

COMMENTARY

Perspectives on mental health promotion alongside virtual teaching-learning engagements in the College of Pharmacy, University of the Philippines Manila

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ABSTRACT

COVID 19 pandemic altered how people work and study. The unfamiliarity to the sudden shift to virtual/remote platforms particularly in the teaching-learning process brought poor mental health in the academe. Constituents of the College of Pharmacy in the University of the Philippines Manila is no exception. The College promoted mental health among its constituents-students, faculty, and staff, through facilitated/supervised self-care, where the usual manner is an individual kind. The approach to the management of stress was holistic to better support the current mode of teaching-learning which uses the virtual platform. Both the initiatives of faculty members and the activities offered by the administration of the college received positive responses and favorable outcomes from the participants. Further studies on the effects of the offered programs and initiatives may result in more regular events and inclusion to the Pharmacy curriculum, respectively.

Keywords: pandemic mental health, stress management in the academe, facilitated self-care

Introduction

Mental Health During COVID-19 on Virtual Teaching-Learning

Mental health is important to everyone as it encompasses our social, emotional, and psychological well-being which can be affected by professional, domestic work, and financial difficulties. An individual with mental health problems becomes more at risk of chronic disorders. Mental illnesses may also be caused by traumatic childhood, and adverse incidents due to existing chronic medical conditions [1]. Stress is a concern if it becomes chronic and unmanaged as it can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses [2]. Stress, unlike anxiety, may be due to an external factor which subsides. Anxiety is an internal feeling as a reaction to stress that persists even without threat or reason and affects daily living. Stress may be managed by various non-pharmacologic means [3]. Stress management can be clustered into two words - self-care, which can lower the risk of illness and increase energy [4].

The World Health Organization predicted pandemic-related restrictions have caused a negative impact on mental

and physical well-being. Children's mental health has been affected by studying from home since structure and stimulation has been lost [5]. The pandemic increased the use of devices and technology for education which may have led to stress, burnout, and depressive symptoms among students. The mode and intensity of smart devices influenced mental health problems among university students. Increased anxiety was seen among younger children who send texts and browse the Internet more [6].

The pandemic adversely affected the mental health of Filipinos due to losses in jobs and livelihood, isolation, physical distancing, and complete change in daily routines. The pandemic also caused distress, anxiety, fear of contagion, depression, insomnia, and psychological impact in the population [7-9]. The mental health of poor Filipino college students was negatively affected due to tuition payments, gadgets for online classes, Internet connectivity, and future job prospects [10]. This avalanche of unfavorable conditions can lead to stress.

At the UP Manila College of Pharmacy, the abrupt shift of class modalities from face-to-face to remote learning, amongst others, caused varying degrees of stress that affected the mental health of the students, faculty, and administrative staff. Stress management has been necessary to sustain effective online teaching-learning activities during the pandemic.

In fact, the UP Manila Office of the Student Affairs noted an increase in mental health cases among students during the pandemic due to academic and physical-mental challenges. In response, the Subcommittee on Students-in-distress was created on the 27th of July 2021 to formulate plans, programs, and mechanisms for them. A survey revealed the top causes of distress are conflicting priorities and unclear boundaries between home and school.

Several stress reduction strategies were recommended like wellness campaigns, use of podcasts, and exercises in between classes to overcome problems on prolonged exposure to digital gadgets during online classes. Avenues for sharing mental health challenges among students were suggested, among others [6].

Early in the pandemic, the Psychological Association of the Philippines listed free telemedicine consultations to address mental health [11]. The Department of Health created programs and interventions for mental health for different sectors at risk. The National Suicide Prevention strategy simulates the psychosocial services of the National Center for Mental Health's Crisis Hotline "*Kamusta Ka? Tara Usap Tayo*," starting May 2, 2019 [12].

New perspective

For Students

In UPCP, the existing management of stress among students is embedded in courses as individual initiatives by faculty members. Selected undergraduate and graduate courses had Cafes/ Gourmets/ Tea Times. These were 30- to 40-minute sessions (synchronous and/or asynchronous) added to the regular course schedules to promote mental health among students. These initiatives aimed to lessen the stress by allowing students to connect socially with one another; provide avenues for sharing thoughts, challenges, and insights; develop a culture of positivity (gratitude, happiness) among participants; and, learn mental health exercises useful during more difficult times. Students engaged in non-academic games, mental-physical health

promoting exercises, and an MTV where insights to strengthen each other were drawn. The professor-in-charge received appreciation feedback from students with some even looking forward to these sessions when things get stressful. A 100% and 88% acceptance rate were obtained in informal polls from two courses, respectively. Students were energized and kept focused on things they needed to accomplish. The said activities broke the monotony of stress, thereby preventing chronicity to occur along with various mental illnesses. Both faculty and students benefited from the short non-academic activities. There is an extra effort though for the faculty-in-charge to prepare engaging materials for every event.

Another undergraduate course included a 2-hour discussion of a new topic, Digital Ethics [13]. It aimed to determine how the fifty-one (51) freshmen were affected morally and ethically by their heavy engagement online during the pandemic. Reading materials were provided by the professor-in-charge, a short lecture was conducted, and then, the students were asked to reflect on how digital technology affected their lives. Student-teacher discussion ensued either orally or through the virtual platform chat box. More than ten students discussed their reflections in class and about fifty chat messages were generated. All appreciated digital technology, but the majority admitted that perfection projected on social media negatively affected their self-concept, confidence, and outlook in life. They compared themselves with the images and stories seen and read online, distorting their concept of reality. One student shared an essay, "What Lies Behind the Screen?" [14] with its gist, "the true essence of life is not what we see on the screen but what lies behind the screen." The faculty debriefed and appreciated the openness of the students in sharing their views. The students were encouraged to have a healthy view of their true life and exercise time management and discretion in accessing digital information. The activity allowed the students to open up on possible stressors emanating from the use of digital technology. Being aware that digital technology did affect their personal views and perceptions of reality is the first step to controlling its power over their lives.

For Faculty and Administrative Staff

Initiatives for promoting mental health also extended to the faculty and administrative staff of UPCP. The Committee on Mental Health Promotions of the College organized a voluntary defusing activity facilitated by trained guidance counselors in response to the concerns raised due to the stressful conditions of remote learning. The activity aimed

to develop an awareness and understanding on the means to restore the well-being of faculty amidst present challenges; appreciate a safe space for sharing and support through a defusing process; and, commit oneself to the task of restoring one's own well-being. The activity helped the six faculty attendees understand the causes of stress and learn ways to cope from stressful situations through their coping toolbox. The small group experience-sharing, self-reflection, and inspirational talks enabled the participants to appreciate and recognize self-worth and value of their role in the College.

A stress management webinar-workshop entitled “Resilience in Adversity: A Webinar-Workshop on Stress Management in the Academe” was conducted for the faculty and administrative staff of the College. It aimed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills to manage stress within the workplace; determine the causes and effects of stress due to work; teach techniques to manage difficult emotions during adversity; and develop proactive responses to stressful situations through meditation, mindfulness, and relaxation response. A physician specializing in lifestyle medicine facilitated the activity as guided by the results of a pre-event survey among the target audience. The event consisted of a lecture on stress and lifestyle medicine for stress management and a workshop on gentle stretching and activities to manage stress in the workplace. Sixteen faculty and seven administrative staff participated and shared positive feedback on all aspects of the webinar-workshop.

These initiatives demonstrated the importance of developing strategies that promote the overall well-being of the faculty and administrative staff based on their needs. The targeted activities assured positive outcomes among the audience. However, it will also be beneficial to have proactive strategies which can be incorporated in daily activities in the workplace to promote their mental health.

Conclusion

The sudden shift to remote learning may have affected the mental health of UCPD constituents. The faculty-led initiatives to assist students in promoting mental health and the stress management programs for the faculty and staff helped strengthen the mental well-being within the College. The facilitated self-care activities created a starting point for those in need of care to improve mental health. Having programs in different tiers of an institution assures better attention to mental health states to sustain effective virtual teaching-learning arrangements.

The individual faculty initiatives may be officially incorporated into the Pharmacy curriculum after a thorough review of its effectiveness in maintaining good mental health among students. Regular stress management activities among faculty and staff may also be instituted using relevant data from local studies.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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