

Suggested APA style reference:

Porter, J. Y. (2007). *Helping college students develop mental wellness skills through journaling techniques*. Retrieved August 28, 2007, from <http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas07/Porter.htm>

Helping College Students Develop Mental Wellness Skills Through Journaling Techniques

Julia Y. Porter

Mississippi State University-Meridian

Porter, Julia Y., is an Associate Professor of Counselor Education at Mississippi State University-Meridian. Her areas of expertise are college counseling and career counseling.

Journaling is a technique often used in counseling to help clients identify problematic thoughts and behaviors. While clients are usually aware that things are not going well in their lives, they often are not able to identify or explain factors that are contributing to their life problems. Used effectively, journaling can help make clients aware of problems that they have not yet identified and provide clients with new insights into problems they are already working to resolve (Gladding, 2001).

While the traditional use of journaling as a counseling technique usually focuses on treatment, this action research project uses journaling techniques to teach college students mental wellness skills. Students enrolled in an undergraduate class EDF 3413 Writing for

Thinking were joined with graduate students in COE 8053/8156 Counselor Education Practicum to form a learning community entitled “Journaling for Mental Wellness”. The overall goal for this project was to teach students the value of journaling as a tool for both personal wellness and professional growth. An added benefit was improvement of writing skills.

Background

Wellness prevention addresses mental, physical, social, and emotional needs (Hollingsworth and Porter, 2007). Following is a list of wellness needs with some of the key behavior factors that have been identified through research as contributing to wellness in each of the needs areas:

Wellness Needs

I. Mental

- * setting goals for yourself
- * accurately assessing your own thoughts and actions
- * developing positive habits that make your life better

II. Physical

- * eating healthy foods
- * having regular medical check-ups
- * exercising

III. Social

- * developing positive relationships with family and friends

- * being able to set boundaries in relationships

- * selecting a career

IV. Emotional

- * self-control

- * managing change and stress

- * spiritual awareness

Of particular interest in this project were mental wellness needs specific to college students. Wellness counseling skills targeted were wellness planning skills, academic skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, team building skills, assertiveness skills, and stress management skills. While all of these skills were addressed during this project, wellness planning skills and communication skills were emphasized.

Project Description

The goal of this project was to help undergraduate and graduate students develop wellness skills through journaling that will help them assume responsibility for their own mental wellness. Techniques used included 1) a focus group led by a counselor who is a journaling expert, 2) traditional journaling, and 3) electronic journaling.

The journaling activities began with a 3 hour focus group session. During this session the following topics were covered:

1. The journaling process was explained. Basic rules given for journaling effectively for mental wellness were: a) write only for yourself (no

concerns about spelling, grammar, format, etc.) and b) write what wants to flow out (being still is okay; it is not necessary to write all of the time allotted for journaling).

2. Students completed 7 journaling activities that required both individual and group participation. Each journaling activity began with traditional pen/paper journaling based on a lead from the group leader. After each journaling activity students were given time to discuss the activity and their responses. Then the group leader would explain the wellness value of each activity. Following is an example from the group activity:

The next journaling lead is , “People who have an inner importance to me are...” You will have seven minutes to complete this journal activity. I will tell you when time is up. The journaling lead is “People who have an inner importance to me are...”

The purpose of this activity was to help the group participants identify individuals who provide support and resources for them. Feeling isolated is a common problem among college students as they transition from home environments to college campuses. To take control of their own wellness in a new environment, they sometimes need to be reminded that they have resources and support.

3. Students also participated in electronic journaling assignments. The

electronic journaling assignments were in a chat room format and could be read by any of the other students who participated in the project. Each of these assignments also began with a mental wellness related lead. An example is “Something I have done for myself today is...” The electronic journaling format was the least effective journaling activity. Additional research needs to be done to determine why students did not respond as effectively to this format. Knowing that other students would read the entries may have been the primary reason.

Students who participated in this project prepared a final essay in which they evaluated the journaling process and their growth as individuals and professionals as a result of their participation in the learning community (Astin, 1995; Porter & Burnett, 2003). Students agreed that the process was beneficial. One participant wrote, “I am amazed at how uncluttered my mind has become and the refocus and relief from writing. Why haven’t I found time before?”

Challenges

Some of the challenges encountered when implementing this project were:

1. Time Line. The counseling/journaling expert that we had contracted with to provide the focus group training in the Spring 2006 had damage to her home from Hurricane Katrina. The project started six weeks later than anticipated. Although the project started late, the time for the project could not be extended because the group needed to end when the semester

ended.

2. Technology. Project participants had varying levels of technical expertise. Another technology problem was creating the web site for journaling since our university system did not provide for combining graduate and undergraduate classes.

3. Grading. Quality of journaling entries varied especially on the electronic journal assignments. Students were given credit for completing journaling assignments regardless of content.

Conclusions

Journaling techniques can be used to help college students acquire mental wellness skills. Being able to incorporate these techniques into appropriate existing classes makes the wellness training available to a much larger number of students than could be reached by individual or small group counseling through college counseling centers. Benefits from mental wellness journaling activities are: 1) journaling encourages appropriate release of emotions, 2) journaling encourages self-analysis, 3) journaling improves critical thinking skills, and 4) journaling improves communication skills.

References

- Astin, A. W. (1993). *Assessment for Excellence*. Phoenix, Arizona: The Oryx Press.
- Gladding, S. T. (2001). *The counseling dictionary*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Hollingsworth, M. A. & Porter, J. Y. (2007) Counseling Students' Perceptions about the

Need for Wellness Planning. In press Tennessee Counseling Association Journal.

Porter, J. Y., & Burnett, M. F. (2003). Facilitating Accountability Data Collection For Use in Counseling Effectiveness Assessment. *Professional Issues in Counseling*.

<http://unx1.shsu.edu/~piic/Fall2003/indexfall03.html>

VISTAS 2007 Online

As an online only acceptance, this paper is presented as submitted by the author(s). Authors bear responsibility for missing or incorrect information.