

College Student Self-Care: The Missing Ingredient for Success?

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College students are experiencing the highest rate of mental health challenges ever in history. This brief report on self-care consisted of nine participants, who were currently attending a public university. Three focus groups were held. Three themes emerged from the data: a.) defining and practicing self-care b.) self-care education and c.) self-care during the COVID pandemic. Since these students never received any formalized education about self-care and because of the college counseling center's inability to serve a growing number of students with mental health challenges, the researcher recommends that education institutions devote more time to educating students about self-care.

Keywords: mental health, self-care, college students, student success

INTRODUCTION

College students are experiencing a mental health crisis (National Education Association, 2024). It is estimated that 60% of college students meet the criteria for a mental health disorder (Kim, 2024). Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are the highest they have ever been among college students (National Center of Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, 2023). Students are experiencing a wide array of challenges on college campuses including financial strain; discrimination and prejudice based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation; adapting to a post-COVID world; fear of school shootings; and most recently, campus protests related to the Israel and Gaza war (Abrams, 2022).

The mental health crisis does not have racial and/or ethnic boundaries among students (National Education Association, 2024). Of all college students, Native American/Alaskan Native students have the highest levels of depression and suicide (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). Female, transgender, and non-binary college students are at a greater risk for anxiety disorders, severe depression, eating disorders, insomnia, obsessive compulsive disorder, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder than male college students (College Transitions, 2024). Furthermore, in 2022, 39% of transgender and non-binary college students had considered taking their own lives, and 9% had attempted to take their own lives within the past year (The Trevor Project, 2022).

To make matters worse, college counseling centers are overwhelmed and do not have the appropriate resources to manage these upticks in anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal ideation (National Education Association, 2024). College counseling centers saw a 40% increase in the number of students who utilized these services from 2009 to 2015, and this number continues to rise (Abrams, 2022). It is also estimated that there are 120 students for every college counselor, and at some colleges, there are 300 students for every college counselor, which makes accessibility to counseling services challenging (Abrams, 2022).

Because of the gaps in mental health services on college campuses, students may have to rely on self-care strategies. Self-care involves nurturing the physical, emotional, and spiritual self and creating a support network (Bickham, 2022). However, students may become so overwhelmed with their academic work that they neglect their well-being, and without early intervention, their mental health may have reached a point where they are no longer able to continue with their classes and must withdraw from school. It is estimated that a third of college students do not finish their degrees because of mental health issues (Leonhardt, 2022).

The purpose of this brief report is to better understand the mental health challenges of college students and determine what self-care strategies they are using to overcome the obstacles they experience in academia and their everyday lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has found that self-care can promote self-compassion, quality of life, healthy responses to stress, stress reduction, self and mindful awareness, physical health, social support, confidence, and overall well-being in college students (Frame et al., 2016; Martin, 2021; Moses et al., 2016). Even though college student self-care is essential to academic success, most colleges do not teach self-care to students, except for maybe a few workshops and activities throughout the academic year designed to decrease stress in students during midterm and/or final exams (Abrams, 2022).

Most students attempt to do too much in college, and make commitments that they cannot realistically fulfill, given the time required for their academic pursuits (Martin, 2021). Therefore, student self-care can fall by the wayside, which can lead to challenges such as low energy, hopelessness, physical symptoms, depression, burnout, lack of concentration and motivation, and diminished performance in academic work (PsychCentral, 2024). Physical and psychological wellness are core components of college success, and half of college students indicate that a lack of self-care is negatively impacting their academic success (Flaherty, 2023). Additionally, protests of the Israel/Palestinian War and adjusting to life after a global pandemic has perpetuated distress in college students and students at the primary and secondary levels (Blake, 2024; Pandya & Lodha, 2022; Topo, 2023; Senter, 2023). Because physical and emotional wellness are essential to student success, this study seeks to understand what college students are doing to take care of themselves and identify what universities can do to better support college students in their self-care.

THEORY

In order for a student to be successful, they must pay attention to their overall health (Teaching Channel with Learners Edge, 2024). Dorothea Orem, a nursing theorist, developed the self-care deficit theory (Naluri Therapeutics, n.d.). The purpose of Orem's theory was to encourage medical patients to take ownership of their well-being (Regis College, 2021). This involves taking routine inventory of any physical, social, emotional, and psychological deficits that may exist in one's life (Naluri Therapeutics, n.d.). When a person is able to fulfill these needs, it is less likely that the person will experience distress and more likely that the person will experience stability (Petiprin, 2023). College life requires a student to be independent and manage their lives without the supervision of parents. When a college student decides to ignore self-care, they may experience an inability to carry on their daily routine, which in turn, can lead to an increased risk for a mental health challenge and a possible crisis in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This study took place at a public university in the Southwestern United States. At this university, a student can earn either their bachelor's or master's degree in a wide array of liberal arts fields, business, social work, education, and nursing. A majority of the students identify as Latino/Hispanic or Native American and the institution is committed to serving first generation college students.

The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board approval for the study, and student participation was completely voluntary. All students were notified about the study through email. The researcher held

three focus groups, that lasted approximately an hour, on February 21st, March 6th, and March 20th in 2024. Nine students participated in the study. Before each focus group, participants completed a brief questionnaire and identified their age, gender, and race and/or ethnicity. Open-ended questions were asked to participants (See Appendix), and a semi-structured interview format was utilized. Focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was coded and categorized and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher utilized a constructivist approach to better understand how college students are engaging in self-care (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the researcher chose to use a latent level of analysis to determine how the narrative data from the focus groups was associated with existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

The average age of the participants in the study was 38.3 years. Two participants identified as male, and seven participants identified as female. Three participants selected Latino/Hispanic as their ethnicity; two participants selected Native American as their race; and four selected white as their race.

In the analysis, the following themes emerged from the thematic analysis: a.) defining and practicing self-care b.) self-care education c.) self-care during the COVID pandemic.

Defining and Practicing Self-Care

All participants discussed the importance of engaging in self-care activities. Participants found themselves in places of diminished well-being when they did not engage in self-care. When this did occur, participants elaborated upon the importance of returning to “baseline” or bringing themselves back to the “present moment”. Participant self-care activities included going to the gym, taking walks and/or hikes in nature, listening to music, meditation, art, breathwork, spending time with family and friends, bathing, reading for leisure, reflecting, eating healthy, sleeping, and participating in positive self-talk.

A participant stated “Self-care is prioritizing my mental health...and I was putting everyone else first. Self-care is about taking care of myself first.” Another participant stated, “I didn’t realize I was burning my own light...if I do not practice self-care, there is nothing I can give to anyone else, and it feels like everything else is crumbling around me.” Participants discussed it was necessary to engage in self-care to ensure they were able to carry on their daily lives. As one participant points out “It is necessary to protect your spirit.”

Self-Care Education

All participants have found themselves learning about and using strategies to promote their well-being, but none of this education has come from their parents or the education system. One participant stated, “I was never really taught to take care of myself.” Another participant commented “I wish it [self-care] was taught from infancy onwards. I think it’s really important to learn about how we can help ourselves.”

Because of the lack of self-care education, some participants found themselves being critical and judgmental of themselves. One participant discussed “We our own worst critics, and we live in a society that puts a lot of pressure on ourselves to conform and achieve certain amount of greatness. The truth is most of us...are average normal people. I am gentle and kind with others, but the way I treat myself is the polar opposite. We need to realize we are humans, too, and deserve love and care.” A participant commented:

There’s a voice in my head that’ll just tell me the most awful vile things about myself. I think...you wouldn’t speak to anyone else that way. You wouldn’t. You would die if you ever spoke to your children or your wife that way. So why would you talk to yourself that way? You know you’re their father and their spouse. Why would you do that to someone

they care about? And once I kind of had that realization...I try to consciously, instead of having that voice that says all these negative things, have a voice that says positive things to me, you know, or that is encouraging to myself, or that, you know, tries to treat myself the way I would treat other people that I love.

Self-Care During the COVID Pandemic

Some participants also elaborated upon the mental health challenges they faced during the pandemic. These challenges surfaced because of the lack of connection and socialization with other human beings. A participant stated they had never experienced any mental health challenges before the pandemic and could only “pinpoint” this to “working remotely” and “for the first time” in her life she was “hit by a ton of bricks”. “To combat the isolation”, the participant would “go to the library, parks, etc.” to engage in the “interaction of life”.

Additionally, a few participants discussed the lack of exposure to face-to-face contact for youth has been especially challenging, as one participant commented “kids are very dysregulated, and having a really hard time with self-regulation”. School administrators are stating it is because of COVID, and youth are lacking those “key social points” in their lives. One participant commented “It seems like there was a lot more” youth “who needed accommodation with their learning as well.” Another participant, who recently visited an elementary school, discussed that because students lack self-regulation skills due to social distancing during the pandemic, this can create challenges for teachers, who feel taxed in managing student dysregulation. One participant stated “emotional regulation has not been a priority”. Now that the pandemic is over, a participant discussed we have had to “relearn socialization” while also being aware of “people’s comfort level with interaction[s]”

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point to the importance of college students engaging in self-care activities to maintain their energy for academic pursuits and overall well-being. Participants recognized their limitations and when they did not make themselves a priority, they often experienced feelings associated with burnout (Martin, 2021). Self and/or mindful awareness of energy levels were essential for participants, and they needed to pay consistent attention to their energy; otherwise, they may find themselves unable to maintain their day-to-day routines (Moses et al., 2016; PsychCentral,2024).

Although college students discussed the importance of self-care, they often felt ill-equipped to practice it because they had never received any structured education for it in their primary and secondary education and in college. All participants also alluded that their parents never taught them important skills to maintain their physical and emotional health. This lack of self-care education resulted in a negative self-image in some participants (APA Monitor; PsychCentral, 2024).

Participants also elaborated on the aftereffects of the pandemic. Participants discussed how the social isolation and working remotely took a toll on the mental health and stability of post-secondary, secondary, and primary students (Pandya & Lodha, 2022; Topo, 2023). The transition from social distancing and remote learning to face-to-face interactions post-COVID was difficult for some participants as they had to adjust to in-person communication (Senter, 2023).

LIMITATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The sample for this study only included nine participants; therefore, the findings are not considered generalizable to college students. Moreover, there was only a single researcher in this study, and this researcher was solely responsible for the credibility and validity of the findings.

Despite the aforementioned limitations within the study, the results did highlight the challenges college students have in taking care of themselves and the stressors felt during the COVID pandemic. It was found that participants find it difficult to create a healthy balance between their academic work, current jobs, family, and friends. When a college student is unable to maintain an equilibrium within their lives, they are

more vulnerable to a crisis. As indicated in the focus groups, the guidelines and policies of the COVID pandemic have also exacerbated the mental health crisis among college students and youth even further.

Because of the impacts of all these challenges, it seems imperative that not only post-secondary institutions, but also primary and secondary institutions need to place more emphasis on self-care education. All the participants in this study never received any self-care education from their parents or any formalized education within the school systems. Previous literature indicates that when a student experiences success with their education, they are likely making time for themselves and engaging in activities that promote their well-being (Teaching Channel with Learner's Edge, 2021). Therefore, future research needs to focus on the success of college students, who engage in self-care and those who do not, to determine its importance on student success.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed some of the challenges college students face while adopting self-care practices within their lives. Without additional funding in education systems to address the mental health crisis, the number of students affected by mental health challenges could worsen. Because of the increasing demand for college counseling services, educating students about self-care may promote their personal well-being and academic success.

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APPENDIX

1. What does self-care mean to you?
2. What challenges have you experienced as a student?
3. How have you used self-care for these challenges?
4. What was effective for those challenges?
5. What was ineffective for those challenges?
6. What types of self-care strategies would you recommend to other students?
7. Tell me about your experiences observing persons with dysregulation after the pandemic.
8. What strategies do you use for letting go?
9. Tell me about the self-care education you received in your life.
10. What are your thoughts on the importance of self-care?