

Building Stress Resilience in Undergraduates: An Examination of Self-Affirmation and Stress Resilience in Students

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Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research project is to investigate how a simple daily practice of self-affirmation could potentially influence shifts in undergraduate college students' social and mental well-being.

How can the practice of self-affirmation impact stress-resilience in undergraduate students as it is related to social and mental well-being?

Literature Review

Key Definitions

- Self-affirmation is “the process of reflection on important personal values or personal characteristics and strengths” (Dutcher et al., 2016, p. 455).
- Stress resilience is understood as both the biological and intentional ways in which one responds to stress (Feder et al., 2009).

Causes of Undergraduate Stress

- Increased class workload and lower grade(s) than anticipated were top causes of student stress (Acharya et al., 2018, p. 661).
- During COVID-19, students voiced moderate or severe difficulty with concentrating on academics (Wang et al., 2020, para. 21).

Responses to Undergraduate Stress

- Students "exposure to daily stressors [increase] likelihood or drinking and number of drinks" (Russel et al., 2017, p. 13).
- Students self-reported a severe level of psychological distress leading to increased rates of depression and anxiety diagnoses (Porru, et al., 2021).

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Methodology/Methods

Method

- Constructivist approach
- Qualitative research method - narrative inquiry through written reflection (Duquesne University, 2020, para. 1).

Sample

- Participants pulled from three Brook Center mini-courses: Co-Pilots, PAVE, Q-mmunity
- Began with 14 participants, ended with 6—
 - 57% decrease in participation

Data Collection & Analysis Strategies

- Participants instructed to write 10 self-affirmations daily for six weeks and complete bi-weekly self-reflections:
 - On a scale of 1-10, please describe your current overall stress level.
 - Please describe what, if anything, is contributing to your stress levels?
 - Please describe how the stress is impacting you and your daily life.
 - What affirmations have you used?
 - Please describe your experiences in writing 10-daily self-affirmations over the last two weeks
- Analyzed through *inductive logic of research* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 64) and did so through the practice of *coding* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Top Affirmations Used

I am strong	I am determined
I am capable	I am healthy
I am loved	I am successful
I am smart	I am worthy
I am beautiful	I am loved exactly as I am
I am enough	I am worthy of love & respect
I'm the one	I will do great things

Results

Was there a decrease in stress?

- Based on self-reported data, student stress levels decreased 24%.

Did this impact mental well-being?

- Yes. “It has given me time to breathe and self-reflect... Reading them reassures me that I am doing okay and that I can get through whatever is causing me stress.”

Did this impact Social well-being?

- Only one student spoke to this stating, “Overall, I also feel like I'm been more outgoing.”

Discussion

Connections to Existing Literature

- In the preliminary reflection, students affirmed that self-blame is often the first way students attempt to manage stress & find control (Straud & McNaughton-Cassil, 2019).
- Students were able to “tell a different story...about their experiences” (Sherman et al., p. 614) through their self-affirmation practices helping to feel more confident.

Limitations

- Significant decrease in participants from start to finish; A larger participant pool is ideal
- Prompts could have better reflected research questions, providing better data to analyze
- Did not track unique student progress

Implications for Research

- Future research should expand this to include more students, a longer period of time, and investigation into other types of self-affirmation practices beyond what was asked here

Implications for Practice

- Implement self-affirmation into programming from counseling services or mental health education
- Faculty implementation to assist in managing academic stress in students