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Evaluating the “Make Health Happen” Integrated Stress Management Program

Mary Bier, Erik Peper, Adam Burke and Katherine H. Gibney
San Francisco State University

“My only wish for the self-healing project is that I had started sooner.”

--program participant

Awareness of one’s stress reaction coupled with mastery of physiological self-regulation, conscious behavior and attitude changes appear to be useful approaches to mobilize health. This poster provides 1) an overview of a structured 14-session regenerative program, 2) results of the 5-month follow-up email outcome survey, and 3) two case examples to illustrate the process.

BACKGROUND OF THE “MAKE HEALTH HAPPEN” PROGRAM

Each semester since 1976, 100-200 undergraduates enroll in a 3-unit Holistic Health stress management and self-healing class in the Institute for Holistic Healing Studies at San Francisco State University. The self-healing practices include awareness of stress, dynamic regeneration, cognitive stress reduction, imagery for healing, and behavior change. The course culminates in a self-healing project in which each student works on a personal health concern and develops and implements a self-healing plan such as stopping smoking, increasing exercise, eliminating warts, reducing back pain, lowering depression, changing diet, controlling anger or anxiety, reducing eczema, and much more. In a previous anonymous survey at the end of the semester, 107 students (average age 25.7; range 18-57) reported that their self-healing projects were successful as shown in figure 1 (Peper, Sato-Perry & Gibney, 2003).

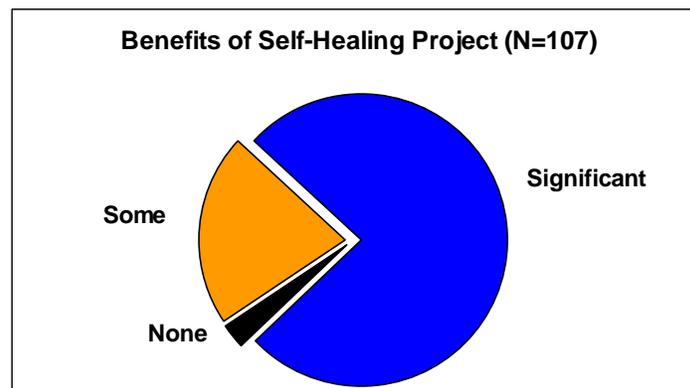


Figure 1. Self-rating of success in achieving self-healing project goals

Many students reported to the instructor that their projects changed their lives and that they learned skills that impacted their health status. This pilot study attempted to investigate the long-term impact of the self-healing projects upon the students. This paper reports the preliminary results of the 5-month individual follow-up email outcome survey.

METHOD

An email request was sent to former students who had taken the Holistic Health class, 3 male and 29 female students, mean age 28.29, returned the electronic surveys. The respondents reported on the benefits of self-healing projects, what type of project they implemented, the stress of performing the projects, the extent to which they would repeat the project and the extent to which they continued the project after finishing the course.

RESULTS

The self-healing projects were grouped into behavioral changes, physiological changes, pain management, diet and exercise, and stress management, as shown in figure 2. All respondents reported significant benefits, felt very little stress doing the project, and generally continued the project after completion of the course, as shown in figure 3. The feeling of stress during the project was most strongly experienced by those focusing on behavioral changes (e.g., quitting smoking and biting fingernails) and had an inverse correlation with perception of benefit. Those who focused on pain management or lifestyle changes (diet/exercise) experienced a correlation between the most benefit and strongest desire to continue. Respondents reported that: 1) the self-healing projects were very beneficial (means score of 4.2. on a scale from 1 “Not at All” to 5 “Very”); 2) the project was somewhat stressful to do (mean score 2.7 on a scale from 1 “Not at All” to 5 “Very”); 3) they have continued with their projects (mean score of 3.5 on a scale of 1 “Not at All” to 5 “All the Time”); and 4) 94.6% of the students would have done the same project again. Almost all of the respondents reported that doing the projects induced significant positive personal change.

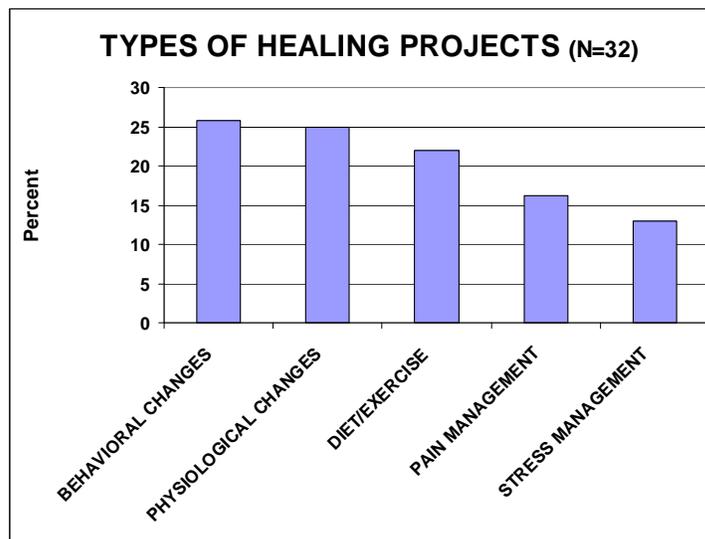


Fig. 2. Distribution of Types of Self-Healing Projects.

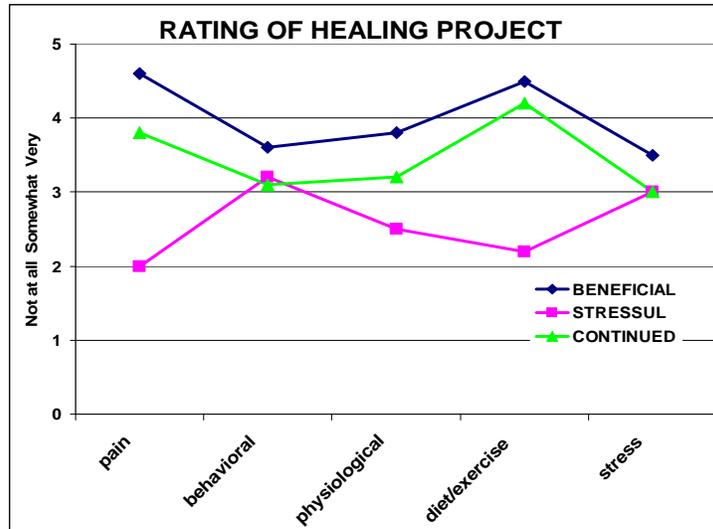


Fig.3. Subjective Rating of Self-Healing Projects

The broad impact of this educational self-management program is illustrated by two representative case examples.

CASE ILLUSTRATION: SELF-HEALING IMAGERY FOR DEPRESSION

A 28-year-old woman struggled with intermittent depression for approximately 6 years. Her depression refused to budge despite returning to school, finding a good part-time job and mending strained relationships. She did not want to use antidepressant medication because of working in a psychiatric clinic. Her goal was to “*once again feel things deeply and approach each new day with a sense of expectation and excitement like I did as a child. I have missed that child-self, and I knew that I could start to bring her back with a little work*”

Four week self-healing strategy

- Accepting depression as part of herself—to be acknowledged rather than despised
- Keeping a detailed log and self-rating of moods every day to monitor lifestyle habits
- Limiting watching TV and increasing socializing (there was no time to watch TV after she began to socialize)
- Decreasing coffee intake to two cups per week
- Increasing exercise (getting off the bus a few stops earlier to lengthen her walking commute)
- Limiting alcohol consumption to less than 4 drinks per week and never drinking alone
- Integrating into daily activities the positive image of how she could feel
- During the four week project, she realized that she had ceased doing activities in the recent years that had made her happy and decided to make them part of her life again (e.g., singing)
- Doing more activities to express her creative energies (after reading LeShan’s *Cancer as a Turning Point*)

Her self-healing project incorporated a number of different images that consisted of inspection of the problem, the self-healing process, and wholeness or health (see figure 4).

 <p>The depression is like a layer of heavy blue clothing, draining my energy and motivation.</p> <p>This is how I envision my body on bad days; the blue and black are a kind of malaise, my insides feeling dark.</p>	 <p>As I inhale I envision warm light filling my body, overcoming the malaise, and the darkness.</p>	 <p>I smile all the time, a serene smile.</p> <p>my Body feels light and energized.</p> <p>This is my well-self. My insides are warm and full, radiating energy out.</p>
<p>Inspection</p>	<p>Healing process</p>	<p>Wholeness</p>
<p>The depression is like a layer of heavy blue clothing, draining my energy and motivation. This is how I envision my body on bad days; the blue and black are a kind of malaise, my insides feeling dark.</p>	<p>As I inhale I envision warm light filling my body, overcoming the malaise, and the darkness.</p>	<p>This is my well-self. My insides are warm and full, radiating energy out. My body feels light and energized.</p>

Fig. 4 Self-healing drawings of a student with depression.

Results of Self-Healing Depression

At the end of 4 week, her depression totally lifted and her moods improved. She improved her communication with her boyfriend, which resulted in an increased level of intimacy, both emotionally and physically. In essence, she recovered a sense of enjoyment of her own body. As she said: *“I know now that I can recover my sense of joy in life... my mood and energy has enabled me to work more effectively and cut down on procrastination... My schedule is still demanding, but is feeling more invigorating than draining as a result of a good balance between work and play...”*

CASE ILLUSTRATION: SELF-HEALING ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

A 57-year-old, slightly overweight male student had atrial fibrillation for at least 8 months with a heart rate around 145 beats per minute. Although he associated it with stress and anxiety, his doctors appeared to ignore his fears and he was prescribed medication and sent on his way. As he reported after his medical diagnosis, *“I was not treated with any compassion and told I needed a pace maker. It was then that I decided to seek out alternative therapies”* His self-healing project was to *“reverse the irregularities of his heart rate without being overmedicated.”*

Four-week self-healing strategy

- Daily monitoring of blood pressure and heart rate combined with self-rating of moods
- Daily practice of dynamic breathing exercises and self-healing imagery practices (Peper, Gibney & Holt, 2002)
- Daily 20-minute practice of yoga and meditation
- Weekly acupuncture treatments
- Daily walking and thrice weekly exercise (swimming and weight training)
- Modifying his diet and eating habits to avoid eating fried foods, breads, pasta and desserts
- Self-healing imagery during the day, as shown in figure 5

		
Inspection	Healing process	Wholeness
The heart jarred by emotions	Developing a peaceful attitude and acceptance	Acceptance and peace feeling and knowing love and the need for love

Fig. 5. Self-healing drawing of student with atrial fibrillation.

Results of Self-Healing Atrial Fibrillation

The atrial fibrillation disappeared, his heart rate decreased to 70 beats per minute, and his blood pressure normalized. His medications were reduced from five (Atenolol, Coumadin, Amiodarone, Diltiazem and Digoxin) to one (Digoxin) and he is no longer a candidate for a pace maker. He also lost 15 lbs. *“The breathing practices helped me to control my heart rate by using my diaphragm instead of mouth breathing. Also, breathing six times per minute brought my heart rate under control. After breathing practice it would drop from 90 to 70 beats per minute. The imagery drawings helped me to get in touch with feelings and healing potentials. Not only has imagery evoked memories but also dreams, fantasies, inner perceptions and visions involving the senses connecting my mind, body and spirit.”* He reported that through relaxation he evoked feelings of peace and calmness and his self-healing skills have boosted his confidence in himself. As he said, *“Since I have started with the healing practices, I have become more centered and relaxed. All of the healing therapies I combined in my self-healing project have taken me to the point that I feel comfortable. I am healing from atrial fibrillation as my heart rate and blood pressure are normal. Now I can feel myself healing every day and my heart is at peace. What I have learned from this project is the potential for self-healing.”*

CONCLUSION

The data suggest that students not only learn useful self-healing skills but also continue to integrate and benefit from the experience after completing the course. Almost all of the respondents reported that the project induced significant personal change. The follow-up suggested that the behavioral category was most difficult to change and was perceived as more stressful. Most likely, this is due to the fact that the behavior was embedded and conditioned in their daily lives. On the other hand, pain reduction and exercise had the most benefit because the

students could experience the benefits of their self-healing intervention immediately. The case examples illustrate that apparent chronic disorders may be ameliorated when an individual actively participates in a self-healing approach. Overall, most students benefited significantly and reported that the **emphasis is on active participation in one's own self-healing, which is essential for reducing mental/emotional blocks that may interfere with regeneration.** The data suggest that students not only learn useful self-healing skills but also continue to integrate and benefit from the experience after the class is over. **We recommend that therapists and teachers integrate the *Make Health Happen* program as a complementary and concurrent self-healing strategy within their existing work. By teaching cascading holistic stress management skills, clients and participants can actively practice at home and in daily routines—and facilitate physiological regeneration and emotional and cognitive balance.** As one representative subject reported, *“It has initiated a large degree of personal growth and healing... The Holistic Health program has been by far the most valuable part of my education at SFSU at this point.”*

REFERENCES

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