversity. Thus, the Humanity and Resilience Project at West Chester University was recently developed with the goal of helping to promote resiliency among students by encouraging genuine social connections that include a sense of shared vulnerability and humanity. With literature that supports the rationale for this approach, it is hoped that the following description of the development and implementation of this project will inspire other college campuses to consider similar programming for their students.

The concept of resilience can take on various meanings and can be difficult to clearly define; yet it represents an important aspect of the human experience that can mitigate the adverse effects of mental health problems and general emotional distress. In fact, when speaking specifically about college students, it has been concluded that resilience characteristics contribute to overcoming adjustment issues related to a student's transition to university life (Rahat & İlhan, 2016). According to the American Psychological Association's (APA; 2011) brochure titled "The Road to Resilience," resilience is the way in which individuals adapt to hardships or significant stressors. Essentially, being resilient means one is able to "bounce back" from challenging situations. Despite the seemingly favorable outcome of resilience, the process of developing resilience is typically not without the experience of emotional distress (APA, 2011).

Existing literature confirms the presence of distress among college-age individuals. In one survey of students from 73 institutions of higher

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education, 26% of students endorsed having substantial mental health concerns in their lifetime (Brownson et al., 2016). Further, 22% of undergraduate students and 18% of graduate students surveyed had seriously considered suicide at some point. Based on these and other findings, researchers concluded that students' stressful experiences would be best addressed by prevention programs in addition to traditional clinical interventions for student distress (Brownson et al., 2016). Another large survey of college-age individuals demonstrated that over half of those surveyed had a psychiatric disorder in the past year (Blanco et al., 2008). College counseling centers also seem to be noticing the high prevalence of student distress and students' need for support. In a survey of college counseling center directors, 95% of the directors surveyed reported that a recent trend toward there being more students with severe psychological problems continues to be true on their campuses, while over two thirds of directors reported an increase in crisis counseling as a concern (Gallagher, 2009). What is more, just over half of the directors reported increases in reports of self-injury among students, as well as a growing demand for services, but no increase in resources (Gallagher, 2009). According to the 2016 annual report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH, 2017), lifetime prevalence rates of nonsuicidal self-injury and serious suicidal ideation continue to increase among students seen in college counseling centers. A slow but steady increase in the self-reported distress related to depression and anxiety among students was another observed trend (CCMH, 2017). Further, it is believed that students who seek college counseling services today present with increasingly complex circumstances and needs that require attention (Much & Swanson, 2010). Thus, it seems essential that counseling centers work to address students' mental health concerns and increase resilience in a preventative and proactive manner, rather than solely through clinical interventions (Brownson et al., 2016).

Given that clinical interventions by college counseling centers are not able to adequately decrease all student distress and increase resilience solely on their own, it is believed that other types of programming and outreach to the campus community can help students make strides toward these goals. One finding in the literature on resilience is that sharing one's vulnerabilities with others can serve as a powerful building block to resilience (Davis III & Paster, 2000; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2015). Thus, one important element to programming that promotes resilience would be to teach students how to embrace their own vulnerability and be willing to be vulnerable with others. Becoming more vulnerable with others can allow individuals to realize what is referred to as common humanity, or the perception that one's experiences are part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2003). Recognition of this common humanity is one key ingredient to developing self-compassion, which is

believed to be a protective factor against the negative effects of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination (Neff, 2003).

Social connectedness is another crucial aspect of resilience. Emmons (2007) proposes that feeling disconnected, isolated, or not belonging can diminish resilience. College students seem to be socially connected through the use of technology and social media, however these connections can be, and to tend to be, less deep, less consistent, and less intimate. One study supported this notion when it found that even the mere presence of mobile devices during face-to-face conversations contributed to less fulfilling conversations and lower empathetic concern (Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2016). This lack of fulfillment and empathetic concern seems to undermine the quality and depth of social connection. Thus, college students might need chances to learn how to establish deeper, more meaningful connections with others (Rosenbaum & Weatherford, 2017). The APA (2011) supports this notion with their strategy of further developing one's resilience through making connections with others. Thus, in addition to vulnerability, the formation and effective use of meaningful social connections is another important element to include in resilience programming.

While emotional vulnerability and the formation of meaningful social connections can help to build resilience, it is also believed that negative social comparisons can hinder resilience building. When looking specifically at social media use, individuals can develop a "fear of missing out" while seeing what their friends and peers are doing without them, which can turn into negative social comparison (Strickland, 2014). Social media users in particular can experience negative mental health effects by comparing their own lives with the positive snapshots of others' lives that tend to be highlighted on social media (Strickland, 2014). Based upon this finding, it would seem important for resilience programming to not only promote the expression of vulnerability and the formation and use of deep social connections, but to also reduce the tendency for individuals to engage in unhelpful social comparisons, as this is likely to detract from one's resiliency.

To address this issue of resilience, we explored ways to disseminate the information from the "Realize Your Resilience: Online Toolkit" (RYR; Miremadi, 2017) to our campus community. While reviewing some of the RYR materials, the themes of recognizing strengths and shifting one's focus to the positive in order to foster resilience were prominent. Although increasing awareness of strengths and shifting attention to the positive are undeniably important to resilience, the issue remains that college students are often inundated with platitudes about strength and positivity. Furthermore, if the focus of resilience building efforts rests only on strength and positivity, we run the risk of implying that students lack something they "should" or "could just" have, which has the potential to foster more shame through judgment than building resilience. It can also invalidate difficult and negative experiences and imply that

struggling is not normal. Consequently, discussions about the development of this program highlighted that acknowledging struggle and allowing oneself to be vulnerable enough to reach out and connect to others for support is likely an essential part of fostering resilience as challenging situations and difficult emotions are all parts of the human experience. As such, we chose to change the title of our program to the Humanity and Resilience Project to highlight the important dialectic of humanity/vulnerability and resilience/strength. It is important to note that many of the works of Dr. Brené Brown, a Research Professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, and Dr. Kristin Neff, an Associate Professor of Human Development and Educational Psychology Department at the University of Texas Austin, have inspired the tenets of this project—their research and writing focus on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, shame, (Brown, 2012, 2015) and self-compassion (Neff, 2011).

The aims of our Humanity & Resilience Project are:

- to disseminate information (to students, parents/families/guests, faculty, and staff) about the connection between humanity/vulnerability and resilience;
- to normalize the human experience and reduce barriers to vulnerability, like shame and perfection; and
- to increase focus on self-compassion and teach skills to continue moving forward when faced with challenges, while honoring and validating challenges.

Description of program

As a way to help the Humanity and Resilience Project materialize, become known to the campus community, and slowly create a cultural shift on campus, we decided to gather ideas directly from students. As a part of an Organizational Communications course on campus, three groups of students interviewed us about the development and implementation of our project and provided feedback about our project. This feedback included ideas on how best to implement it from a communications standpoint and from current students' perspectives.

The feedback provided by these groups of students included various ideas about strategies for advertising the project to the campus community, specific activities or events that would fit with the mission of the project, and ways to further grow the project in the future. One suggestion from students was to create a logo and slogan that could be used to advertise the project. One of the groups created the slogan "Connect. Not Compare" and designed a logo to go with it. With the group's permission, we are now using this

slogan and logo for our project's brochures, flyers, and other advertising materials. We believe the slogan accurately captures a primary mission of the Humanity and Resilience Project: to help individuals reduce distress by connecting with others through shared humanity and vulnerability, rather than comparing themselves to others in unhelpful ways. The students' feedback also generated helpful ideas for specific activities and events to hold on campus to get the campus community involved in the project. Finally, the student groups made suggestions about how to sustain the project long-term through the use of student volunteers, collaboration with other student organizations, and organizing fundraisers.

One suggested event, "Power Down Day," was the inspiration for our first outreach, which would be a preview day for an upcoming "Digital Detox Day." The purpose of "Digital Detox Day" was to invite students to put away their mobile devices and connect, both with themselves and others. The initial preview day took place during an existing weeklong outreach on campus that centered on student wellness, interest, success, and happiness. For this event, we had a table in the student union on campus for several hours and invited students, faculty, and staff to stop by to participate in a short-term "digital detox." Therapy dogs were present at the table to greet students, and refreshments and t-shirts were offered to students who participated. Participating students were provided with "sleeping" bags to put their phones away in, and were asked to gather around high-top tables with other participating students to converse. Each high-top table displayed conversational prompts to help students get to know each other and connect in meaningful ways. Approximately 55 students participated in this outreach, and students' overall anecdotal responses were positive.

About a month later, we hosted our actual "Digital Detox Day." This event was a longer, stand-alone event, and it incorporated additional activities for students to engage in while they put their mobile devices away. Students had the opportunity to write down a reason why they want to "digitally detox," with these reasons then displayed so passersby could see them. A table was set up outside of the room in the student union to greet students, while the reserved room was utilized for the "digital detox" activities. After students put their phones away in the "sleeping" bags, they entered the room and had the opportunity to enjoy refreshments, interact with therapy dogs, and engage in conversations with peers. The Center for Contemplative Studies on our campus collaborated with us for this event—offering students the opportunity to be led in mindful movement/meditation and to participate in mindful coloring. Throughout the event, many of the students who entered the ballroom enjoyed spending some time talking with each other while interacting with the two therapy dogs and the dogs' handler. As students

left the ballroom, we asked them to fill out a brief feedback form about their experiences with this event.

Feedback

From our "Digital Detox Day" outreach, we were able to obtain completed feedback forms 25 students. Out of this small sample of students, 17 identified as female and eight identified as male. The most frequent demographic profile of students who completed the forms were 19-year-old, first-year students. Most students (84%) reported that the presence of therapy dogs at the event was their reason for choosing to participate. Another feedback question asked students how likely they were to intentionally digitally detox both before and after this event. Before the event, only 24% of students were "likely" or "very likely" to intentionally digitally detox, but after the event, 72% of students reported being "likely" or "very likely" to intentionally digitally detox. The feedback form also asked students to list any perceived benefits and consequences to digitally detoxing. Themes for the endorsed benefits included: relaxation/stress relief/self-care, being better focused and less distracted, reconnecting with friends, nature and dogs, being present, and taking a break from the pressures/criticisms of social media. Themes for the endorsed consequences included: losing contact/feeling disconnected or "out of the loop" and missing important/emergency messages/being unavailable. It is noteworthy that 44% of students completing the feedback form did not list any negative consequences.

From a preliminary look at this small sample of feedback, it appears as though there is perceived value in taking the time to unplug from mobile devices and connect in other ways. Thus, holding future "Digital Detox" events seems to represent one important element of growing the Humanity and Resilience Project.

Conclusions and recommendations

The feedback gathered from our Digital Detox program is promising and validates the usefulness of this type of outreach and of the intention of our Humanity and Resilience Project. From the responses, it seems that this program met the goals of teaching students how to reduce stress, increase their common humanity, and improve relationships by connecting with others in person and disconnecting from their technology. Many of the students who participated found benefits from disconnecting from their phones as well as creating an intention to do so more in the future.

As a result of the success of this program, we would recommend other university counseling centers to consider creating similar programing. We would encourage conducting this outreach in a student union or other high-

traffic areas on campus, where students are likely to pass by. We struggled at times to attract students to participate in the program by itself. We found that by having giveaways (such as t-shirts), snacks, and therapy dogs present, to be a big asset in attracting students to participate in the program. While the therapy dogs are free and are usually a big draw, it may be helpful to have some funds for giveaways, food, and other promotional materials.

In building on this Digital Detox program and our bigger Humanity and Resilience campaign, we want to continue to find more ways of engaging our students with this initiative. For example, in future events, we plan to approach students sitting at tables in the dining halls and engage them in conversations about putting their phones down and connecting with each other in person. We also hope to target specific groups on campus, Greek Life, and athletic teams with this type of programming. We want to initiate discussion and education around the influence of technology, the negative influence of comparisons, the importance of connecting with each other, and building that concept of common humanity. We believe by educating our students and giving them permission to try these skills, we can begin to shift the culture on campus to connection over comparison and build their resiliency so they are better equipped to manage and tolerate distress.

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