

Enhancing the Lives of University Students

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Abstract

This purpose of this investigation was to identify and assess the effectiveness of strategies taught to fourth year under-graduate students in a Quality of Living class designed to increase the quality of student's lives. Thirty-four students enrolled in a Human Kinetics course en-titled: Quality Living: Theory, Research and Application at the University of Ottawa (created and taught by Dr Terry Orlick) completed a questionnaire at the end of the semester. Five questions were used to investigate the students under-standing of quality living and the strategies they used to influence the quality of their lives. After the twelve-week course, student responses indicated that those enrolled in the course had a greater sense of control over their quality of life and had acquired meaningful strategies to positively influence the quality of their lives and the lives of others.

Introduction

"I'm stressed"! Most undergraduate students have thought this at one point in their post-secondary academic careers. According to the 2011 National College Health Assessment II survey, the American College Health Association (2012) cited stress as the number one factor negatively affecting students' academic performance. The Association also reported that seventy-one percent of men and ninety-one percent of women had felt "overwhelmed with all they had to do" in the past twelve months (ACHA, 2012). Pritchard,

Wilson and Yamnitz (2007) found that students transitioning to college replicated the declines in physical and psychological health experienced by first year law and medical students. A Survey conducted by Adalf, Demers and Gliksman (2005) revealed that approximately thirty percent of undergraduate students reported elevated psychological distress and were deemed to be in a state of poor mental health.

In light of these findings, it is a clear that academic institutions would benefit from exploring options that would prevent or alleviate

these stress related issues. Pritchard and colleagues (2007) suggested that future research be aimed at establishing a repertoire of interventions that college administrators could implement to reduce the negative outcomes experienced by students. In Canada, the Ontario College Health Association (OCHA) identified, college and university students as a high-risk population. In their 2009 report, the OCHA recognized universities and colleges as crucial stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive mental health strategy.

“A comprehensive mental health strategy for assessment and early intervention with the student population would have a significant impact on student health and wellness, as well as their ability to be academically and professionally successful.”

(OCHA, 2009, p.3)

The OCHA also differentiated proactive and reactive solutions; viewing solutions through a proactive lens as providing students with positive life enhancement tools before problems escalate. In order to best serve future university cohorts, research is required to identify effective interventions used by students to strengthen their ability to effectively cope with the demands of university. Insight into positive strategies students are engaged in will be influential in the design and delivery of a comprehensive strategy to better equip students to successfully meet the challenges of university.

Quality Living Research in an Academic Context

Vaez, Kristenson and Laflamme (2004) suggest that limited attention has been paid to students' perceived quality of life. Instead, most research has focused on students' negative coping responses such as alcohol consumption or smoking. In response to these findings, Vaez and colleagues investigated the perceived quality of life of nineteen hundred and ninety-seven students and nine hundred and forty-seven individuals of similar age who were working full

time in Sweden. Results from the study indicated that both male and female students in this study had significantly lower perceived quality of life compared to their working peers. As a result, Vaez and colleagues suggested that greater attention be focused on identifying the key determinants of student quality of life. The researchers suggested that this would enable future interventions to have greater success by ensuring that student populations have the necessary tools to manage life at university.

Singh and Choubisa (2009) used a university course as a delivery method for various interventions aimed at increasing students' wellbeing. They analyzed qualitative and quantitative data collected from seventy-seven students who enrolled themselves in a positive psychology course in New Delhi, India. Students took part in one three-hour lecture per week and one tutorial per week over the course of a semester. For a de-tailed description of the course content, please see Singh and Choubisa (2009). The qualitative analysis revealed students endorsed five types of interventions: time management, stress management, three good things, self-talk and best possible self. Quantitative data showed a significant increase in students resiliency score over the course of the study. This research suggested that students endorsing self-management interventions were better prepared to face adversity.

Research Investigation

The purpose of Orlick's Positive Living Skills Program and the focus of this investigation was to identify and document the students' journeys and experiences that they engaged in while attempting to increase the quality of their lives over the duration of his twelve-week course. At the University of Ottawa, Dr. Terry Orlick teaches a fourth-year undergraduate course entitled: *APA 4117A - Quality of Living: Theory, Research and Practice*. The objectives of this course included:

- 1) teaching students to expand their conceptual and practical understanding of positive living or quality living,
- 2) challenging students to enhance the quality of life by applying personally relevant positive living skills that were learning throughout the course, and
- 3) teaching students how to continually live, learn, assess and improve the quality of their daily lives (Orlick, 2012, pg. 1).

The course structure consisted of lectures, small groups engaged in collaborative learning, a series of self-reflective questions and a personal positive living enhancement project chosen by the students. The class also required students to read two books written by Orlick entitled: *Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone (2008)* and *Embracing Your Potential: Steps to Self-Discovery, Balance and Success in Sports, Work and Life (1998)*. Each book offered a variety of activities that allowed students to self-reflect in meaningful ways about personal positive change and how to implement a positive intervention or put theory into practice. Students attended one three-hour lecture every week (for 12 weeks) where emphasis was placed on collaborative learning in small groups. The primary action-oriented method for meaningful independent learning was a quality living project that was ongoing over the twelve-week semester. For a more de-tailed description of course structure and content, see Appendix A.

Over the course of the semester, students kept a personal journal in which they wrote down anything that they read, did, acted upon or learned that was relevant to enhancing the quality of their own lives. Periodically, Orlick assigned questions that directed students to engage in self-reflection and meaningful ongoing learning. Students were encouraged to write relevant points or lessons from readings, daily experiences, class lectures or class discussions three to four times per week. More specifically, students wrote down life enhancement strategies

that they acted upon in an attempt to increase the quality of their life. Students had complete control over the format of their journal and were given considerable freedom to express themselves in a meaningful way. Some students included positive pictures, photos, quotes or drawings in their personal journals.

After twelve weeks of collaborative learning, lectures and weekly journaling, thirty-four students enrolled in the fourth year undergraduate course completed a “quality living reflection” from which the following five key questions were taken and analyzed: What does quality living or living your life with quality mean to you? What do you think contributes to quality living or brings joyfulness to your life and the lives of others? What do you think interferes with quality living? What strategies did you act on over the past twelve weeks to increase the quality of your life? What is the take-home message of this course? Note- All the analysis of these Journals was done after the course was completed and all grades were submitted.

Results

Defining Quality of Living

Each student developed his or her own unique definition of quality living. From the thirty-four responses, several reoccurring themes and keywords were identified. Remaining positive, appreciation of simple joys, balance, connectedness, and enjoyment were the most frequently mentioned qualities associated with quality living. Some representative quotes are presented below.

Living with more energy gains than energy drains and knowing how to create energy gains. Quality living involves a fully connected focus and a positive focus in all aspects of our lives. We have to embrace the simple joys and stay open to new opportunities to live a life with quality.

Feeling happy or feeling satisfied was important to high quality of living.

Living with purpose and living with balance. Feeling happy with what you have and where you're headed. Having a high level of happiness in your life.

Quality of living is when you feel fulfillment and satisfaction in your life, first with accepting who you are and next in pursuing a worthy goal/purpose. Being satisfied brings joyfulness and happy living.

Another reoccurring theme involved interactions between a student and another important person.

It means connecting in positive ways with our loved ones and having a positive impact on those around us.

Overall, the twelve-week course allowed students to develop a personally relevant definition of quality living and expand their conceptual understanding of what quality of life meant to each of them.

Contributing Factors to Quality Living

Building on the students' perceptions of Quality Living as a foundation, students were asked to create or identify a set of criteria that contributed to quality living. Responses included a combination of personally relevant factors for each student.

Embracing simple joys, simple things or moments every day, re-ally does bring me the greatest joy. Participating in activities I love that energize and re-energize me enhances the quality of my daily living. Being in the presence of people that mean a lot to me also gives me a lot of joy and my pets too.

The assigned readings in this course offered self-growth oriented questions that could be applied to various domains in each person's life. This

served to direct the focus of students to better themselves in simple, positive, meaningful and self-directed ways. They were choosing to enhance their own lives in meaningful, self-appointed and self-directed ways. This was viewed as a contributing factor to quality living.

What helped my most was having an area in my life in which I am totally engaged in bettering my-self or attempting to meet my potential

In response to the assigned course questions, several students created lists of activities that increased their quality of life.

Relaxation, exercise, spending time with family and friends, listening to music, learning, traveling and enjoying simple joys

The students felt that the act of journaling was an important component to the course structure, personal life enhancement and ongoing evaluation. Many students mentioned that self-reflection was a significant contributing factor to in-creasing the quality of their lives over the twelve-week semester.

Reflecting on my highlights has brought me a lot of joy since the start of this course. It helped me to look for more highlights and share them with others. The sharing helped me to have positive connections with people around me, making everyone happier.

Knowing what brings you joy. Peace within yourself and being able to find peace around you. Alone time can contribute as well; time to reflect on your accomplishments and your future goals. Good people around you who can support each other is also a contributing factor to on-going positive living.

Through self-reflection and weekly journaling, students were able to express the key

determinants that influenced their quality of life. The responses provided in this article were representative of common characteristics that students identified in their journals.

Factors that Interfere with Quality Living

In his book, *Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone (2011)*, Orlick discussed how positive living can be enhanced by increasing your positive energy gains and decreasing the negative energy drains in your life. Energy drains create obstacles to positive living or the joyfulness in your life by shifting your focus away from experiences that bring you joy and happiness. This concept was highly endorsed by students when they were asked to describe situations or factors that interfere with their quality of living.

My energy drains come from certain people, stressful situations that I have no control over, for-getting to slow down and take control of my perspective and not remembering or not reminding myself that I decide how I feel.

Focusing on my mistakes or losing my focus in my mistakes can turn my focus to the negative. The stress of focusing on negatives is a major energy drain for me and I lose my positive reflection time. The highlights slip past me unnoticed.

Being around negative, energy draining people is not joyful at all and really drags me down. It can ruin my mood for an entire day ... or at least part of it. Being anxious or preoccupied with my health or thoughts about failure really takes away from enjoying life in the moment.

Stressing over the little things and being around people who drain my energy interferes with my quality of living.

Loss of balance was another commonly cited factor that detracted or interfered with quality living.

Not having balance between work and my life outside of school also interferes with my quality of living.

When I'm under a lot of stress, I tend to lose the balance in my life and stop participating in activities that provide me with simple joys.

Several students used lists to describe the various factors that inhibited their quality of living. Stress, concerns about money, uncertainty, school, fear of failure, worries about academic evaluation and worries about the future were frequently identified.

Strategies/Interventions Endorsed by Students

Students were exposed to a variety of positive interventions from reading materials, class activities, presentations/lectures and from listening and sharing in their collaborative learning groups.

Students' reflections revealed that looking for "highlights" was a commonly used positive living skill that was presented and discussed in many classes. Orlick defines "highlights" as "simple, positive experiences, connections, actions or interactions that bring joy, quality and meaning to your daily life.

"Highlight connections free all human beings to live in more positive and joyful ways every day" (Orlick, 2011, p.61). Orlick also provided students/individuals with Highlight clickers – which is basically a tally counter or clicker that was designed to be used as a tracking method to enhance students' awareness of Highlights or numbers of positive connections experienced in a certain context or in a day. Personal experiences with Highlight Clickers and how to find more Highlights was frequently discussed in collaborative learning groups.

The most beneficial thing that hit home for me was the concept of being open to appreciating the simple joys of life that surround us every day. They often went un-known or unappreciated before I learned what I learned from this class. The word highlight became a key word for me because every time something good happened I would tell myself “highlight”.

Stop... Breathe... Look around... Observe... Get lost in the beauty of the moment... This is what has helped me find more highlights in my life. Slowing down the pace of things and appreciating life.

Highlights –once you learn about being aware of highlights... after a while, it comes naturally so that you get excited for highlights throughout the day.

Another important lesson that students learned in this class was how to effectively use cue words to establish a fully connected focus and to refocus when distractions diminished a fully connected focus. Chapters eight through ten in Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone exposed students to a variety of focusing and refocusing techniques that can be implemented to promote a positive and fully connected focus in virtually any context. Orlick (2011) identified eight domains where individuals can improve their ability to sustain a positive and fully connected focus. The value of being or becoming fully focused resonated with the students in this class. Virtually all students discussed and shared examples of various focusing strategies that they used and improved throughout the semester.

Focusing, refocusing: If I find my-self drifting in situations I will say, “refocus” in my head and it really helps. Being fully connected or “in the moment”; this ones

hard at times but when I can live in the moment, I am at my best.

Relaxation and breathing techniques were also taught in this class and discussed in the final chapters of Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Every-one. Relaxation Interventions ranged from practicing one-breath relaxation to listening to a number of Orlick’s audio CD’s that progressively relax muscles, breathing, as well as imagining relaxing in tranquil nature settings. In addition to learning these different relaxation techniques, many students in this class noted that sports, physical activity, athletics and recreational activities and time in nature were useful for reducing stress.

Relaxation, deep breathing, quiet reflection, relaxing muscles like “jelly”, exercising, embracing simple joys (nature, a smile, a hug, an acknowledgment) were all mentioned as effective ways to reduce stress nurture joy and relaxation.

Orlick (2011) defines “docisions” as a decision with an immediate action component. Encouraging students to act upon their positive intentions was strongly evident in the course readings and lectures. Orlick often reminds students, athletes, people and performers in all domains that “Thinking is not enough – Only Action Counts in the real world of positive change”.

Docide: The power of the mind. Most of the time, all it takes is a small switch of perspective to see things in a positive light. Communicating your appreciation: sharing your positive thoughts with others makes them feel great AND makes you feel great

Students also increased the amount of verbal appreciation they gave to others as a result of this course. This was reported to have a beneficial influence on both students and those around them.

Making appointments with my self to do things that I want to do. This really helped me balance between my zones (green and gold). I also appreciate my life more and make sure to tell people how much I appreciate them.

The act of journaling Highlights and Personal Progress was deemed a very useful strategy for increasing quality of life. Specifically, increasing awareness of the factors that influence quality of life and keeping a record of what worked and what did not work was very beneficial.

The journal has been most beneficial. In addition to the reflections it forces me to do upon myself, it has been a self-discovery highlight. I have learned more about what matters to me and what is lacking in my life these last 12 weeks than I have ever learned in the past).

The opportunity to experiment with new skills and self-reflect on these skills was reported to be a beneficial experience by the large majority of the class.

Take Home Messages

An overarching theme that was evident in a high percentage of responses was the idea of autonomy and control. At the end of the course, students identified that they were the controllable factor that had the greatest power to influence their own quality of life.

If you want a better life, it is a choice. The skills to make the choices are easy to follow and will help you; you just need to remain open to the opportunity.

Make the choices in life that will bring you the most joy and happiness and strive to live your life with positivity and focus.

There was also evidence that students became more positively action-oriented after taking this course and engaging themselves in the enhanced quality of living project.

The take home message is, don't just think about starting to live positive, ACT on it. Create an action plan and try to improve everyday.

Finally, students were able to recognize that their actions can impact those around them. A positive perspective was identified as a “gateway” to not only make yourself happy but to positively impact those around you.

Make a change in yourself and everyone around you can benefit.

Living life positively and in balance is one of the most important things in our lives. With the right perspective (being positive, open minded, non-judgmental, receptive and accepting of yourself and others) any situation can result in a more desirable outcome. It all depends on you and how you perceive it and how you perceive your control.

Slow down and appreciate what you have, what's around you and who you are. Appreciate life; do

not take anything, even the simplest thing, for granted.

Discussion

The students' written reflections indicate that a twelve-week personal life enhancement intervention integrated into the delivery of an undergraduate course on Quality of Living can be effective for increasing personal resources to enhance subjective quality of life. The students' responses provide evidence that these young adults completed this course with a much better conceptual understanding of what influences their quality of life and meaningful strategies that can be used in making their lives more positive. The voice of these students adds to the growing evidence suggesting that universities and colleges have an opportunity to deliver proactive mental health interventions by further exploring the effectiveness of meaningful student-centered

interventions, which can be evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Future positive living skills interventions and research should be implemented in high schools, junior high schools and elementary school to begin nurturing positive ways of being as early as possible. It would also be of value to conduct follow up studies with students at all levels to assess to the long-term effects of learning

positive skills for enhanced quality of living. This will help us in our global journey aimed at providing meaningful Positive Living Skills education to all people, of all ages, in all cultures. This simple positive action oriented step can increase the readiness, resiliency, positivity, stress control capabilities and overall quality of life of children, students and people of all ages – throughout the course of their lives.

Appendix A

Week	Description of Class Activities
1	Define quality of living and explain its significance. Pre-course reflections are completed in class. Course expectations are described and evaluation criteria are explained. Assignment: Read chapters 1-4 in positive living skills book (PLS) for next week.
2	What constitutes a positive, connected focus? Discuss chapters 1-4 of positive living skills in collaborative learning groups. Small group discussion about lessons learned for positive and fully focused connections. Assignment: Read chapters 5-8 in positive living skills for next week.
3	Discuss chapters 5-8 of positive living skills in collaborative learning groups. Small group discussion on how to initiate positive and focused action. Assignments: Read chapters 9-10 in PLS.
4	Discussion on how to strengthen pillars of focus. Assignments: Read chapters 11-12 of PLS.
5	Discuss positive living skills chapters 11-12. Discuss Distraction control. Assignments: Read Embracing Your Potential (EYP) chapters 1-2. Complete self-reflection questions on pg. 14 and 15 of EYP.
6	Discuss chapters 1-2 (EYP). Read Chapters 3-5 in EYP
7	Winter Reading Week - No Class
8	Discuss how to maximize your potential by strengthening relationships and being/feeling/focusing your best in different contexts. Read an article of choice on the Journal of Excellence related to Positive Living.
9	Students hand in reflection on article from <i>Journal of Excellence</i> . Students discuss articles in small groups. Collaborative learning groups continue to discuss quality living actions and lessons learned.
10	Group sharing of positive living actions, challenges, benefits and lessons learned.
11	Collaborative learning groups – continue to share progress and positive lessons learned
12	Hand in quality living project; share bottom line lessons learned with classmates, summarize what was most important for you, and discuss final reflections in small groups in class.

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