

Strategies to increase happiness and wellbeing among public health students, faculty and staff

Script for the presentation

Slide 1: Title Page

Good afternoon. What I will be describing started several years ago.... before the current pandemic. As my School's Diversity Officer and member of the University's Senate Executive Committee I was dismayed to learn that one out of four undergraduate students at the University of Maryland College Park had diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. The Counseling Center at that time had a waiting list to be seen of at least 2 months – this was pre-pandemic. Students and others were asking, shouldn't we do more? I went on to complete a 7-month Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology, a 3-month resilience trainer training, and attended the International Positive Psychology Association meeting in Melbourne, Australia. I came back with lots of ideas and met with our Dean who asked for a proposal with a budget. Faced with limited resources, we were asked to focus on "low-hanging fruit" to get started – so we decided to take advantage of existing training such as Mental Health First Aid Training,¹ and perform a literature review to find out what other schools and programs in public health were doing.

Slide 2: Background & Aims

Prior to the pandemic, it was thought that as many as one out of three undergraduate students suffered from depression,² and rates of depression and anxiety were at least that high or higher among graduate students.³ Although public health schools equip students with skills to promote and protect health, little is known about what is provided to support the physical, mental and social wellbeing of students, faculty and staff in academic public health. Our aim was therefore to perform a literature review to find programs, interventions, strategies and tools that could be applied to public health students, staff and faculty.

Slide 3: Key Definitions

Positive psychology and mindfulness can contribute to the preparation of public health students to protect and improve the health of people and their communities, but also promote their own personal wellbeing and mental health. The World Health Organization defines health as complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.⁴

Slide 4: Methods

Our review of 13 databases was disappointing in 2019, and again in January of this year. Search terms were broad, and most records related to nurses or physicians. Although 194 articles focused on some aspect of public health, only 1 described evaluation results of an intervention in academic public health. So, we added two new

¹ <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>

² Ibrahim AK, Kelly SJ, Adams CE, Glazebrook C. A systematic review of studies of depression prevalence in university students. *J Psychiatr Res.* 2013 Mar;47(3):391-400.

³ [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/22/berkeley-study-finds-high-levels-depression-among-graduate-students;](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/22/berkeley-study-finds-high-levels-depression-among-graduate-students)
<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/11/30/huhs-depression-survey-grad-students/>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>

Carter-Pokras, O., Tchangalova, N., & Puett, R. (2022, June 29-July 2). *Strategies to increase happiness and wellbeing among public health students, faculty and staff* [Conference presentation]. The 10th European Conference on Positive Psychology, Reykjavik, Iceland.

pieces to our search: 1) review of websites for all 68 accredited Schools of Public Health in the United States,⁵ and 2) review of abstracts from the 2020 and 2021 American Public Health Association annual meetings.

Slide 5: Example from our literature review

The one example from the literature review described 4 years of results from New Mexico State University's undergraduate public health practice-based teaching course that was part of the Exercise in Medicine on campus.⁶ Two themes were identified from student evaluations. Of particular interest was the 2nd theme—maintenance and relationships. One example quote: “I was able to reach out to people without the fear of rejection.” Learning how to build and maintain relationships is an important part of public health.

Slide 6: Key words searched

Shown on this slide are key words used for the per reviewed search. In bold are the words used for the search of School of Public Health websites. Wellness and mindfulness were the most commonly used terms for websites belonging to Schools of Public Health and their respective campuses.

Slide 7: Challenges during the search

A common theme when searching accredited School of Public health websites is that related academic programs, courses and other resources are not easy to find. Shown here is a screenshot of what current students would find at Harvard's School of Public Health website— nowhere does Harvard's Center for Health and Happiness appear.

Slide 8: Limited evaluation of activities to support wellbeing of public health professional students, staff, and/or faculty

Reviewing APHA abstracts for the years 2020 and 2021 uncovered 2 programs that had been evaluated: 1) an 8-week MBSR program at the University of Pennsylvania for undergraduate and graduate students⁷ and a 6-week virtual Tai Chi and Qigong intervention for older university employees.⁸ Both programs showed an improvement in sleep quality amongst participants. The MBSR program additionally showed significant improvements in mindfulness, satisfaction with life, psychological distress, and perceived stress.

Slide 9: Academic Programs & Course Examples

Several academic programs and course examples were identified from reviewing the websites for the 68 accredited Schools of Public Health ranging from a BA degree and minor in wellness and health promotion practice, to a MPH concentration in mindfulness at Brown University to courses such as the one at the University of Maryland School of Public Health on nontraditional and holistic health practices taught by my coauthor, Dr. Puett since Spring 2020.

⁵ See <https://ceph.org/about/org-info/who-we-accredit/accredited/#programs> for list of accredited Schools of Public Health

⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2373379920935460>

⁷ <https://apha.confex.com/apha/2021/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/499902>

⁸ <https://apha.confex.com/apha/2021/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/507605>

Slide 10: Examples of activities to support wellbeing of public health professional students, staff, and/or faculty

Most activities are housed outside Schools of Public Health, in campus health centers or wellness programs. Of particular interest is that Boston University and the University of Illinois at Chicago have hired wellness coordinators for their schools. It is important to note that what we identified can only be viewed as examples of relevant programs, courses, and activities at accredited Schools of Public Health since we did not survey the Schools.

Slide 11: Example quotes from correspondence with APHA abstract authors

Many of the activities and programs that we identified are dependent upon champions – this is exciting since is a “bottoms up” approach but also makes them more vulnerable and limited in scope as to who they target – mainly students enrolled in specific classes or programs.

Slide 12: Positive Psychology Interventions

Using Dr. Boniwell’s ACTIONS acronym to organize positive psychology interventions,⁹ we see that activities and programs that were identified are also limited in scope in terms of what they cover. Most are targeted towards students and on mindfulness and meditation (addressing calming and perhaps nourishing). Going forward, perhaps emphasis should perhaps be given towards supporting the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, and coping strategies. These factors have been identified by Shonkoff et al (2021)¹⁰ and the American Psychological Association¹¹ as key to promoting resilience, including in the face of interpersonal discrimination.

Slide 13: The SPH Happiness and Wellness Initiative

At the University of Maryland School of Public Health, the School of Public Health Happiness and Wellness Initiative has evolved. Dr. Robin Puett’s course has been offered since Spring 2020.¹² A webpage was created to share resources,¹³ and a regular newsletter sent out to thousands of subscribers since early 2020. The School offers weekly meditation, and a colleague sends regular wellness tips to graduate students. Campus offers wellness coaching, a 2-hour Clifton strengths program, stress management consultation, wellness coaching and daily online meditations.

Slide 14: Conclusions

In conclusion, strategies to increase happiness and wellbeing among public health students, faculty and staff are rarely published. Efforts to support physical, mental and social wellbeing for this community should be evaluated and findings shared.

⁹ Chapter 8 – Positive Psychological Interventions. In: Boniwell I, Tunariu AD. Positive Psychology: Theory, Research And Applications (2nd ed). 2019

¹⁰ <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-090419-101940>

¹¹ <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

¹² <https://sph.umd.edu/news/happiness-effect>

¹³ <https://sph.umd.edu/about/sph-happiness-and-wellness-initiative>