

A Self-Study of the Mental Health and Well-Being of Psychology Graduate Student In Canada

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ABSTRACT

A quantitative self-study was conducted by a graduate student group to examine stress and well-being within a graduate psychology program. A self-report survey was adapted from an Ottawa university psychology group's questionnaire. Students from clinical and experimental psychology streams at a large urban university (N=24) responded to an online survey assessing the following domains often linked to health, stress, and coping: Demographics, lifestyle (e.g., sleep, exercise, diet, finances, coping, resources), academic stress, and access to mental health and well-being services. The majority of students endorsed the following: Poor sleep and eating habits, weekly exercise, heavy workload, financial constraints, and high stress. Half of all participants indicated that they had a well-balanced life; overall, three-quarters were satisfied with their academic life. Findings from the present self-study contributed to the development of targeted interventions. Future studies should explore students' stress and well-being in more detail, across multiple institutions, and develop student-driven solutions.

RÉSUMÉ

Une auto-analyse quantitative a été réalisée par un groupe d'étudiants aux cycles supérieurs afin d'examiner le stress et le sentiment de bien-être ressentis par ceux qui sont inscrits à un programme d'études supérieures en psychologie. Pour les besoins, un rapport d'expertise à remplir soi-même a été mis au point à partir d'un questionnaire utilisé par un groupe d'étudiants en psychologie de l'Université d'Ottawa. Vingt-quatre étudiants d'une grande université urbaine évoluant dans les branches de la psychologie clinique et de la psychologie expérimentale ont répondu à un sondage en ligne qui avait pour objet d'évaluer certains aspects de leur vie liés à la santé, au stress et aux façons d'y réagir : des données démographiques, des détails sur le

style de vie (par exemple, le sommeil, l'exercice, le régime, les questions financières, les façons de réagir, les ressources), le stress associé aux études et l'accès aux services de santé et de bien-être mentaux. La majorité des étudiants ont accusé les traits suivants : de mauvaises habitudes de sommeil et d'alimentation, de l'exercice une fois par semaine, une charge de travail considérable, des contraintes financières et beaucoup de stress. La moitié des étudiants ont indiqué qu'ils avaient une vie bien équilibrée; au final, trois quarts des sondés se sont dits satisfaits de leur vie universitaire. Les constatations découlant de cette auto-analyse ont contribué à la mise au point d'interventions ciblées. Des études ultérieures examineront de façon plus approfondie le stress et le sentiment de bien-être ressentis par les étudiants de divers établissements, et tenteront de mettre au point des solutions à partir des observations formulées par les étudiants.



Introduction

Being a graduate student can be stressful (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). There are competing obligations to contend with, including coursework, conducting research, writing papers, and teaching undergraduate students. Graduate students are at a developmental stage where social demands, such as maintaining close relationships, starting a family, and caring for elderly parents, are increasing. Graduate students often report difficulties balancing all their obligations, which can contribute to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and depression (Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, & Grant-Harris, 2012; Offstein, Larson, McNeill, & Hasten, 2004). They also commonly face financial stressors and a lack of understanding from family and friends (Offstein et al., 2004). Although students often express interest in seeking help to manage stress, only a small percentage follow through. Reasons cited for

not seeking professional mental health support include fear of stigma, lack of time, waitlists, and lack of knowledge about available resources (Stecker, 2004).

The Mental Health and Well-Being Group (MHWBG)

In recognition of these issues, in 2009, graduate students in clinical and psychological science streams at Ryerson University founded a group to enhance students' experience throughout graduate school. The MHWBG organizes events intended to support students and enhance well-being in the psychology graduate program. Examples of past events include seminars focused on navigating the first year of graduate studies and the development of a peer mentorship program to aid the transition to graduate school. Feedback on MHWBG events has been overwhelmingly positive thus far.

Cahir and Morris (1991) found that among psychology graduate students, self-reported time pressure explained the most variance in stress levels followed by negative feedback from faculty and financial difficulties. More recently, McKinzie, Altamura, Burgoon, & Bishop (2006) reported that poor sleep, lack of exercise, and low mood were all significantly related to higher stress levels amongst psychology graduate students. Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler (2001) also found that the presence of social support and good coping skills decreased stress levels and increased success amongst clinical psychology graduate students. Well-being is important for students in psychology graduate programs because these programs train future psychologists who will promote mental health and well-being in society. Interestingly, despite training in psychopathology and psychological treatment, guidance on personal well-being is not standard in psychology programs. Consequently, there is a need to better understand the experience of stress and well-being amongst students in graduate psychology programs and to identify relevant resources for these students. Since the last study to systematically investigate the experience of stress and well-being amongst psychology graduate students was published in 2006, it is increasingly important to determine an up-to-date understanding of these concepts. The purpose of the current study is to expand existing information about the experiences of psychology graduate students. The present quantitative self-study assessed lifestyle factors (i.e., sleep, eating habits, exercise, work, and financial concerns), overall stress level, access to confidential mental health services, and satisfaction with life at school amongst graduate students in a psychology program at Ryerson University.

Method

Procedure

A recruitment e-mail detailing the purpose and methods of this study was sent to all graduate students in the psychology program at a large urban university in Toronto. The e-mail provided a secure link to an online, anonymous self-report survey described below. Participants who gave informed consent to participate were given access to the online survey. A written debriefing form was provided to all participants. All procedures were approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

Materials

Some questions for the online survey were from a mental-health and well-being survey previously developed by graduate students in a psychology program in Ottawa. This survey included 38 questions about the following: demographic variables, lifestyle (e.g. sleep, exercise, diet, finances), coping skills, academic stress and satisfaction, and access to mental health and well-being services. New items were developed to include questions about sleeping, eating, and exercise habits, hours of work per week, and financial concerns.

Participants

Sixty-eight psychology graduate students were given access to the survey and twenty-four psychology graduate students (18 clinical and 6 psychological science) completed the survey (35% response rate). Five (16.7%) students were in MA year one, eight (29.2%) in MA year two, six (20.8%) in PhD year one, and seven (25%) in PhD year two. Two (8.3%) students did not indicate their program year. The program from which students were recruited is new and was not yet at full capacity when the survey was conducted; therefore, no students were further along in the program than second year PhD. Six (20.8%) students identified as single, one (4.2%) identified as being in a short-term relationship, and 16 (58.3%) in a long-term relationship. Five (16.7%) did not indicate their relationship status.

Results

Lifestyle Factors

Participants were asked nine questions about lifestyle factors, including sleep, eating, exercise, and work habits. Descriptive statistics were gathered for each question, the results of which are outlined below and summarized in table 1.

Sleep. Approximately one-third (29.2%) of students reported sleeping eight hours per night, one-third (33.3%) seven hours per night, and one-third (33.3%) six hours per night. One participant indicated regu-

Table 1

Summary of self-reported lifestyle factors

Domain	Percentage
Number of hours slept per night	
>8	4.2
8	29.2
7	33.3
6	33.3
Description of eating habits	
"not very healthy"	8.3
"somewhat healthy"	20.8
"average"	29.2
"pretty healthy"	37.5
"very healthy"	4.2
Number of times exercised per week	
3	29.2
2	29.2
1	12.5
<1	25.0
Number of hours worked per week	
<30	4.2
31-40	12.5
41-50	29.1
51-60	29.2
60-70	16.7
>70	4.2

Notes: values reported as percentages; $N = 24$.

larly getting more than eight hours of sleep per night. Half of the participants endorsed sleeping five hours or less per night an average of once or twice per week. Overall, fifty-eight percent of students indicated that, on average, they do not get enough sleep.

Eating habits. Half (50.0%) of participants responded that they were unhappy with their current eating habits. Students varied on whether or not they ate a healthy diet: two (8.3%) indicated "not very healthy," five (20.8%) indicated "somewhat healthy," seven (29.2%) indicated "average," nine (37.5%) indicated "pretty healthy," and one (4.2%) indicated "very healthy." When asked about barriers to eating healthier, lack of time was the most commonly endorsed barrier (52.2%), followed by cost (13.0%), and lack of access at the university (4.3%). An additional 4.3% indicated that they simply do not like to cook, while 17.4% reported that there were no barriers to healthy eating.

Exercise habits. Most students identified exercising on a weekly basis, with seven participants (29.2%) indicating exercising three times per week, seven (29.2%) twice per week, and three (12.5%) once per week. Six participants (25.0%) indicated that they

exercise less than once per week, which may range from no exercise to only a few times per month. Students endorsed participating in a range of physical activities during the regular school year, including cardiovascular activities (61.9%), weight training (33.3%), yoga or pilates (28.6%), swimming (23.8%), team sports (14.3%), fitness classes (14.3%), outdoor sports (9.5%), and dancing (9.5%).

Work habits. Participants were asked how many hours they engaged in work/school related activities. Overall, students' work week varied. However, 71% indicated that they worked 46 hours per week or more: greater than 70 hours (4.2%), 60-70 hours (16.7%), 56-60 hours (16.7%), 51-55 hours (12.5%), 46-50 hours (20.8%), 41-45 hours (8.3%), 36-40 hours (4.2%), 31-35 hours (8.3%), and less than 30 hours (4.2%).

Financial Concerns

Seventy-one percent of students indicated they worried about money. While a large proportion of students (41.7%) were satisfied with their current income, the majority (58.3%) felt that their income was insufficient. Students identified a range of financial concerns, including: lack of financial stability, living with parents, previously accrued student debt, paying off debt, limited income to support oneself, high cost of living in Toronto, paying rent and bills on time, not receiving future funding, and concerns about funding running out.

Stress and Well-Being in Graduate School

Students were asked to describe their overall stress level (see Figure 1). Slightly above half of students were not comfortable with the level of stress they experienced (54.2%). Only half of students felt they had a well-balanced life. The survey inquired about participants' satisfaction with their life at school in particular (see Figure 2). Three-quarters of participants (75.0%) were "pretty satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their life at school; the remaining quarter was "somewhat satisfied" (12.5%), "not very satisfied" (8.3%), or "not at all satisfied" (4.2%).

(Suggested placement for figures 1 & 2)

Participants were queried about confidential access to mental health and well-being services. The majority of students (87.5%) acknowledged the importance of having access to confidential mental health and well-being services and the majority (73.9%) indicated that they would like better access to confidential mental health care.

Lastly, participants were asked to endorse items they felt were vital to maintaining their health and wellness, choosing as many options as applied; their responses, ordered by popularity are represented in

Figure 1
Students' self-reported stress level

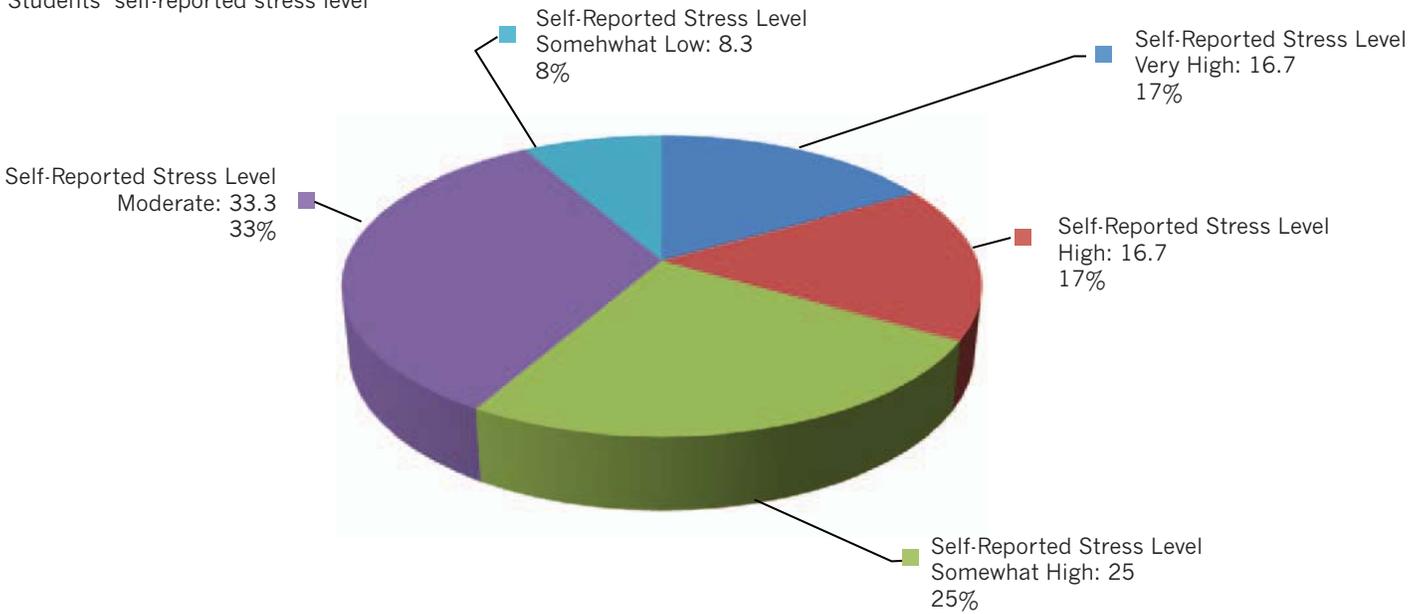


Figure 2
Students' self-reported school satisfaction

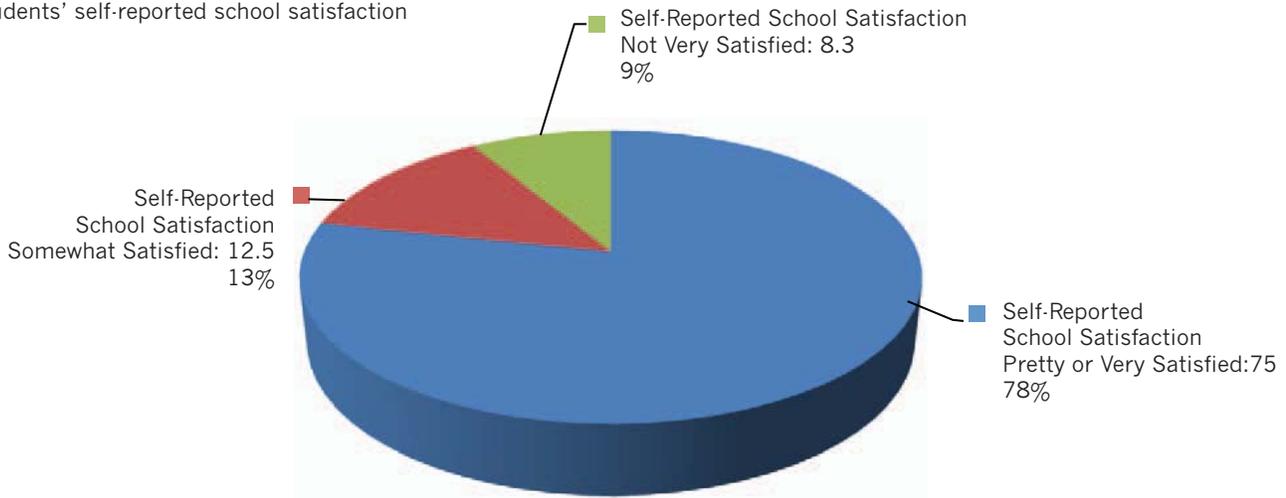


Figure 3
Domains endorsed as vital to health and wellness

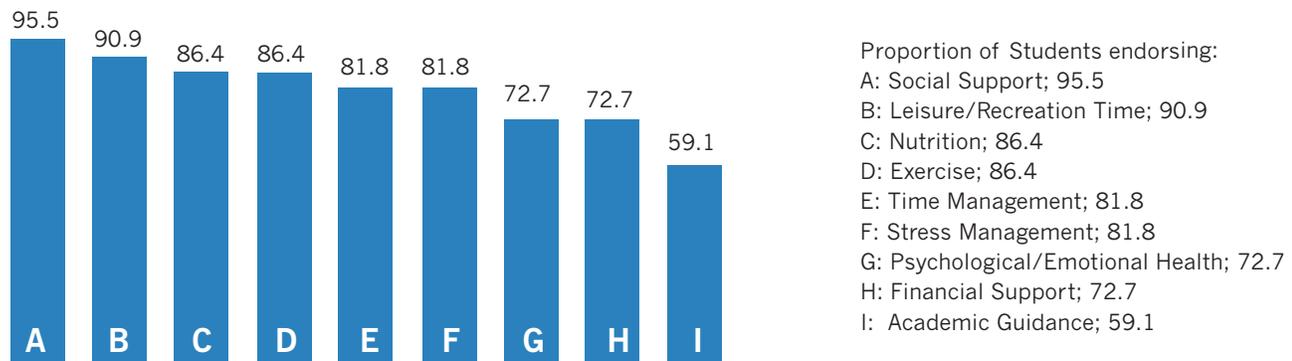


Figure 3. When asked to identify the three most important items for maintaining health and wellness, psychological/emotional health and stress management were endorsed most (nine participants), followed by academic guidance and financial support (six participants), time management and leisure/recreation time (five participants), and exercise, nutrition, and social support (two participants).

(Suggested placement for figure 3)

Discussion

The aims of this self-study were to increase understanding of the experience of stress and well-being among graduate students in a psychology program and to elucidate what supports best enhance well-being. Consistent with past reports on student wellness studies, a substantial portion of our sample endorsed concerns about sleep and eating habits, coping with stress, finances, and accessing mental health services.

Students voiced concerns over lifestyle factors including the number of hours they slept and many were unhappy with their current eating habits. Barriers to healthy eating included lack of time, cost, and ease of finding healthy food choices on campus. The majority of students indicated that they worked 46 hours per week or more, substantially more than the national average of 36.6 hours (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013). The majority of students reported that they worried about finances and felt their income was insufficient. Concerning stress, approximately half of the students reported discomfort with their current stress. Further, the majority of students reported that they highly valued confidential access to mental health services. Many of these concerns echo those reported by students across academic disciplines (Murphy, Gray, Sterling, Reeves, & DuCette, 2009). In spite of the concerns reported, half of students reported being comfortable with their current level of stress and the majority of students indicated they were satisfied with their school life. Students identified access to confidential mental health services, academic guidance, financial support, time management, and recreation/leisure as the most important resources to maintaining their wellness.

Although future studies are needed to obtain students' perspectives on how the MHWBG, psychology department and university could best support wellness in these domains, this study illustrated how wellness research can be used by student groups to develop targeted interventions. Based on students' self-reported needs, the MHWBG developed annual stress-reduction seminars for students. Faculty within the department provided support and facili-

tated opportunities to provide student-driven suggestions to address the concerns endorsed in this survey. A follow-up survey and focus group will be conducted to more clearly identify the core issues related to the topics addressed in the current study and to elicit students' suggestions to help the department address concerns.

Data from studies such as this could also be used to improve curriculum in future years. Medical schools have begun to incorporate electives focused on self-care, stress reduction, and self-development. These electives have proven to be effective in decreasing students' self-reported experience of stress, anxiety, and depression and increasing well-being (Holm, Tyssen, Stordal, & Haver, 2010; Lee & Graham, 2001). Therefore, introduction of electives focused on self-care and well-being could be an important consideration for psychology training programs to include in their curriculum.

Limitations

Although this study has been helpful to the MHWBG in generating ideas about how to better serve students, it is not without limitations. The small sample size and low response rate limit the generalizability of the results to psychology graduate students. It would be prudent to expand the sample to include psychology graduate students from across Canada and graduate students in other disciplines (e.g., business, engineering, medical sciences, social sciences) to increase variability in the sample. It would be worthwhile exploring additional relevant research questions, such as exploring whether dispositional differences between graduate students in psychology and graduate students in other graduate programs moderate vulnerability to stress.

The development and psychometric evaluation of measures of graduate psychology student well-being are also needed. The survey used was developed for this study and psychometric properties of the survey have not been evaluated; as such, its reliability and validity are unknown. In addition, the wording of some questions were not clear, which rendered interpreting findings difficult. For example, participants were not asked if their current sleep patterns have changed since starting graduate school. However, since the majority of students reported they were not getting enough sleep and approximately half of the students reported sleeping five hours or less on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, we infer that poor sleep is related to graduate school (see Hurst, 2008; National Sleep Foundation, 2013). Moreover, because upper year PhD students were not included, it is not possible to generalize these findings to this group. Finally, it is not possible to draw any conclusions from this

study about possible relationships between well-being and academic/professional outcome because objective outcome measures, such as grades, were not obtained.

Conclusions

Despite the study's limitations, this study provided valuable information about the experiences of students in a graduate psychology program at a Canadian university. Although graduate students in psychology report many stressors, the students also reported much strength. For example, resilience was highlighted as a resource that can help students' cope and the majority of students reported they were satisfied with their academic experiences. This study also demonstrated how students may utilize student organizations, such as the MHWBG, to promote wellness through research, advocacy, and development of resources to enhance student experience.

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