

WAMSS Wellbeing's Strong and Steady Campaign

The principles of relaxation and stress management course

Introduction

The Strong and Steady campaign was developed in order to address a growing concern about the psychological wellbeing of medical students. The purpose of the Strong and Steady campaign is to provide an avenue for constructive discussion about stress and mental health, and the factors that lead towards these becoming detrimental to the health and functioning of individuals. In particular, the campaign aims to provide education and dialogue in psychological resilience and how a single objective event can lead to a number of both useful and harmful outcomes for the individual.

Method

Due to some organizational issues, the course was limited to four weeks in duration during the month of May, and the themes of relaxation and stress management were explored through facilitated group discussion and the learning of practical techniques from a student facilitator. The student facilitator had no formal training, and fulfilled the role on a voluntary basis. Explanations on each topic were carried out using the facilitator's personal experiences and observations, the Indian philosophy of Yoga and research in contemporary psychology.

The topics by week are attached as **Appendix A**.

We were also fortunate to have some sandwiches provided for us each week by MDA National, which was a nice way to finish off the session, particularly at 7pm.

Outcomes

Two sets of questionnaires were carried out.

- 1) The first was in response to the question "What would you like to take away from this course?"

From this, there were 5 core topics compiled and from most to least frequent they were:

More **resilience/energy**, less **stress**, to **relax** more, to be **happier**, achieve **life balance**/better **time management**.

- 2) The second questionnaire was much bigger, and involved both a 5-point Likert scale and 3 open questions. This questionnaire and results are at the back of this document - **Appendix B**.

In summary, the general enjoyment and utility of the 4 week course received much enthusiasm, but was let down by **inadequate time to explore key concepts** which may have contributed to less time devoted to **sharing of ideas** and little change in the item **I am more willing to face life's problems after this course**. On the upside, **The topics discussed were interesting** and **These sessions were useful for stress management** received maximum possible scores, and perhaps most importantly, **I think this course (or one similar) would benefit other medical students**, received

the maximum score and **I would be interested in attending a course next semester** missed out on the maximum score by just one point.

In addition, the attendance at each session was well maintained in terms of size, and we had an 80–90% retention rate throughout the four weeks. The static group throughout the duration of the course was an important factor in the success of this course as it meant building group trust and openness, fluidity of discussion, and a sense of successively building on concepts and techniques over each week.

Comments from participants

“I liked how the topics discussed can be directly related to us, as students”

“[I liked] having a time during my week where I was forced to think about me – or even better, not think at all. It really helps.”

“I liked the small group, I think it facilitated discussions well.”

“Sad I only attended one session!”

Highlights

The experience of mindfulness, a new way of thinking, discussions and explorations of definitions, the small group, practical ideas to implement in everyday life, the people.

Take home lessons

Advertise the course more widely

Provide tea and find a more suitable room with adjustable lighting etc...

Location and time is important for many students' ability to attend

Find out what everybody wants to learn/talk about

Start with finding everybody's definitions for the key concepts of the night

Generate more discussion amongst the group, and use everyone's insights and knowledge

Use practical techniques

Provide summary sheets at end of each session and set 'homework' tasks, or items for reflection

What's next?

This course has been the first of its kind for WAMSS. In the new semester we will be looking forward to two concurrent courses running for 6–8 weeks each. With lessons learnt from this course, we will be looking forward to an even more interesting and refreshing outlook on life that promises to help more students walking away with skills and resources to handle stress and embrace a positive and confident attitude in everyday life. Perhaps not too much further in the future we can train some more voluntary facilitators... who knows?

Appendix A

The Principles of Relaxation and Stress Management Course Summary

Week 1 – The Mind–Body Complex

The body and mind are two aspects of the same complex. Mindfulness of physical posture and points of tension within the body facilitates mental and physical relaxation.

Week 2 – Perception

The way the mind perceives the world is the way the mind experiences the world. Epicurus said: “Man is not disturbed by events, but by the view he takes on them.” Perception of events determines the reaction to the event. Recognition of your own ‘habitual automated responses’ to different events helps to identify subconscious reactions and perceptions.

– Stress

Stress is the perceived inability to cope; when perceived resources are insufficient to meet demands; when we are off balance and outside comfort zone. Strategies to manage stress: adequate preparation for specific events, rationalize the importance of the event and likely consequences, bring a positive attitude to the situation, be willing to fail (you might learn something valuable from it!)

Week 3 – Health and Inner Peace

Just as the body and mind are one, Health and Peace are one. Inner peace is very difficult without good health (remember the Shaolin monks) No health without inner peace. Lifestyle-related chronic disease arises when we make poor health choices despite adequate knowledge. To attain inner peace, find a single focus and inner conflict will be removed naturally (this is a long process). The focus will change over time. What is important is to have a clear direction in mind at all times. The poet William Blake wrote: “If the fool were to persist in his folly, he would become wise.”

Week 4 – Addictions and Habits

Change is your fundamental nature. An addiction is a recurring compulsion to engage in a specific activity despite known harmful consequences (harmful as deemed by the one with the addiction). It is human nature to want to survive, but it is reality that we change. Suffering comes from the mismatch between desires and reality. Handling habits – Why is this habit detrimental?

- Where does this habit come from?
- What can I do about the underlying problematic belief?
- If this doesn’t work, then replace habit with another habit.

Appendix B – Course evaluation by participants (n=9) Mean score 0 = Str. Disagree; 5 =

Content

The content of each session was appropriate	5.0
The topics discussed were interesting	5.0
These sessions were useful for stress management	5.0
I will use techniques from workshops in the future	4.9
This course has challenged the way I see the world	4.6
I am more willing to face life’s problems due to the course	4.2
I have become more aware of my own response to stress	4.9
I understand more the importance of mental outlook in the prevention and management of disease	4.9

Delivery

The discussions were a helpful way to explore key concepts	4.8
There was adequate time to learn key concepts (Disagree if topics were rushed)	4.1
The facilitator’s knowledge was adequate	4.9
The facilitator was well prepared for each class	4.8
The facilitator’s personality is an important aspect of a successful course	4.7

Future

I would be interested in attending a course next semester	4.9
I think this course (or one similar) would benefit other medical students	5.0
I would encourage other students to attend a course next semester	5.0

Overall

I am happy that I have attended this course and feel more positive about potential difficulties in general----- 5.0