Why *Self-care made simple*?

The research area motivating my SDA is the commodification of wellbeing – discussed in the *Economics of Wellbeing* weekly topic, and further researched through media articles, psychological and economics-based literature, and primary research (website searches).

Background to the issue

Wellbeing is frequently presented in "a squeaky clean" way to members of society (Bonger, 2017:267), with emotions such as "happiness" regarded "as … visible, improvable" states (Davies, 2016:3) that can be enhanced through "objects" that are provided to consumers (Bonger, 2017:257).

A glance at the retail site *Amazon* revealed a "box of wellbeing", promising "happy vibes" (Tisserand, n.d). Further, over "100,000 books [are] for sale on Amazon [that] have … 'mindfulness' in their title" (Purser, 2019:12). Upon reflection, I am an active member within this "consumer economy" (Bonger, 2017:255) - I am writing this as my aromatherapy lamp omits fragrances promising to 'calm my mind'.

It is unsurprising that 'purchasing' wellbeing is appealing, as items "are permeating … the high street" (Davies, 2016:4) whilst we live in a fast-paced society, meaning that we seek out quick fixes, "to satisfy our wants … with the least effort" (Jevons as cited in Davies, 2016:55). Therefore, items that are marketed to us as promises to reduce our "dissatisfaction" (Bonger, 2017:255) are appealing due to "the … addictive" "instant gratification of our culture" (Bonger, 2017:262).

Away from the high street and on our screens, "social-media platforms" present "carefully … curated images" of wellbeing (Reding, n.d.), through hashtags on *Instagram* such as *#wellbeingwednesday* and *#selfcaresunday* - reducing wellbeing to a day of the week in which a spa day is sufficient to 'gain' wellbeing. This brings into consideration the "exclusionary" level of "affluence required to afford … self-care" (Agnew, 2020).

Wellbeing has become “privatised” (Purser, 2019:8), with individuals “invest[ing]” in wellbeing-promising items (Purser, 2019:11) such as mindfulness “apps” (Purser, 2019:12) “as one would invest in a stock hoping to receive a handsome dividend” (Purser, 2019:11). However, people are alone in this investment, as “the burden of managing [wellbeing is] outsourced to individuals” (Purser, 2019:8) in which responsibilities such as “find[ing] oneself” (Bonger, 2017:253) are encouraged by companies, which individuals attempt to do through purchasing items, driven by “our instinctive emotional responses” (Wundt as cited in Davies, 2016:80) such as “fear”(Dunn & Hoegg, 2014 as cited in Davies, 2016:74).

While, importantly, wellbeing-related items “are not sinister in and of themselves” (Love, 2018), the consequential “overcomplication of wellness” (David as cited in Agnew, 2020) that is presented to society results in what self-care and wellbeing really mean – “doing the basic things … to survive and hopefully thrive” (Berry-Moorcroft, 2018) being lost.

The solution

My solution to this issue is a booklet designed for university students (to be provided to them during Freshers’ week) called *Self-care made Simple.* It provides simple strategies with regards to wellbeing maintenance throughout students’ busy days, based on knowledge acquired from our weekly interdisciplinary discussions, personal reflections, and academic and non-academic research from disciplines such as psychology. The aim of this booklet is to raise awareness to students regarding the simplicity of managing their wellbeing, which will hopefully debunk existing ideas students may have regarding spending a lot to live ‘well’. At first, I considered whether it is hypocritical for me to provide advice using literature that I have purchased, as a way of ‘buying’ wellness. However, the commodification of wellness in the form of expert-written self-help books arguably differs to luxurious items intended to be ‘quick fixes’.

Students are my audience because there are increasing “concerns about the emotional and mental wellbeing of students” (Iarovici, 2014:3). Further, I understand, as a student, how easy it is to neglect

my wellbeing due to my hectic lifestyle, and the consequential purchasing of items that are marketed to require minimal "effort" on my behalf (Jevon as cited in Davies, 2016:55).

The medium of a booklet was chosen based on my view of what wellbeing is. I align with Eudaimonic theories, considering wellbeing as the extent "to which someone is fully functioning" (Ryan & Deci, 2001:141), in which "wellbeing is not … an outcome or end state" (Deci & Ryan, 2006:2 as cited in Moore, 2020) but "a dynamic process" (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008: 62) that is our own responsibility to "engage with" (Stewart-Brown, 2020). Thus, I intend for this booklet to be carried around with students, so they can use it for whatever their need is, for example, when experiencing significant feelings of stress.

There are "personal and social consequences of any medium" (McLuhan, 2006:107), and I believe this medium, as opposed to a poster claiming to 'cure' problems related to wellbeing, for example, reinforces that wellbeing is not a purchasable item, and hopefully, encourages students' to reconsider what wellbeing means for them.

Booklet contents

Welcome to university pp. 6-9

University is regarded as "the best time of [a student's] life" (Goodman, 2020) (p.6). This often creates unrealistic expectations for students. This section therefore functions to address and normalise issues and emotions that students may face at the start of university, such as the "*Big Fish Little Pond effect*" (p.7.), in which students feel out of depth (Brown, 2016:21). In my experience, these difficult feelings were not discussed, and I felt 'abnormal' for feeling this way.

It was important to reinforce, in this section, the "complex[ity]" of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001:141), and that therefore, not every page will appeal to everyone. Further, these suggestions are intended to be taken as guidelines, which can be followed loosely or strictly. This is vital in

reinforcing my Eudaimonic viewpoint of wellbeing, in which wellbeing is not about meeting fixed "goal[s]" (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2019:519) but is something to manage and adapt to.

Practical ways to manage your wellbeing everyday p.10.

This section was inspired by the weeks of term that involved trying practical methods of managing wellbeing. It is aided by my own reflections as well as interdisciplinary literature.

Being mindful in your everyday university life pp. 11-16

Being mindful means "observ[ing] and accept[ing]" thoughts (Davies, 2016:32) in a "non-judgemental" approach (Begley, 2007:139). I believe students are rarely in the present moment, due to worries about the future. Further, the commercialisation of mindfulness (for example, the meditation app *Headspace,* which I have bought a subscription for) is likely to reinforce the belief that it costs money to be mindful, thus not appealing to students.

I wanted to therefore use this section to offer free, simple ways of being mindful, in the hope that it will encourage students to rethink what mindfulness means. It does not have to entail a strict routine, such as daily meditation at a particular time (while this works for some) and therefore, my approaches offer flexibility in when and how they are carried out. For some optional structure, a timed five minutes in which to be mindful in was suggested (p.12), advised by Octopus Publishing Group Ltd (2017).

Class discussions (Riva, 2020) as well as reflection on my own practices that involve "taking notice of simple things" (Rochdale Borough Council, 2015) such as drinking my coffee without distractions introduced this simplification of mindfulness. Through this section, I hope to encourage students to incorporate some of these simplistic approaches to mindfulness into their busy daily lives.

Feeling overwhelmed? pp. 17-18

Biologically, our "self-protection system" Gilbert (2009:25) provides "dispositions" such as feelings of panic (Gilbert, 2009:28). Students are susceptible to distressing emotions, due to the constant juggling of academic, social, personal, and financial factors.

Duff (2018:24) states that "symptoms of panic are … incompatible with deep breathing". Thus, psychologist-advised exercises (Duff, 2018:27, Huberman, 2020) were incorporated into this section. These are useful to apply wherever a student is, and do not take up much time.

Looking inwards p.19

This section was inspired by class conversations regarding psychological skills that help us to maintain our wellbeing.

Self-maintenance pp. 20-22

This was inspired by *Week 6: Self-maintenance*, in which we discussed how seemingly harmless things such as mobile phone use can affect our wellbeing (Goodman, 2020) and cause stress in students' lives. Over time, "emotional distress creates susceptibility to physical illness" (Stewart-Brown, 1998: 1608). Thus, this section acts as a reminder to students to prioritise their health and consider what is important to them "to … thrive" (Berry-Moorcroft, 2018).

Consideration of the acronym "GREAT DREAM" which emphasises "connect[ing] with people", looking after one's physical fitness and setting "goals" enables "happier living" (Action for Happiness, n.d.) as well as thinking about one's "core values"(Davenport & Scott, 2016:47) and "main life areas" such as "family", "leisure [and] social" aspects to life, and "fitness" (Davenport & Scott, 2016:49-50) (p. 21) were incorporated here.

How to be self-compassionate pp. 23-24

As students, we face setbacks, for example, rejections from employment, which can result in self-directed disappointment and anger.

Learning to develop "compassion" improves "our relationship with ourselves" (Gilbert, 2009:5), and thus, it is vital to "be a compassionate listener to yourself" (Modgil, 2020). Further, Fletcher (2019:123) mentions how in "learning to 'speak' to yourself in a kind manner" we "prevent the … build-up of stress that triggers our sympathetic nervous system". Inspired by these sources, this section functions to remind people to be kind to themselves, as non-compassion is associated with poor mental health (Howes, 2020).

Building resilience/ responding to failure pp. 25-27

This section stems from Week 5: *Wellbeing and Failure,* in which resilience comes from experiencing failure (Heron, 2020). "Emotional intelligence" is "resilience in face of stress" (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008:10). The concept of "failing well" (p.25) (Wellbeing Support Services, 2019) is a useful concept for building resilience. This section functions to invite students to change their relationship with failure. We lack control over "external conditions … which … provide challenges" (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008:62), for example, a bad grade, but we can alter how we react to things (Action for Happiness, n.d.).

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