

Reflection: The Development of a New Course Entitled “Stress, Depression and Suicide”

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Abstract:

This reflection paper discusses the conceptualization and development of a new course entitled “Stress, Depression and Suicide.” The work involved in designing the course content, instruction method, class activities, assessment strategies, and working with the teaching personnel are discussed. The reflection reveals that it is hard work to implement the course, but the course developer still believes similar courses should be offered on other campuses as a means to promote mental health and reach students in need.

Key Words:

Stress, depression, suicide, course development, course implementation.

Background of the Course Development

I was working at the Centre of Suicide Research and Prevention at the University of Hong Kong when I developed and designed a new course entitled “Stress, depression and suicide.” My ideas for developing this course were based on related research findings and on the motivation to offer a course that could be relevant to students’ personal lives.

First, stress is a common experience in today’s fast changing world. It is well documented that there is a strong association between stress and psychological well-being (Cooper, Appleby, & Amos, 2002; Crean, 2004; Wilburn & Smith, 2005; Wong, Stewart, Ho, Rao, & Lam, 2005). Therefore, I thought that designing a course about stress could prepare students better to face stressors in their lives.

Second, research has found that college students show signs of moderate to extremely severe degree of stress and depression (American College Health

Association, 2008). A recent large scale research study involving 10 tertiary institutions in Hong Kong found that more than 20% of first year tertiary students showed signs of moderate to extremely severe degrees of depression and stress (Hong Kong Tertiary Institutions Health Care Working Group, 2005). Hence, it would be important to educate students about depression and its management.

Third, it is well established that depression is one major risk factor for suicidal behaviors (Ang & Huan, 2006; Bentley, 1999; Galaif, Sussman, Newcomb, & Locke, 2007). Therefore, I considered this course to be incomplete without including topics on depression and suicide. Moreover, the problems of depression and suicide in adolescents have been topics of concern in many countries in recent decades (Beautrais, 2001; Brener, Hassan, & Barrios, 1999; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002). Suicide ranked as the third leading cause of death for young people aged 15 – 24 in the United States (Barrios, Everett, Simon, & Brener, 2000). In Hong Kong, it was the leading cause of death for young people in this age group (Yip, Liu, Lam, Stewart, Chen, & Fan, 2004). A rising trend has been observed in some countries. For example, in the United States, suicide rates for this age group have more than doubled since the 1950's (American Association of Suicidology, 2009).

Taking all of the above findings together, I decided to design a new course entitled "Stress, Depression and Suicide." This course should be not only academically important but also personally relevant to the college student population. I wanted this new course to enhance students' knowledge and self-understanding relating to stress and well being. I also wanted students to apply what they learn.

The Course: Stress, Depression and Suicide

This was a general education broadening course open to all undergraduates as an elective. An important objective of the course was to enable students to build up resilience against possible stressors so that they could lead a healthy and effective life. Hence, the intended learning outcomes were not just knowledge acquisition; I wanted my students to apply what they learned in the course. How could I achieve this objective? I started with the course content. I included diverse topics such as the relationship between stress, depression and suicide; risk and protective factors; and personality variables. As well, I included interpersonal, physical and spiritual dimensions of stress, depression and suicide; and stress-reduction techniques.

Was that enough? I asked myself. No! The method of instruction was also important. There were eleven two-hour weekly sessions in this course. It would not serve the purpose if they were all lecture-style sessions, particularly if there were 250 students enrolled in the course. Elements of active and experiential learning should be present. Therefore, I set aside three sessions for smaller group tutorials and one session for group presentations. In addition, I designed many in-class activities and experiential exercises. As well, I added some after-class application and community involvement activities in this course. The following are some examples of the activities and exercises included in the course:

- Short quiz on myths and facts about depression and suicide
- Count your blessings exercise

- Finding and modifying your own irrational beliefs
- Explore or establish social support networks for a specific needy group (e.g., elders who live alone)
- Observe a group practicing tai chi or other exercises in a park. Talk to 2 participants to find out what benefits they gain from the exercise.

To encourage continuous student efforts, I adopted an ongoing, formative mode of assessment. There were four components in the course assessment:

1. Preparations and participation in tutorials
2. Completing a student learning portfolio that consisted of (i) a collection of student-selected in-class exercises, and after-class application activities, reflection exercises that students did throughout this course which could document their own learning progress and (ii) a brief self-reflection report of their learning journey in this course
3. Delivering a term-end group presentation in class
4. Submitting a summary report of the group presentation

I acted as the course designer, main lecturer and also the course coordinator to handle course logistics, liaise with guest speakers, handle administrative work with the Registry and work with the teaching assistants who helped run the tutorials. Specialists from different disciplines were invited as guest speakers. Different personnel (such as research assistants, and a postdoctoral research fellow) were recruited as TAs to conduct the tutorials. A course website was constructed to disseminate information about the course and provide course materials for students to download.

My Reflections

1. The Course Content

It was challenging to include three areas (stress, depression and suicide) in one course. But that was not all. Since the course was open to all undergraduates, I had to design the course content in ways that could cater to students' diverse backgrounds. As well, some lectures were delivered by guest lecturers, I also had to liaise with them closely. For example, a physician was invited to talk about the physical dimension of stress and well-being (such as the relation between illness and psychological distress, exercise and wellness, and healthy life style). I had to alert the lecturer not to go into the details of the human anatomy and to avoid using medical jargon so that the majority of the class could understand. I also suggested a self-assessed healthy life style inventory to be used in class. My experience was that close liaison and communication with guest lecturers was necessary and essential to ensure a coherent and consistent delivery throughout the course. As far as possible, I also walked around in class and talked to the students to see how well they understood the lectures. I found that this was very useful in teaching a large and diverse group of students.

2. Working with the Teaching Assistants

The TAs who were responsible for leading the tutorials all had no prior teaching experience. Nor did they have any previous experience with student learning portfolios.

I arranged briefings and meetings with them to ensure that they understood the objectives and design of the three tutorials, the requirements of the tutorial worksheets, the arrangements of the Group Project, and the purposes of the Student Learning Portfolio and what was expected of the students. Training on principles and philosophy behind assessment strategies was also conducted. Assessment rubrics for marking were prepared in advance and explained in detail so that consistency in grading could be achieved. Trial marking sessions were also arranged.

On reflection, I think I should have reacted more proactively when some of the TAs voiced their concerns about their responsibilities. One TA remarked: "I have had no teaching experience before." Another said to me somewhat worriedly: "I'm not trained in this discipline, and I feel a little anxious." Although I had given them adequate briefing and training sessions and written guidelines, from their point of view, those were inadequate. I was not sure what else they needed. I could only give them assurance that I would support them whenever needed. I later noticed that one TA who had more training in the areas gave a mini-lecture to this team of assistants. Apparently, some peer tutoring was at work. I knew the many benefits of peer tutors, but this idea did not occur to me as a resource to the team. On reflection, I think that a peer tutor could be appointed so that the team can feel more comfortable and better prepared to carry out their responsibilities.

3. Promoting the Use of a Student Learning Portfolio

Students in this course found the idea of a student learning portfolio new to them. In fact, it was my first time using a portfolio too! To prepare students for the task, I explained its purposes and characteristics at the beginning of the course in class. Guidelines were given to students and some questions were prepared to assist students' self-reflection. As it was the first time I had used a student learning portfolio, I did not have concrete examples for students to see "what the real thing" would look like. I also thought that to show them actual examples might limit their originality and creativity. However, on reflection, I now think that selecting a variety of examples as illustrations would be helpful to stimulate students' ideas.

4. Concluding remarks

On the whole, I found that it was hard work to design, prepare, monitor, and implement this course. The workload was continuous and somewhat unexpectedly large. However, at the end of the course, I obtained substantial positive feedback from students about the course. I also learned much more about my students, and about the various stressors among college students. I could see that there was really a need for courses like this one. It served as a mental health promotion and first aid kit for these students. It could reach students who otherwise would not seek help.

In leading the tutorials, I had the opportunity to hear students talk about their daily stressors, and the sources of their anxiety and depression. I could also see how they tried to apply what they learned in the course to deal with their problems. One student, for example, shared that he wanted to change one of his bad habits, drinking only coke, to drinking water instead. His group mates laughed at first on hearing this problem, but very soon they realized this could cause him distress and immediately stopped

laughing. They then offered many suggestions to help him eliminate his habit. In another tutorial when students were asked to derive creative cognition and coping strategies using insights they gained from an arbitrary object that was given, I was impressed by students' witty responses and hidden potential. For example, one student got a box of color pens and said "Life is similar to color pens – it has many challenges, and we can use various problem-solving strategies to add colors to it." Such remarks and interactions with students made the course enjoyable and very meaningful.

I found it very rewarding to read students' portfolios. In the portfolios, they commented on how much they had learned about the subject matter. Their self-understanding in relation to the topic was enhanced. They also said they had learned a lot of practical, easy-to-use strategies to manage stress. Some talked about how they changed their behaviors to reduce causing stress to others. Others shared how they applied life-enhancing strategies in dealing with their own stressors or in helping peers and family members manage their problems in life. Still others positively commented on the course structure, the teaching format, or topics that they liked most.

Truly, it was hard work and stressful to develop and run this new course. However, it was also gratifying to run the course as students could try to apply what they learned. The course attracted 350 applicants when it was offered for a second time. Moreover, my encounters with students and their reading portfolios made theory and research more real. I speculate there is a need for similar courses to be offered on other campuses. One in five university students experiences stress and distress. However, some students probably will not seek help. A course of this kind can be a means to promote mental health and reach those in need.

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