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Global Health and Leadership Conference Grant Proposal

18/4/2022

Learning to Love Learning: A Positive Feed-Back Loop Approach to Combating Procrastination

Background and Statement of the problem

Over the past few decades, procrastination has been dubbed a maladaptive behavior that many people exhibit during their life which may result in negative health consequences. In fact, 15% to 20% of the population has been found to chronically procrastinate (Harriott & Ferrari, 1996). This behavior is even more prevalent in academic settings where 80% to 95% of university students have reported procrastinating at least one time and 46% of students have reported procrastinating frequently on academic activities (Harriot & Ferrari 1996). To understand the problem of procrastination and its detrimental effects, we must first define maladaptive behaviors. These behaviors are able to stop someone from adapting to new or difficult situations. Research has shown that engaging in maladaptive behaviors such as procrastination has had negative consequences on students' academic performance and overall feeling of life satisfaction (Goroshit, 2019). Procrastination in the academic environment frequently begins as a student's reaction to the fear of failure. Thus, students who procrastinate suffer from degrees of mental stress and anxiety ranging from lower self-esteem, decreased sense of optimism, higher level of self-criticism, and a higher level of depression than students who procrastinate less or not at all (Klingsieck, 2013). Furthermore, challenges to learning resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic may have also contributed to an increase in maladaptive behaviors by students (Peixoto et al., 2021).

Because of the many negative effects of chronic procrastination including a decrease in academic performance, withdrawal from courses entirely, degradation of mental health, and much more, this issue is concerning not only for students but also for teachers and institutions for higher education (Ozer et al., 2014). Furthermore, by reinforcing these habits early on in life, you can drastically increase your own quality of life: how about that doctor's appointment you've been putting off for weeks?

My Solution

My proposed solution to this issue is to create an organization of student volunteers to alleviate aspects of the causes and effects of procrastination. Basing the organization on volunteers would allow it to be cost-effective and viable because of the reviewed focus on mental health and awareness by students and adults alike. One of the first tasks for this organization is to collaborate on a set of educational videos on mindfulness and a general overview of mental health and its importance. These videos and exercises would be focused on teens and high school students but may still apply to anyone looking to relieve their stress.

The next initiative of this organization would be to form an outreach group to chat directly with students about mental health and to provide support. One way to provide support directly would be to hold weekly calls where groups of students can practice mindfulness and yoga in a safe and welcoming environment. One of the main goals of this organization is to create a community of students that can support each other. Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) was created to teach self-acceptance to individuals who experience significant levels of self-criticism (Halamová et al., 2021 & Gilbert and Procter, 2006). The goal of CMT is to change the negative thought processes like self-criticism that induce and prolong procrastination by replacing them with more supportive thought processes in hope that the new process will become

the dominant mental pathway that the student uses when placed in a stressful situation (Mitchell 2022). The steps laid out in CMT will be the focus of some of the organization's mindfulness videos and group meetings:

1. Realize that any self-harm behavior and attempt to avoid mistakes are maladaptive coping strategies.
2. Identify the underlying fear of procrastination through mindfulness
3. Acknowledge that procrastination may be helpful in the short term to alleviate anxiety but these activities tend to increase anxiety in the long term (Gilbert and Procter, 2006).
4. Encouraging self-compassion and taking time to take care of oneself and promoting self-awareness

Mindfulness or paying attention to a present moment without judgment or thoughts was found to reduce anxiety and stress as well as improve students' ability to regulate emotions (Cherry and Wilcox, 2020). Furthermore, Short and Mazmanian (2013) have noted that mindfulness, which promotes the absence of worry, significantly reduces perfectionism. Motie et al. (2019) also found that mindfulness decreased anxiety and procrastination and also improved self-esteem. In contrast to these studies, Shearer et al. (2016) found that depression, anxiety, and maladaptive behaviors were more present in people who had a lower degree of mindfulness. Tobin and Dunkley (2020) also found that mindfulness techniques did not take a large amount of effort to be effective with students. This research is further supported by Beck et al., (2017) who found that just twenty minutes a day of simple mindfulness and yoga practice reduced student stress during an entire semester of school while also not sacrificing high grades.

Another goal of the organization will be to reach out to educational institutions about the importance of raising awareness among students that anxiety as a result of academic stress is a

substantial possibility (LeBlanc, 2019) and that minimizing stress is critical for successfully completing classes (Huckins et al., 2020). Mindfulness is not the only method of supporting students, teaching practical problem-solving skills such as managing their time and understanding the benefits of self-compassion is very important for institutions to promote in order to have a safe and welcoming environment. Similarly, creating a supportive learning environment that alleviates the feeling of loneliness that students feel, especially during Covid-19, is very important in combating maladaptive behavior (Heppner et al., 2006 & Peixoto et al., 2021). Though this is one of the main topics to raise awareness about, it is also one of the main reasons the organization I am proposing will have a support group: students should connect with one another and feel a sense of togetherness during these challenging times. While working in a group to promote social interaction may benefit many students, we also need to be sensitive to the needs of students that have a more avoidant personality (Lavy, 2017). In the cases of these students, Lavy (2017) proposes to provide the students with assistance when dealing with difficulties concerning group work and to provide constructive criticism to help them overcome negative views about group work. While this proposed organization may not be able to implement this, we are able to raise awareness among institutions about these issues. In one article by McCarthy (McCarthy 2015), it is suggested that delivering feedback using audio recordings, where the tone of voice may be perceived as support rather than criticism may help students with maladaptive habits as it minimizes the risk of a student feeling as though they are being shamed. This idea may also work for a series of motivational recordings or phone calls that are viable for this organization.

One way to make an even stronger impact on the problem of procrastination and mental health is to implement a Positive Feed-Back plan. Under this plan, once a student succeeds in

reinforcing positive behaviors regarding procrastination, they should attempt to reach out to at least one student who might also benefit from learning about mindfulness and positive study habits. By showing other students that they have more options such as mindfulness that they can try, the organization will be able to reach many more students than it could through platforms such as youtube or through outreach. Furthermore, asking students to fill out feedback forms and commenting on mindfulness videos would potentially be great ways of gathering feedback to incorporate.

One aspect of this solution is the intended audience for the organization. While most studies referenced in this proposal focused on college students, I believe that, especially with the onset of the pandemic, an approach to combat the root of procrastination which happens in middle school and high school would be more effective. This would also allow me to potentially continue this organization as I transition to college and extend the organization's range to college students once it has significantly developed. This is especially important since it solves some of the problems of having older members of the organization move on when entering college. The organization would also look to partner with multiple schools and student organizations in the beginning, and then branch out to hospitals in the area as it picks up more traction.

Physical resources aren't as necessary for the proposed organization since platforms such as youtube and discord are open for free communication. Though we may need to purchase quality editing software for mindfulness videos, most funds raised by the organization will be donated to other mental health organizations. In terms of organization, the group would need to have head leaders for outreach, video development, fundraising, and support groups. These heads would lead teams of 5-10 students in their specific area to ensure the organization's success. As the organization grows, we would then allocate students to their preferred area to help.

Other Considerations

This proposed organization is a student lead organization to combat a problem that predominantly affects students. My own interest in procrastination and mental illness started during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic when I saw many of my peers start to procrastinate only to their own detriment. This interest culminated in an article I wrote about procrastination and action control for the Harvard BREVIA magazine. I then later connected this behavior to mindfulness and yoga when I attended a camp with my family which focused on doing mindfulness exercises every morning. These exercises were very refreshing and stress relieving which birthed the idea for this proposal.

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