Integrating positive psychology interventions into university classes boosts student wellbeing

The University Wellbeing Programme

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Introduction:
University students tend to have low wellbeing compared to the general population and wellbeing decreases as their study progresses. This is problematic as high wellbeing can buffer against mental health issues and also improve physical health and academic outcomes. Positive psychology interventions offer a tested avenue for increasing wellbeing but university students can be difficult to access due to time constraints which lead to high dropout. Our study imbedded a program of positive psychology interventions into a second-year positive psychology subject. Students completed the University Wellbeing Program (UWP) in lectures and tutorials over 6 weeks with each week covering a different positive psychology intervention. Students were provided with an introduction to the topic and a positive psychology intervention designed to increase the positive variable (see Table 1). The activities targeted either subjective wellbeing or one of the factors of psychological wellbeing.

Table 1: The University Wellbeing Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Wellbeing Factor</th>
<th>In-class activity</th>
<th>Take-home activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Positive Emotions</td>
<td>Gratitude letter</td>
<td>Three good things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Mindfulness meditation</td>
<td>Mindfulness meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>Test possible self</td>
<td>Valued Cards, acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Environmental mastery</td>
<td>Strengths finder</td>
<td>Goal setting, Acting on goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Positive Relations with others</td>
<td>Living Kindness</td>
<td>Daily acts of kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td>Self-compassion letter</td>
<td>Self-compassion pause</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypotheses

Participation in the UWP will lead to:
H1: Increased wellbeing including emotional, social and psychological wellbeing
H2: Significant shifts in wellbeing categories from languishing → moderate → flourishing
H3: Increased positive affect and decreased negative affect
Exploration of moderators and mediators:
H4: More frequent practice leading to greater wellbeing gains
H5: High levels of pre-intervention valuing happiness will lead to greater wellbeing gains

Methods

Procedure:
Three studies to test the effects of the
Study 1: Single experimental group (N= 67), weekly surveys and 1 month follow-up
Study 2: Replication with single experimental group (N = 155) and two timepoints (pre, post)
Study 3: A 2 (Time 1, Time 2) x 2 (Group: experimental, control) mixed factor design (N= 247)

Measures:
- Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC)
- Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (S2 and S3)
- Valuing Happiness Scale (S2 and S3)
- Meaning in Life Questionnaire (S3)

References:

Conclusion

The UWP provides an effective intervention to improve students’ wellbeing – shifting students towards flourishing mental health. The more students valued happiness, the more they gained from the program. Importantly, the UWP is imbedded in class which resulted in very low attrition rate (e.g. 3% in Study 1). As students were already attending class there were low time costs and minimal stigma. Integrating positive psychology interventions into university classes can provide an easy yet effective way to increase students’ wellbeing. This could have flow on benefits for their physical health and academic success while buffering against mental health issues.