Assignment 3.2:

Distress Tolerance and Goal-Oriented Skills Workshop for Undergraduates

James Germany

Dr. Seth Hayden

Wake Forest University

CNS 771 BG

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Rationale

While enrolled at the College of Charleston as an undergraduate student, I noticed the innumerable avenues in which college students could be brought to the edge of distress, as well as the various methods that students used to cope (often ineffectively) with the stresses of a cognitively, emotionally, socially, and developmentally rigorous period of life. College students, free from the constraints and guidance of parental figures and goaded on by fellow students, often react to stressful moments or stressful obligations with unhealthy coping mechanisms like binge-drinking and/or distractions like binge-watching television. The use of such coping mechanisms is related to lower levels of distress tolerance in individuals and vice-versa and can be detrimental to one’s wellness over time via physical effects, the potential to develop a substance abuse disorder, the development of difficulties regarding processing emotions, and social ramifications, among others (Webb, Simons, and Simons, 2020). Conversely, higher levels of distress tolerance are related to better emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and resiliency (Arici-Ozcan, Cekici, & Arslan, 2019). Therefore, I have designed this psychoeducation group to build college students’ awareness of stressors they are likely to face, their own reactions to stress, ways to manage stressors in the moment, methods of increasing distress tolerance over time, and how to set goals to have a less stressful life.

The first session will focus on building awareness by evaluating the cognitive, behavioral, and affective elements of stress and allowing students to examine their own coping mechanisms and formulate more desirable methods of coping. The second and third sessions will be focused on short-term and long-term growth of distress tolerance by improving students’ understanding of mindfulness techniques shown to improve wellbeing and distress tolerance (Nila, Holt, Ditzen, Aguilar-Raab, 2016; O’Leary & Dockray, 2015). The final session will then focus on the use of SMART goals and the relationship between goal attainment, life satisfaction, and wellbeing (Bernardo et al., 2018).

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**Session One: Awareness-Building**

* **Goal:** To cultivate participants’ awareness of specific stressors and their own reactions to such stressors.
* **Objectives:**
  + Build a lexicon of acute and continuous stressors students are likely to face in college and in the professional world.
  + Develop participants’ understanding of their own potential cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to various stressors.
  + Teach participants to understand healthy reactions to stress by labelling specific reactions as either protective or potentially damaging.
* **Methods:**
  + Participants will discuss stressors that they face in their studies as well as their reactions to these stressors.
  + SUDS: After compiling a list of the most common stressors mentioned in discussion, the students will each use a subjective units of distress scale to gauge their own distress in a given situation.
    - In describing their reactions, students will write about what they are thinking, feeling, and doing in response to certain stressors.
    - Students will also write about how they may cope with the stressor once the event has passed.
    - The group will then reconvene to discuss the students’ results to the exercise.

**Session 2: Stress Management in the Moment**

* **Goal:** To increase participants’ distress tolerance through the use of situational emotional regulation techniques while conveying the long-term positive effects of using such techniques regularly.
* **Objectives:**
  + Acknowledge the long-term ramifications of consistent stress by describing how perceived stress reduces one’s overall wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008)
  + Describe how building emotional regulation skills increases resilience and distress tolerance over time, helping to resolve existing mental health issues while preventing potential mental health problems (Nila et al., 2016).
  + Teach the physical nature of emotions, how they affect thinking and behavior, and how to reduce the impact of emotions in the moment through techniques like the body scan and diaphragmatic breathing (Gladding & Newsome, 2017).
* **Methods:**
  + Using the situations from last session’s SUDS activity, students will think about the situations that caused them distress and individually practice the body scan and diaphragmatic breathing to garner and understanding of the physical nature of emotions and how to calm the body to reduce stress.
  + Roleplay: Students will form small groups to act out stressful situations, practicing their newly learned techniques in the moment of a simulated stress event.

**Session 3: Long-Term Gains in Distress Tolerance and Resilience**

* **Goal:** Establish knowledge and skills to aid in the long-term development of greater resilience and distress tolerance.
* **Objectives:** 
  + Discuss internal vs. external locus of control, particularly how developing an internal locus of control can enhance adaptive coping and wellbeing (Bernardo et al., 2018).
  + Discuss the potential for consistent exercise and nutrition to increase self-efficacy, reduce anxiety, and mitigate situational stress (Jacquart et al., 2019).
  + Include psychoeducation regarding integrating meditation, self-compassion, and gratitude into developing greater long-term distress tolerance (Nila et al., 2016; O’Leary & Dockray, 2015).
* **Methods:**
  + Mood Assessment: Students will complete the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) at the beginning and end of the session to measure potential effects of the meditation practice and gratitude journal (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).
  + Meditation Practice:
    - Students will practice diaphragmatic breathing while allowing thoughts to come and go for 10 minutes.
    - After the initial 10 minutes, students will practice loving-kindness meditation for 5 minutes, continuing to breathe while thinking a compassionate mantra toward themselves and/or others (e.g. “Breathing in, I love myself; Breathing out, I forgive those who have hurt me”).
  + Gratitude Journal: Students will describe things for which they are grateful by writing in a gratitude journal provided to them in the group.

**Session 4: Goal Setting for Personal Growth and Distress Tolerance**

* **Goal:** Learn how goal setting and attainment relate to distress tolerance and develop skills to supplement goal setting and attainment abilities.
* **Objectives:**
  + Discuss how goal attainment relates to developing a greater internal locus of control, leading to enhanced wellbeing and distress tolerance (Bernardo et al., 2018).
  + Discuss SMART (simple, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) goals and how to set them.
* **Methods:**
  + Have students brainstorm personal goals related to the subject matter of previous sessions (i.e. meditation practice, gratitude journal, exercise, and nutrition).
  + Discuss how to make such goals SMART and how to extend the SMART paradigm to other life goals to increase self-efficacy, promote goal attainment, and increase wellbeing.

**Internet Resources**

**Emotional Regulation:**

* Daily Free Guided Meditation Groups: <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/latest-news/free-daily-online-meditation/>
* In the Moment Calming Techniques: <https://www.everydayhealth.com/columns/therese-borchard-sanity-break/10-quick-ways-to-calm-down/>
* Body Scan Instruction: <https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/>

**Awareness:**

* Feelings Wheel: <http://feelingswheel.com/>
* Activities for Increasing Self-Awareness: <https://positivepsychology.com/building-self-awareness-activities/>

**Goal Setting:**

* Explanation of SMART goals: <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/productivity/how-to-write-smart-goals>

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