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A SALUTOGENIC APPROACH TO WELLBEING: THE SMU RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

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Research has shown the inextricable relationship between resilience and wellbeing – resilience not only reduces mental ill-being; it actually enhances positive mental health. Resilience has been shown to be positively correlated with positive indicators of mental health, such as life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and positive emotions. As such, resilience can be conceptualised as both a protective and preventive factor that is associated with healthy development and psychosocial stress resistance. Departing from the dominant pathogenesis approach, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has adopted salutogenesis in its whole-of-university approach to health and wellbeing promotion. Through the operationalisation of the SMU Resilience Framework, the University actively develops the skill of resilience in students, which serves to reduce the risk factors and enhance the protective factors. By doing so, the University is not only improving the likelihood of student success, but also helping students find their footing to thrive and succeed, engendering pathways to a life of flourishing.

Key words: mental health, wellbeing, resilience, salutogenesis, self-management, student success

Introduction

Being a particularly vulnerable group, the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching impact on university students' everyday lives and well-being have been fairly well documented (e.g., Appleby et al., 2022; Husky et al., 2020; Copeland et al., 2021; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Students' concerns stemming from the upheaval are wide ranging, including those related to their learning experience (e.g. the shift to online learning), socio-emotional functioning (e.g. social isolation), finances, and perception of their future (e.g. economic and career prospects). While "learning loss" from online or hybrid instruction is getting much of the attention as

universities revert to more normal operations, the pandemic's impact on the broader health and well-being of students in higher education warrants sharper focus, particularly by student affairs professionals.

Nonetheless, while mental health has recently come under the spotlight due to COVID-19, the reality is that the pandemic has occurred against the backdrop of increasing mental health issues among youth at large. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated already existing problems, bringing student mental health in higher education into renewed emphasis.

This paper details the salutogenic approach to wellbeing adopted by the Singapore Management University (SMU). In response

to observable trends on student mental health, and in the bid to embed wellbeing into the fabric of the university, the SMU Resilience Framework was developed and launched in 2021. The framework underscores the university's paradigm shift from a more reactionary approach to a more broad-based and proactive approach of enhancing holistic student wellbeing through developing the skill of resilience in students.

Context

University students are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges for a host of reasons, including challenges commonly associated with transitions to adulthood (Auerbach et al., 2018). University students' mental health has been a growing concern, with an increasing number of students experiencing a range of mental health challenges.

Consistent with the national trend, the Student Wellness Centre at SMU has seen a rise in the number of students seeking services for psychological distress over the years. For instance, there was an almost three-fold increase in the number of student clients between 2015 and 2021.

To determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students at SMU, a survey was conducted in September 2021. A total of 5801 undergraduate and postgraduate students responded to the survey. The survey revealed that 45.6% and 52% of undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively felt that their mental health was "somewhat worse" or "far worse" than before the pandemic. In the same survey, the top mental health challenges reported by respondents included anxiety, trouble concentrating, trouble sleeping and social isolation.

Mental health issues experienced by students are, undoubtedly, of significant concern to university administrators. Mental health challenges can significantly jeopardise students' academic achievement, retention rates,

social interactions and career readiness. For the student affairs team at SMU, the study of observable mental health trends and findings from the student survey underscored the importance of addressing areas of student concern and the aspects of student life negatively impacted by the pandemic in order to maintain student well-being and support a successful university experience.

Salutogenic Approach to Wellbeing

The salutogenic approach, or salutogenesis, is an approach to health promotion that focuses on factors that support good health and wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1987). In contrast, the pathogenesis approach focuses on the causes of disease or ill-health. Literally, salutogenesis translates to "the origins of health", from the Latin 'Salus' meaning health, and the Greek 'Genesis' meaning origin. In other words, a salutogenic approach is one which is primarily preventative-focused.

The erstwhile approach to mental health and wellbeing at SMU was a more reactionary one, where the focus was on providing timely intervention as and when students presented symptoms of distress. However, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the acute need for students to be able not just to survive, but to thrive, in an increasingly unpredictable world that will present a myriad of both expected and unforeseen challenges. As such, a supportive university environment should be one where students have the opportunity to learn valuable life and coping skills, which are transferrable to a range of post-university settings including workplaces.

This realisation led to SMU's paradigm shift in its approach to mental health and wellbeing to one that is more proactive in nature. Instead of waiting to react to problems, SMU promotes a more positive, proactive culture that prioritises students' overall wellbeing. In adopting the salutogenic approach, the university has moved upstream in the prevention

cycle, considering the origins of health and wellbeing, and not merely having a singular focus on the symptoms and end effects. Questions that we emphasize on include: “How do we create a more mentally healthy community?”; “How can we reduce the burden of mental health problems and thus better manage the demand on services?” As pointed out by Lindström and Eriksson (2005), if one has access to resources such as knowledge, experience, social support and healthy behaviour, there is a better chance for one to deal with the challenges of life and to construct coherent life experiences.

In other words, this upstream approach serves to reduce the risk factors and enhance the protective factors. Too often, the knee-jerk response to high levels of demand or need is to raise the provision of mental health services. While there is certainly a requirement for these downstream services and support, it is imperative that due attention is given to the upstream part of the equation, where proactive measures to support the mental health and wellbeing of students are considered. Doing so will provide higher education institutions a more sustainable approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Relationship between Resilience and Wellbeing

Resilience is an active process through which people develop the awareness of, and the ability to make choices towards, a more successful life, even when faced with difficult circumstances. Luthar and Chichetti (2000) define resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”. To put it another way, resilience allows one to adapt to stress and maintain one’s equilibrium when faced with adversity.

Resilience and wellbeing are inextricably linked. According to many empirical research studies, there is a mutually reducing

relationship between resilience and mental ill-being, such as depression, anxiety and negative emotions (e.g., Miller and Chandler, 2002; Nrugham et al., 2010; Wells et al., 2012; Poole et al., 2017; Shapero et al., 2019). Concomitantly, the mutually enhancing relationship between resilience and positive mental health has also been established. Resilience has been shown to be positively correlated with positive indicators of mental health, such as life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and positive emotions (e.g. Hu et al., 2015; Haddadi and Besharat, 2010; Satici, 2016; Tomy and Weinberg, 2016). As such, resilience can be conceptualized as both a protective (i.e. moderating the effects of adversities) and preventive (i.e. enhancing the effects of one’s ability to cope) factor that is associated with healthy development and psychosocial stress-resistance.

Although resilience is often viewed as an inherent personality trait that people either possess or lack, studies have actually shown it is a skill or characteristic that can be acquired (e.g. Leys et al., 2020). In other words, resilience involves behaviours, thoughts, and actions that anyone can learn and develop. Furthermore, Luthar has emphasized that resilience “is never an across-the-board phenomenon” (Luthar, 2006, p. 741). The example consistently used is that of an academically successful adolescent who quietly suffers emotional distress and social isolation. This young person may be educationally resilient but not emotionally or socially resilient.

The SMU Resilience Framework

Given that salutogenesis is an approach to health promotion that focuses on factors that support good health and wellbeing, SMU approaches overall student wellbeing through developing the skill of resilience in students. This is a proactive approach towards supporting students’ mental health. Instead of waiting to react to problems, the aim is to promote a

more positive, proactive culture that prioritises students’ social and emotional health. Such an upstream approach serves to reduce the risk factors and enhance the protective factors. By doing so, the University is not only improving the likelihood of student success, but also helping students find their footing to thrive and succeed, empowering them to find a pathway towards a life of flourishing.

As such, the SMU Resilience Framework has been adopted by the university as an approach in health promotion where students are empowered to take charge of their own wellbeing; where the focus is on fostering holistic wellbeing instead of just mental health per se. The SMU Resilience Framework (see Fig. 1) aims to build resilience in students in six distinct yet inter-related dimensions of wellbeing (adapted from Hettler,1976) as shown in Table 1.

A three-pronged approach is used to build resilience in the aforementioned six dimensions, and comprises Education, Encouragement and Experiences as expounded below:

(a) Education

This involves imparting relevant knowledge and skills (to both staff and students), and shaping attitudes. Education efforts can take the form of on-line resources, workshops, newsletters, roadshows and campaigns.

For example, the university has developed the online module “Mental Health and You” which aims to help students understand why mental wellness

matters, teaches them practical strategies to look after their mental wellbeing and provides advice on when and how to seek help. This is a mandatory module which all students are required to complete in their freshmen year.

The THRIVE workshop series offers specially curated workshops that equip students with knowledge and skills related to personal success, team success, learning success and wellbeing. Examples of past workshop topics include “Managing Personal Finance”, “Managing Difficult People” and “Study Stress and Study Skills Management”. These complimentary workshops are held throughout the year and students are encouraged to participate in workshops that they find relevant to developing their resilience in wellbeing dimensions they have identified as priority areas.

The Resilience@SMU App and SMU Resilience Framework website make tailored information, resources and tools such as podcasts, videos and e-modules available for all students to access. For example, the Resilience@SMU App has a chatbot function which acts as a digital wellness coach to provide personalised wellness tips and remind users to keep up with the positive habits they have set out to cultivate. In the SMU Resilience

Table 1 Dimensions of wellbeing in the SMU Resilience Framework

Dimension of wellbeing	Related scope
Physical	body, exercise, nutrition, healthy habits
Intellectual	mental challenge, critical thinking, commitment to learning, study and time management
Social	relationships, interaction, conflict-management, respect
Emotional	self-awareness, management of feelings, emotions, reactions
Career	employability, skills, self-value, relevance
Financial	financial literacy, expense management, financial health, security

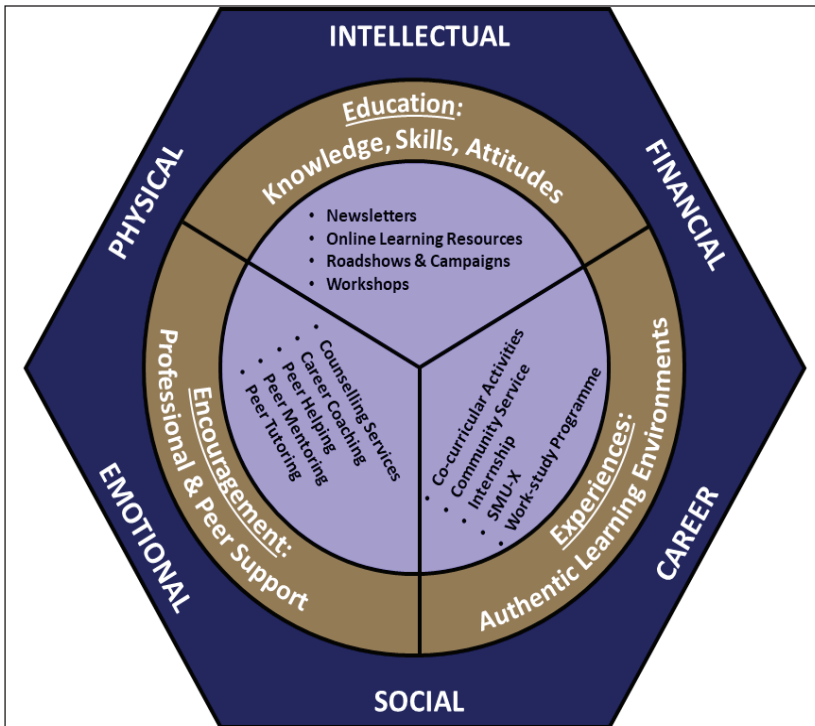


Fig. 1 The SMU Resilience Framework

Framework website, students are able to use the Resilience Dimensions Self-Check Quiz developed in-house to help identify areas they can consider strengthening. As such, the combination of social engagement tools and education content aims to empower students to assimilate positive habits and coping skills.

(b) Encouragement

This refers to social support provided to students through various platforms. Certified counsellors at the university’s Student Wellness Centre provide professional counselling services and support for students facing challenging circumstances in their lives. In addition, the University has Student Care Officers who work in partnership with

the counselling team to provide timely socio-emotional support to students.

Another initiative is the SMU Peer Helpers who provide peer support. Peer Helpers are full-time undergraduate students selected and trained to support the work of professional counsellors at the Student Wellness Centre. While they are not professional counsellors, they extend the reach of the Wellness Centre by providing a listening ear and emotional support to their peers in times of need.

(c) Experiences

A distinctive feature of the SMU education is the development of well-rounded students through experiential learning via its diverse co-curricular platforms

(including student clubs and societies, mandatory internships and community service projects). All SMU undergraduates are required to complete minimally 80 hours of Community Service and a minimum 10-week internship attachment at a partner company prior to graduation. A large proportion of SMU students are also involved in at least one other co-curricular activity.

SMU-X is another example under the 'Experiences' pillar in the framework. SMU-X are credit-bearing academic modules that entail students tackling real-world challenges by collaborating on projects with corporates, non-profit and government organizations.

These authentic learning environments help broaden students' emotional and psychological horizons. They provide students real-world experiences to hone their resilience in a relatively 'safe-to-fail' space, since they can still fall back on resources (i.e. Education) and support (i.e. Encouragement) from the university while undergoing these experiences.

The SMU Resilience Framework provides the overall architecture by which relevant programmes and activities across the university can be organised, thereby engendering a whole-of-university approach towards the holistic wellbeing of students. The framework also guides the curation of wellbeing initiatives, and helps ensure that all aspects of students' wellbeing are catered for. Through the three-pronged approach of Education, Encouragement and Experiences, SMU aspires to develop resilience in students so that they can be empowered to take charge of their own wellbeing and support the wellbeing of others, even after leaving university.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly brought to the fore the importance of protective and preventive factors for well-being, such as socialising, exercise, leisure activities, family relationships and mental health support. Beyond addressing students' immediate concerns stemming from the pandemic, there is a broader charge that administrators in higher education need to take on. Higher education institutions need to take on the mantle of nurturing resilient communities for a world that will become increasingly unpredictable and fraught with both anticipated and unanticipated challenges. To this end, it is asserted that resilience should be warranted a fair amount of attention in health and wellbeing promotion in institutes of higher education.

The SMU Resilience Framework, as detailed in this paper, is an example of a salutogenic health promotion framework which leverages the development of resilience to enhance and promote student health and holistic wellbeing. The aim is not only to improve the likelihood of student success, but also to help students find their footing to thrive and succeed in life beyond university, empowering them to find a pathway towards a life of flourishing.

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