Impact of a Happiness Intervention on one's well-being

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Purpose

• Compare the impact of a happiness course on older adults and college students
  – Negative aspects of mental health (depression, stress)
  – Positive aspects of mental health (happiness, life satisfaction, mindfulness)
Background

• Mental health issues
• Prevalence of mental health problems
• Older adults
• College students
Background

• The Art of Happiness course initially taught to undergraduate students at University of Delaware.
• Students expressed how the course positively impacted them
• Students continued to apply the lessons learned in their life
Background

• Course was piloted at 2 senior centers in the state of Delaware
• Shortened to an 8 week intervention addressing the most significant concepts
Background

• We wanted to see if similar results could be found with college students
• Developed a 1 credit Happiness for Health course that had a similar number of contact hours as in the senior centers course
Intervention at senior centers

• 90-100 minutes long (lecture, activity, discussion on reading, sharing assignment)
• Kept a journal
• Read “The Art of Happiness” by the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler
• Assignments
Intervention for college students

• A 14 week 1 credit course to college students
  – Each session was 50 minutes
  – Lecture and activity
  – Discussion on the assignment
  – Assignments
Intervention topics

- Defining happiness
- Stress management
- Changing perspective
- Compassion and human connection
- Forgiveness
- Transforming suffering
- Mindfulness
- Humor
Intervention – learning activities

- doing acts of kindness expecting nothing in return
- reflecting on positive aspects of life
- letter writing
- stress reduction activity
- reflecting on growth from a negative experience
- mindfulness practice
- embracing humor
Methods

• Older adults were recruited through flyers and announcements at the center
  – Had to be 50 years of age
  – Community dwelling residents
  – Independently living
  – Ability to ambulate
  – Not working full time
  – No severe cognitive impairment
  – Not currently diagnosed with depression
Methods

• College students were self-selected through registering for the course
Methods

• Prior to the first lecture all participants were given a survey.
• Valid and reliable instruments were identified and used
  – Subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)
  – Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer, et al., 2006)
  – Diener Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985)
  – Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983)
  – PHQ-9 depression scale (Kroeneke, et al., 2009)
Results

- N= 32 older adults and 16 college students
- Demographics
  - Mean Age (range) 71 (53-84) 22 (20-24)
  - Race – Caucasian 91% 100%
  - Sex – Mostly Female 88% 54%
Results by time

- General Linear Model was used to examine the effect of the program from pre to post survey results and by group.
- Both older adults and college students demonstrated significant time improvement in
  - depression scores (F=4.50, p<.05)
  - subjective happiness (F=17.22, p<.0001)
  - mindfulness observing (F=18.43, p<.0001)
  - mindfulness describing (F=4.06, p<.05)
  - mindfulness non-judging (F=4.17, p<.05)
  - mindfulness non-reactivity (F=10.21, p<.003)
Results by category

• Significant differences were found by category on stress (F=5.52, p<.05)
Results by time

- Depression: $F=4.50$, $p<.05$
  - Older adults from 14.83 (+/-5.48) to 12.56 (+/-3.18)
  - College students 16.00 (+/-5.84) to 15.06 (+/-5.22)
Results by time

• Subjective happiness scores: F=17.22, p<.0001
  – Older adults from 4.89 (+/-1.37) to 5.52 (+/-1.27)
  – College students from 4.62 (+/-1.18) to 5.23 (+/-1.13)
Estimated Marginal Means of time

- Category: older adult, college student

Estimated Marginal Means

Time

University Delaware logo

Diagram showing two lines: one for older adults and one for college students, indicating increasing trends over time.
Results by time

- Mindfulness Observing: F=18.43, p<.0001
  - Older adults scores improved from 26.61 (+/-5.61) to 28.58 (+/-4.97)
  - College students scores improved from 22.56 (+/-6.30) to 25.50 (+/-6.12)
Results by time

• Mindfulness Describing: F=4.06, p<.05
  – Older adults improved from 27.13 (+/-3.97) to 27.87 (+/-3.96)
  – College students from 25.50 (+/-7.57) to 27.00 (+/-8.01)
Results by time

• Mindfulness Non-judging: $F=4.17, p<.05$
  – Older adults went from 26.84 (+/-6.31) to 28.81 (+/-5.42)
  – College students went from 25.19 (+/-6.94) to 26.69 (+/-6.34)
Results by time

- Mindfulness Non-reactivity: $F=10.21$, $p<.003$
  - Older adults went from 20.83 (+/- 4.01) to 22.79 (+/- 3.36)
  - College students went from 20.19 (+/- 5.49) to 22.06 (+/- 5.64)
Results by category

- Stress: $F=5.52$, $p<.05$
  - Older adults *increased* 15.06 ($\pm 5.74$) to 16.21 ($\pm 3.30$)
  - College students *decreased* 17.25 ($\pm 7.56$) to 13.88 ($\pm 6.24$)
Results

• Older adults significantly improved their level of happiness, lower depression, and greater life satisfaction ($p<.05$)
• College students only demonstrated significant improvement in levels of happiness ($p<.05$)
Discussion

• A course like those presented indicate they can have a positive impact on both older adults and college students
Discussion

• Stress
  – One surprising finding was older adults indicated feeling more stress at the conclusion of the course whereas college students showed improvement.
  – This is the reverse of what we may have anticipated finding since most college students experience more stress at the end of the semester than at the beginning.
  – This could be due to adults and college students having different causes of stress. It would be beneficial to explore a different approach to this topic for the older adults and college students.
Discussion

• The impact on subjective happiness and lower depression scores is worth further exploration.
• Is it possible that these outcomes may be helpful to those experiencing mental health issues by helping them change perspective or seek professional help?
Implications

• The research showed the potential to develop mindfulness in both older adults and college students.
• Mindfulness is associated with less depression, increased ability to handle stress, and general overall better health.
• College students who practice mindfulness report less substance abuse, less stress, and better academic performance.
Future study

• We have done a 6 month follow up and preliminary analysis looks as though many of the measures have remained higher than pre-test levels
• The goal is to include control groups, more diversity in sample, and a larger N
• We would also like to expand the study to those who have experienced a catastrophic or life-changing injury or illness, those who have experienced significant loss, and even younger populations
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