An Exercise in Practicing Functional Stress Management Skills to Enhance Student Well-Being

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Abstract. This in-class exercise is designed to help students build functional stress management skills to better cope with difficult times and stress in their lives. We guide students to reflect upon and respond to questions in the exercise which will help them recognize and deal with stressors. We instruct students how to use their responses to create a Functional Stress Management Action Plan to prevent and reduce stress. Engaging in this reflective and action-oriented exercise helps students learn experientially how to build a functional approach to work and life. In light of the difficult times in which students are living – including an ever-changing job market, rising inflation and cost of living expenses, a dynamic and changing workplace, environmental concerns, and political and other global issues – this exercise meets an important need confronting students today. Students can also use these skills to help those they will lead in organizations to manage stress and enhance well-being.

Keywords: functional stress management, well-being, action plan.

1. Introduction

High dysfunctional stress levels among students are a critical concern in higher education. Stress can negatively impact students' mental health, academic performance, and degree completion (Kaler *et al.* 2021). Currently, students have been confronted with such stressors as an ever changing job market, rising inflation and cost of living expenses, a dynamic and changing workplace, environmental concerns, and political and other global issues, to name only a few. These are challenging, complex, issues that cause students distress, anxiety, and a decreased sense of well-being. In the face of such volatility, students need to develop positive approaches to dealing with life's stressors. Researchers have asked how we can help students to develop the ability to thrive and grow stronger with uncertainty, stress, and adversity (Taleb 2012). Psychologists and social scientists have studied a host of attributes such as perseverance, optimism, growth mindset, character, self-control, motivation, conscientiousness, self-efficacy –

each with its own history and research literature (Crede *et al.* 2017). There are a variety of approaches that psychologists and social scientists recommend to build functional stress management skills, such as connection to others, physical wellness, mental well-being and finding meaning in our lives. These can empower us to withstand dysfunctional stress in life. One strategy for alleviating the mental health challenges that students face involves students' gaining a better understanding of the factors that contribute to high stress levels, and actively working to mitigate these challenges.

The goal of this paper is to propose an exercise and a functional stress management action plan that could, potentially, mitigate the stress management challenges students face, to encourage our students to develop healthy perspectives and habits. We offer this as a classroom exercise to be used once students have been taught about and understand internal locus of control and external locus of control. Our classroom exercise will allow for discussion of functional and dysfunctional stress, as well as best practices and outcomes to alleviate and better manage dysfunctional stress in students' lives. Bowen (2021) elaborates, "Beyond our relationships with, encouragement of, and belief in our students, we have the power to guide them to better use of whatever internal forces they can access" (p. 250). We have adapted an exercise from the Wellness Society[1] so that it can be explained, used, and debriefed in the classroom, to help students experience and explore potential ways to manage dysfunctional stress, build functional stress management skills, and enhance well-being. Building life-long habits to foster functional stress management is necessary to help students become organizational leaders who can model functional stress management for those they lead. Developing such skills could help students to build healthy organizational cultures whose members can thrive. We successfully run and facilitated this exercise in 2022 in three distinct undergraduate Organizational Behavior course sections, with a total of 70 students who represent a cross-section of students from around the world. Students across the three different sections completed the exercise and provided us with feedback. We also followed up with students after one month to debrief their experiences in implementing their action plans. This exercise can be effectively used in several courses such as Organizational Behavior, Leadership, Leading Change, and Organizational Theory.

2. Theoretical Foundation

As the mental health outlook for students continues to become more serious and more pervasive (Duffy *et al.* 2019; Lipson *et al.* 2018), the need to better

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1.   Thank you to The Wellness Society (www.thewellnesssociety.org) for the idea for this exercise from the Coronavirus Anxiety Workbook: A Tool to Help You Build Resilience During Difficult Times. Uncopyrighted and free to share with attribution and a link to their website.

understand contributing factors grows. This imperative has yielded a solid body of scholarship about mental health and stress among undergraduate students (Auerbach *et al.* 2018; Eisenberg *et al.* 2018; Li *et al.* 2020). Scholarly research conducted to address the mental health challenges experienced by college and university students has explored predictors of academic stress and the relationship of academic stress to other aspects of students' diverse experiences. Academic stress refers to factors in the academic environment that contribute to students' experiences of stress. These factors may include course work, group projects, and behaviors related to academic requirements (Karaman *et al.* 2019; Wilks 2008). Cornwall *et al.* (2019) found that time pressures, feelings of being rushed through their studies, and not having enough time to complete their scholarship were frequently mentioned by students. Other studies, including some in international contexts, have attempted to identify the relationship(s) between academics and stress among undergraduate students. Ramachandiran and Dhanapal (2018) found that nearly 90% of the undergraduate students in their study reported that their academics were the primary factor contributing to their stress. A British study (Kaler *et al.* 2021) found that although student management techniques may not fully mitigate the causes of course-related stress, both the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that the student-centered strategies used by instructors could help mitigate course-related stress. The authors advise that the maladaptive coping mechanisms students mentioned in their survey should be addressed through promotion of healthy stress management behaviors and making mental health and stress management resources widely available to students. They propose several adaptive coping mechanisms such as effective time-management behaviors - planning things out, using a calendar, making To-Do lists, listing goals, maintaining a schedule, using reminders, taking short breaks, healthy eating, sleeping well, and rewarding oneself after studying. In tandem with these coping mechanisms, Kaler et al. (2021) suggest that constructive stress management behaviors could also include taking time for relaxation such as meditation, yoga, music, judo, boxing, watching and/or playing sports, recreation and working out, study breaks, walks, movies, time with friends or family or pets, doing art, and taking brief naps to reset. Also, students could use constructive stress management by seeking help from a professional psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, therapist, or success coach.

According to Worsley *et al.* (2022), research suggests that young people's mental health is poorer during university study than before entry. In a British study, anxiety and depression were found to be higher at mid-course compared to one-month pre-entry into university (Andrews & Wilding 2004). Similarly, a British cohort study found that levels of psychological distress increase on entering university and levels of distress did not return to pre-registration levels (Bewick *et al.* 2010). Other studies have also demonstrated that students' mental

health is poorer during their first year of study compared to pre-entry into university (Cooke *et al.* 2006).

Educational institutions have recognized the need to move beyond traditional forms of support and provide alternative, more accessible interventions aimed at improving mental health and well-being. Worsley *et al.* (2022) conducted a review of accessible interventions (including classroom interventions) focused on improving the mental health and well-being of students in post-secondary level educational institutions with the goal of gathering evidence to capture the largest body of existing research on general mental health and well-being interventions for college and university students. They searched electronic databases to identify reviews in English from high-income OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries published between 1999 and 2020. They included all review-level empirical studies involving post-secondary students attending colleges or universities that examined interventions to improve general mental health and well-being. Intervention types identified included: mindfulness-based interventions, psychological interventions, psychoeducation interventions, recreation programs, relaxation interventions, setting-based interventions, and stress management/reduction interventions. They found evidence that mindfulness-based interventions, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and interventions delivered via technology were effective. Evidence on other interventions was limited, requiring further study before viable conclusions could be drawn about what works best to sustain positive mental health and well-being in today's diverse and growing post-secondary student population.

Stress can be both beneficial and negative. Eustress or functional stress comprises moderate levels of stressors that have constructive and positive effects on efforts and performance (Nelson & Simmons 2011). A functional stress response can be attained through exercise or achieving goals, for example. In contrast, distress or dysfunctional stress comprises high levels of stressors that have destructive and negative effects on effort and performance (Nelson & Simmons 2011). Dysfunctional stress is a response that occurs when we perceive a situation as threatening to our well-being or when our resources have been overly taxed or exceeded. (Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Yang 2017). Dysfunctional stress can exacerbate existing mental health issues and chronically high stress levels can lead to anxiety (Shankar & Park, 2016). According to Nelson and Simmons (2011), dysfunctional stress includes: the physiological element, which is manifested as negative physical health effects such as insomnia or exhaustion; the psychological element, which appears as negative attitudes and emotions that can lower life satisfaction; and burnout, which consists of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of interest in life that can result from ongoing exposure to high levels of stressors.

Dysfunctional stress can be managed. We can develop coping techniques to manage, reduce, or minimize dysfunctional stress. Penwell-Waines *et al.* (2015), group these coping mechanisms into two types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping aims to reduce or eliminate