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Understanding Wellbeing – Student Devised Assessment

Accompanying Essay

Word Count: 1646

The transformation from adolescence to adulthood is period of rapid growth and changes, in which teenagers grapple with establishing an identity. It is estimated globally that 10-20% of young people experience mental health problems (WHO, 2020) whilst half of all mental health problems begin before the age of 14 (Brown & Triggle, 2018; WHO, 2020). Female adolescences are highly at risk during this time, as they are twice as likely to experience depression (Thapar et al., 2012) and anxiety symptoms than their male counterparts (Beesdo et al., 2009). Self-esteem significantly declines, especially between the ages of 11-16 (Baldwin & Hoffmann, 2002; Clay et al., 2005), often occurring in parallel with the decline in body satisfaction (Clay et al., 2005). Girls also experience higher levels of self-criticism, external shame and resistance to compassionate feelings towards themselves (Xavier et al., 2016).

Whilst helping adolescence to increase self-esteem appears as though it could improve their mental wellbeing, it has downfalls. Self-esteem has been positively linked to happiness and optimism (Lyubomirsky, Tkach & Dimatteo, 2006), yet it relies upon social comparison. People engage in social comparisons to form an opinion of themselves by analysing their qualities in relation to others (Festinger, 1954). This leads people to make upwards or downwards comparisons of themselves against others. Typically, most people tend to view themselves as better than their average peer (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), and whilst this cultivates self-esteems, it stems from judging others and can lead to narcissism (Neff, 2003; Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Moreover, self-esteem is often contingent. For example, self-esteem has been positively correlated with income (Neff & Vonk, 2009), yet economics research has found that our happiness can more accurately be predicted by our relative income[A] (Ball & Chernova, 2008; Clark et al., 2008). Relating to self-esteem, how good we feel about ourselves or what we have is often dependent upon the comparisons we make to what other people have. This is very common in adolescents, as they are constantly comparing themselves with others to establish their identity and place within peer groups. This can however negatively impact upon wellbeing therefore to improve wellbeing at this age social comparisons should be minimised.

Self-compassion does not rely upon social comparisons and has been found to have the same positive effects on wellbeing as self-esteem, without the downfalls (Neff, 2003). Unlike self-esteem, self-compassion is not correlated with narcissism and it is a negative predictor of social comparison (Neff & Vonk, 2009). It has been found to strongly correlate with psychological wellbeing and negatively correlate with negative affect (Zessin et al., 2015), with several meta-analyses finding self-compassion linked to reduced levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms and stress (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Marsh et al., 2017). Moreover, self-compassion is more stable than self-esteem in predicting feelings of self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

As presented by Neff (2003), self-compassion is composed of three components; self-kindness as opposed to self-judgement, common humanity over isolation, and mindfulness. Self-kindness involves being kind and non-judgmental of oneself in difficult times. Common humanity refers to the recognition that our feelings and experiences are part of the shared human experience, instead of isolating us. Finally, mindfulness promotes living in the present moment and within self-compassion it is used to acknowledge difficult feelings and emotions without judgement. I chose to develop my SDA based upon these three principles.

Through my digitally created images, I chose to promote self-kindness by alerting adolescents to challenge their critical self-talk and reconsider the way they speak to themselves. For adolescence,

self-kindness may be especially difficult due to cognitive changes in perception at this stage of life. At the beginning of their teenage years, individuals begin to conceptualise the thoughts of others, forming an imaginary audience in their mind who they are constantly acting for and being criticised by, whilst developing a personal fable, leading them to believe their intense emotions and life happenings only happen to them (Elkind, 1967). These changes can increase self-focus, concern with evaluation from others, and self-criticism (Xavier et al., 2016; Bluth & Blanton, 2015). With this in mind, I chose to promote this intervention in an alternate way, instead questioning young females if they would speak to a close friend in the same way, aiming to make the exercise easier by taking the focus away from the self.

The benefits of self-kindness may stem from biological underpinnings. High self-criticism engages the threat system (Gilbert, 2009) leading to increased levels of stress and cortisol levels [B]. However, by speaking to ourselves in a kinder, compassionate way we can shut down the threat system and activate the biological self-soothing system, releasing oxytocin (Gilbert, 2005). In compassionate states, oxytocin can lessen emotional reactivity and calm the autonomic nervous system, responsible for the fight or flight response (Carter et al., 2017). One recent study found that following a compassion-based intervention, participant oxytocin levels increased in addition to empathy (Bellosta-Batalla et al., 2020). Not only does this release of oxytocin aid kindness to ourselves, but it also promotes sociability with others (Carter et al., 2017) which could be a gateway to decreasing feelings of isolation.

Alongside promoting kindness to the individual, self-compassion deepens our connections with others. The etymology of the word 'compassion' comes from the Latin 'compati', which means 'to suffer with' [C]. In this way, self-compassion emphasises that we are not alone when facing difficult emotions and suffering is a shared human experience.
Within my images, I wanted to present this idea alongside the concept of building resilience. Contrasting to the bright colour scheme across the rest of my images, I chose to use a dark background to make the symbol of the two hands a focal point, with rainbow coloured text in the background conveying a sense of hope and strength in tough times. By acknowledging suffering as temporary and universal, self-compassion can promote resilience. Research also supports this, as a study by Yarnell & Neff (2013) found self-compassion to build resilience and emotional intelligence.

Adolescents are often lacking in emotional intelligence, and another way this can be strengthened is through mindful practices. Mindfulness is particularly useful in stopping the mind from processing information in biased way, which is typically common for girls who suffer from body image issues. Within my images, I chose to present mindfulness through other forms of practices such as through art and exercise [D]. I chose to do this, as I believed that the typical forms of mindfulness, such as meditation, may be more difficult for teenagers and appear less appealing. Engaging in artistic expression and exercise cultivates many similar experiences to typical mindfulness exercises, such as being present in the moment by cultivating a sense of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Part-taking in activities of artistic expression has been found to improve mental health in patients suffering from mental health problems (Caddy et al., 2011) and also improve wellbeing in adolescents, developing self-confidence and self-esteem (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Moreover, part-taking in artistic expression can increase eudaimonic wellbeing by adding a sense of purpose to life (Zarobe & Bunday, 2017). Physical exercise, such as dance and yoga, has also been linked to increased wellbeing (Richards et al., 2015).

I chose to use a social media platform to promote self-compassion to adolescent and young adult females due to its increasing popularity with this age group and its role in exacerbating the current wellbeing crisis. Amongst under 18-year-olds in the United States, Instagram is more popular than Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Girls are more likely to spend their time

on social media websites than boys, with high usage linked to lower psychological wellbeing across both genders (Twenge & Martin, 2020). An increased social media usage has also been linked to increased tendency to make social comparisons, which negatively impacts upon self-esteem (Steers et al., 2014). Adolescents focus on likes and followers as positional goods for comparison, which provide them with a sense of validation and status (Chua & Chang, 2016; Steers et al., 2014).

Not only do young girls make comparisons against their peers, but also against the media presentations they view. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, reinforce sociocultural factors of beauty, often presenting unrealistic images of thin women, and accentuate the idea that a women's beauty depicts her worth. Research has shown exposure to such thin ideals predicts body dissatisfaction, negative affect and reduced self-esteem (Harrison, 2001; Clay et al., 2005). Repeated exposure to these images presented by the media can lead many girls to internalise thin ideals, which can cause body image issues and disordered eating behaviours (Harrison, 2001). One recent UK study found 40.7% of teenage girls in their sample engaged in disordered eating behaviours (Bould et al., 2018), and eating disorders involving restrictive eating or purging behaviours are much more prevalent in females than males (Striegel-Moore et al., 2009).

There have however been recent movements to change the presentation of female bodies in social media, predominantly on Instagram, such as the #bodypositivity movement (Cohen et al., 2019a; 2019b). The movement has changed the diversity of body shapes broadcast across the media and has brought light to problems such as eating disorders, body dissatisfaction and social comparison (Cohen et al., 2019a), opening up the conversation about these issues which negatively impact upon mental health and making those who experience them feel less alone. Moreover, exposure to posts of this nature has been linked to improved body satisfaction and mood in young adult females (Cohen et al., 2019b).

Whilst this movement is a step in the right direction, it is not enough. Active steps need to be taken to provide young women with the skills to combat the contrasting messages they encounter online and love themselves regardless of what they see in the media. Equipping girls with self-compassion will improve their wellbeing throughout their young years and the rest of their lives, helping them to build resilience, whatever life throws at them.

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Bibliography

[A] - This was inspired by the content on the Easterlin Paradox in week 5's discussion on Economics

and Wellbeing.

[B] – My research into this area stemmed from the knowledge on resilience presented in Week 3's

The Science of Wellbeing.

[C] – This is a reference to the knowledge I gained in the group task from week 7's Philosophy and

Wellbeing.

[D] - The week 10 discussion on the benefits of artistic expression and its similarities to meditation

led me to present mindfulness activities differently in my SDA.

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- This led my original research into self-compassion yet its focus upon an older age bracket led

    me to focus on more adolescent focussed research.