



# **Selected Thoughts on Creating a Culture of Well-being: An Often Neglected Dimension on the College Campus**

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the issues of mental health, stress, and well-being as experienced by an often misperceived and vulnerable segment of the adult population - the college student. Both causes of mental health breakdowns and the traditional intervention strategies are analyzed and discussed within the context of teaching and learning resilience skills and happiness habits at the freshmen level of the college. Furthermore, while reflecting on the current literature and case reports, this paper offers alternative proactive and preventive measures towards improving the mental health, stress, and emotional well-being of the college student.

## **1. Introduction**

The transition from high school to college can be a difficult time for young students. No longer is their support system within arm's reach and the immediate comforts of being "home" or alone is lost. They are expected to manage the day-to-day challenges of life and face the dreaded "Freshman 15" on their own (Scott, 2014). For many it can all be detrimentally overwhelming. Freshmen encounter an abundance of factors that can harm their health and well-being such as, problems with relationships, unrealistic expectations, money woes, drugs, drinking, academic pressures, and bullying (Twenge, 2007). Curry College in Massachusetts lists nine challenges for freshmen in its online presentation. Interestingly, the listing is addressed to parents as the college asserts, "College Parents Can Help First-Year Students Overcome Challenges." The nine challenges include academic, social, physical, and other areas of concern yet while each challenge is discussed through links, there is no indication that the College has instituted programs to address them or even include students in their very own welfare (First-Year Challenges, 2014). At Colgate University's website it is



declared that, “Stress is a Common Problem among University Students.” They go on to list stressors and include wellness as being important. In the case of Colgate the attention to stressors is under the heading of counseling and once again no clear evidence exists for actual remedial processes (Issues Familiar, 2015).. Very reasonably it can be concluded in light of the two examples noted here, as well as others that the college student resides in a vulnerable population whose obstacles beg to be addressed proactively. This is largely due to the fact that many if not all students face new and complex tension at a time when their resilience and well-being is compromised. No wonder the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence recommends, as reported in the Washington Post, an Emotions 101 course to tackle most especially, suicide, which is reported to be the second leading cause of death on the college campus (Strauss, 2014).

The annual survey, “The American Freshman”, conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute concluded that in 2010, the emotional health of college freshman had dropped to its lowest level in 25 years. The survey results identified that only 52 percent of college freshman rated themselves as "above average" in emotional health, down from 64 percent in 1985 when the survey began (Incoming college students, 2015). The remedy to this phenomenon for many colleges has been to increase the number of mental health counselors on staff. While this is a worthwhile endeavor, it is not a solution that supports students who are not self-referred or otherwise diagnosed as needing mental health interventions. This solution can be characterized as strictly clinical and reactive. The time has come for preventative and proactive measures. Institutions of higher learning need to dedicate research efforts and class time to engaging the student in restorative exercises addressing and facilitating the building of resilience skills and a strengthening of wellbeing. Many institutions conduct programs for the well-being of faculty and staff not unlike what a host of hospitals and other enterprises do for their employees. Nevertheless, a concerted effort towards the individual student on and off the campus appears to be lacking.

The Rape Treatment Center at the UCLA Medical Center in Santa Monica advises under the heading, “**Sexual Assault: What Colleges Can Do**”, that “Campus-



based sexual assault programs should have three goals: to educate students, faculty, and staff about sexual violence; to prevent sexual assaults involving members of the campus community; and to provide an appropriate response when sexual assaults occur” (Campus Rape, 2015). While notable and desirable, such efforts continue to fail to get to the core of the matter, which lies at the place deep within where traumas abide. A best approach to the problems experienced by college students may be sought in the delivery of a comprehensive set of experiences leading to proficiencies in well-being and in resilience.

## **2. Why Well-being and Resilience?**

As it often tends to be a norm in academia, the term well-being is defined by extremes. On one end are the students who will successfully navigate the stressors of college life with little issue. On the other end are those who will succumb to the pressures and descend into depression and anxiety. The more descriptive metaphor is that the first group is like a ball that bounces back quickly when displaced or dropped. The second is like the egg. These students crack under stressors and their ability to cope becomes disorganized and messy so that like Humpty Dumpty they cannot generally be put together again. But what of the many students who find themselves in the middle group? This cluster traverses through their college years, it can be argued, like that of the orange. Orange students take hits and feel the stress internally, but they look solid and well put together on the outside. Consider how many times an orange can be dropped or squeezed before it really starts to show signs of strain. While the outside remains unblemished and resilient, the inside is weakened and becomes unstable. The needs of this group are just as tangible as the bouncy ball and the egg, but are often overlooked. All too frequently there are sobering news feeds about this “orange” group. They are the students who take their own lives and/or the lives of others. During such reports, the phrase that is too often made by friends and bystanders is that the offender “seemed fine.”

The well-being of the entire student population should be addressed at all academic institutions. What is most promising in this endeavor is that studies have shown that resilience can be learned. There are numerous studies and projects running at colleges and universities that focus on the “welfare” of the student as has been



shown. The research topics include: high-risk drinking, hazing, concussion protocol and sexual assault deterrence to name a few (Skorton, 2015). What are missing are the programs that specifically focus on student well-being as mentioned previously. The need is there and the need is now. In each college freshman course load, there needs to be activities and classes that address the fundamental competencies of resilience: self-awareness, self-regulation, optimism, strength of character and connection. Some universities are starting to invest in the concept. Duke University began a You@Duke campaign in 2013. The project will study the resilience of the 2018 graduating class and results will be used to shape campus programs and activities that will strengthen overall wellbeing. Their findings will also be used to seek out opportunities for guidance and intervention to make the college experience better and to instill lifelong coping skill (Giduz, 2015). There is an essential need for educational institutions to foster emotional and social resilience so that students are better able to bounce back from adversity and setbacks.

The field of study that is currently researching such topics is positive psychology or the “science of happiness”. College professors have been teaching the subject for years, but only recently have universities started to apply the research to their own institutions. “If you think about what our goals are, we get people ready to have successful lives”, says George Mason University president Angel Cabrera. “A part of that, but only a part, is to have skills and knowledge that can land students a good job. It is also our responsibility to make sure that they have habits and behaviors and awareness about how to have a good life” (Marklein, 2015). George Mason University is taking this philosophy to heart and included the well-being of their student body and faculty into Goal 7 of their 10 year strategic plan. And it is not only educational institutions that are recognizing the need and potential reward. This year the Chicago Cubs hired their first mental strengths coach. He is valued as a part of the training team in the same way as the batting and hitting experts (MLB Teams Nurture Players, 2015). Perhaps the largest institution to endorse and value the concept is the United States Army. The University of Pennsylvania was contracted by the Army to provide comprehensive resilience training for Soldiers, Family members and Army Civilians to assist them with developing coping skills and behaviors that increase resilience. In



addition, the program educates clients about preventative measures that encourage self-awareness, deter high-risk behaviors, and support healthy alternatives that produce positive outcomes (Master resilience training in the U.S. Army, 2011).

In all three organizations, the key skills addressed include: using evidence to question and dispute automatic negative thoughts and irrational beliefs; replacing automatic negative thoughts with more constructive interpretations, beliefs, and behaviors; applying behavioral activation strategies; building interpersonal skills; and managing stress. Over the course of their college career, the expectation would then be that they would gain the ability to generalize these skills to apply them to new and relevant situations. This is not a bandwagon, but instead it is a necessity. If we are to build the character of students it is imperative that we stock their life skills tool kit. This kit will be filled with skills that allow students to develop the abilities needed to overcome adversity. This tool kit will build resilience skills and strengthen well-being, not only for the time students spend in college or university but for all that follows their experiences there.

### **3. Components of a Freshman Well Being Excursion**

A core freshman well-being course would serve as a program developed to teach students core resilience competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, mental agility, and relationship skills. Such efforts have already presented positive results in school settings to include; decreased depression and anxiety as well as improved relationships, greater self-esteem and better emotional awareness and regulation (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2007). Additionally, interventions rooted in the field of positive psychology, have targeted increased resilience, an increase in positive emotion, the identifying of strengths and enhanced connection with promising results (Seligman et al., 2009). Students can and should be taught social and emotional resilience and well-being through a curriculum and training series that creates a common language and culture of positive well-being throughout the school family. The training would likely differ from anything currently utilized in schools since it serves as a preventative measure helping students and teachers alike, in maintaining a positive mindset, learning to bounce back from adversity, and developing happiness habits.



The following plan to tackle the problems faced by colleges is based upon the tenets of the field of Positive Psychology. It is an example to be field tested at a high school in New York State, on the topic of bullying, which is to be adapted to the college arena. The curriculum is designed to incorporate the following happiness habits into the high school system:

- having a positive mindset
- being grateful/performing acts of kindness
- practicing mindfulness,
- recognizing personal strengths
- identifying energy management techniques
- setting attainable goals
- finding flow

The following is a brief introduction to what has been designated Tackling Tough Thoughts of the 3T curriculum, which begins the implementation of the above. This particular curriculum is geared toward curbing bullying and its effect in the High School setting:

## **TACKLING TOUGH THOUGHTS & OTHER BULLY BUSTERS**

BUILDING A POSITIVE MINDSET AND STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE

**Rationale:** The objective of the 3T curriculum is to offer students the skills needed to build a positive mindset and strengthen personal resilience in a way that:

- Builds a more positive and optimistic school climate
- Helps reduce the act and effects of bullying
- Provides students with life-long resilience skills and happiness habits

**Approach:** Each unit contains one or two skills and each skill is divided into four sessions:

### Session One: *Define*

- *Define:* Introduce and define the skills and concepts. Students should be prompted to discuss their basic understanding of the skill through verbal checks and/or personal examples.



- *Buy In:* An interactive component of the unit that indicates why the skill is important and how it is relevant. Buy-ins are mainly videos and will require media set up (youtube.com).
- *Discuss:* Allow students the opportunity to reflect on the skill: Are they already using it? Do they see value in using the skill? What can they do today to start making the skill a habit?

Session Two: *Review & Reflect*

- *Review:* Review the components of the skill. Ask Students if they have been utilizing the skill over the past week and if yes, how is it going? If not, what is keeping them from using the skill?
- *Bully-Buster:* How can this skill stop students from bullying and/or help those who feel they have been bullied to recover more quickly?

Session Three: *Learn More*

- In this session, students will be able to work in groups to further discuss the skill and to choose a mini project to complete in session four.

Session Four: *Do More*

- Students will complete the project chosen in session three.

**Structure:** Each session includes instructions on presenting the information, activities to reinforce key concepts and reproducible student handouts. Within the session outlines, all text that is in bold is scripted text. Facilitators may choose to read this text from the manual (not the recommended method), use it as a guide or not use it at all.

**Time:** Each skill is designed to be taught in a four 20 minute blocks. Units should be taught in the order designated.

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At the college level, additional adaptations can be instituted to better adjust to school culture. Such additions could include: supplying meditation/energy management rooms to be available to students and staff, providing professional development opportunities to teachers and administrators, encouraging the modeling of resilient behaviors, and using the flipped classroom method, allowing students to learn on line (websites, YouTube, TED, etc....) about resilience skills outside of the classroom setting then discussing these skills and asking for reflection (oral/written) in class.



#### **4. Conclusion**

The potential benefits of introducing resilience skills and happiness habits in an effort to increase the well-being of the college freshman are undeniably attractive. Such benefits include, increased optimism, reduced anxiety and depression, improved performance in classes and the introduction of valuable life skills. The facts suggest that proactive measures should be sought in these areas. The continuation of solely reactive services will not facilitate a campus environment truly working toward decreasing student stress, suicide, and nonproductive coping mechanisms. A well-being curriculum is unassuming to implement, requires modest cost yet could potentially yield grand results. Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who is often described as the father of positive psychology believes that, “organizations operating in the current environment can ill-afford to be loaded up with negative thinkers who give up at the slightest obstacle. They need optimists ready to make the most of opportunities.” Not the least of the organizations to which he alludes is the college and university.





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