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**Cultivating Wellness in a Pandemic: Virtually Engaging Higher Education Students  
with Experiential Activities**

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**Abstract**

Students in higher education experienced extreme challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and the stress of obtaining a college education during the year between 2020 and 2021. As a result, students' mental health was impacted, and their coping skills were on trial. In addition, due to COVID-19 safety precautions, many universities have experienced the plight of shifting all classes to an online platform since March of 2020. As a result, higher education educators were faced with the conundrum of effectively teaching students in this virtual learning environment. To cultivate wellness, the authors recommended various experiential activities for higher education educators and discussed how to effectively apply them with students. The objectives of using these activities are to help students regulate their emotions and experiences, alleviate their stress and anxiety, and find new meanings and coping strategies to work through this crisis.

*Keywords:* pandemic, mental health, wellness wheel, warm ups, experiential activities

## **Cultivating Wellness in a Pandemic: Virtually Engaging Higher Education Students with Experiential Activities**

The years 2020 and 2021 were marked by a worldwide pandemic. COVID-19 continues to have a strong impact on our day-to-day activities and mental health. Specifically, higher education students are experiencing this pandemic concurrently with the expected stressors of obtaining a college education. Therefore, cultivating wellness among these students is more vital than ever before. This manuscript begins with a discussion regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education students. Next, the authors offer a variety of experiential activities for educators to use with their students, including polarizing emotions, RAIN, and the Wellness Wheel. Finally, discussions on effective application of these experiential activities are included.

### **COVID Impacts on Higher Education Students**

In March of 2020, universities experienced the plight of shifting all classes to an online platform, regardless of the previous modality of curriculum delivery, due to COVID-19 safety precautions. Many students took what was originally thought to be a short break from in person studies, only to find themselves wrapping up the academic year using an online platform. This virtual learning experience continued into the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year and persisted in various approaches for many college students throughout the year. Additionally, educators were faced with the conundrum of how to effectively teach students in classes that are best delivered through an experiential format.

Forcing all higher education into a homogenous learning environment was an arduous undertaking as the demographics of this student population is increasingly diverse. Once the experience of the young adult, a college education has opened up to students of all ages, races,

genders, and sexualities (Lederer et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). In their discussion of the unique needs of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lederer et al. (2021) mentioned that the college population is growing in the number of nontraditional students who are older and have obligations such as work and family that extend beyond their academic pursuits. Diverse populations were affected more negatively than others by COVID-19 due to inadequacies and inequalities in access to resources such as health care and housing. Therefore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on diverse student populations was increasingly detrimental when compared to other populations.

It is not abnormal for college to be a time of growth and learning but also a time of stress and uncertainty. The stress and uncertainty associated with the college experience can impact students' mental health. Therefore, it is not surprising that college students are more susceptible to and report higher levels of mood and anxiety disorders than the general population (Charles et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). In their study on the mental health of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wang et al. (2020) found that the pandemic created significant increases in levels of depression and anxiety among the 2,031 college students that responded to their survey. The researchers investigated further to understand what impacted student mental health, and the respondents included factors such as concerns regarding academic performance, safety of self and family members, and lifestyle concerns (Wang et al., 2020). Charles et al. (2021) raised concerns on potential increase in substance abuse and other maladaptive behaviors in college students as means to coping with depression and anxiety related to the pandemic. Moreover, students' mental health was further impacted by the loss of multiple expected college experiences such as graduation, study abroad trips, internships, etc. (Charles et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2021). Additionally, social development is an expected part

of a college providing developmental experiences such as a sense of belonging, increased self-awareness, and solidified self-identity (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Lederer et al., 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students missed out on these developmental experiences.

College often provides students with access to resources they otherwise may not have at home. Being sent home due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that some students experienced homelessness, job/financial loss, and food scarcity when there was no home to go to or they went back to a home lacking in resources (Li et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2021). Some students went back to homes that lacked in the basic technology needed to access virtual classes. Online classes were difficult for those who went back to homes without reliable internet service and limited access to technology such as computers (Lederer et al., 2021). College students reported that the disruption in delivery of education increased their concern regarding grades (Charles et al., 2021), academic progress (Li et al., 2021), and future career prospects (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). In their study of first year college students' mental health during the pandemic, Fruehwirth et al. (2021) stated that Hispanic, first generation college students, and sexual/gender minority college students experienced "the greatest difficulties with distance learning" (p. 12). Finally, due to the rapid shift to virtual education, there were difficulties in carry over of proper curriculum design for students with disabilities (Lederer et al., 2021). Disconnection from these resources contributed to the overall sense of disconnection from the students' collegiate experience. The overall sense of disconnection amplified the importance of students connecting in their classes with their peers as part of their learning environment.

With the absence of the typical higher education experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously students were left navigating grief related to the loss of the typical college experience along with processing a worldwide pandemic. Educators found themselves in

a similar predicament with the conundrum of offering the same level of education but in an unplanned virtual environment. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide educators examples of experiential wellness activities that transfer from the classroom to a virtual environment. According to Mumbauer-Pisano and Kim (2021), higher education students have indicated an appreciation for experiential activities that offer wellness strategies. Specifically, activities that engage student in both activity and creativity (Mumbauer-Pisano & Kim, 2021). As a component of student wellness, the experiential activities are designed to assist students in the reduction of stress and anxiety, emotional regulation, and increase their access to innovative coping strategies and crisis management.

During times of crisis such as a global pandemic, experiential activities that carry over to a virtual environment allow college students to maintain direct learning experiences like the ones described by Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984). Experiential activities as explained by both Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) provide students in the higher education setting direct experiences along with processing, reflection, and learning (Chavan, 2011). The students in Wang's et al. (2020) study reported using online support to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. These students reported using mindfulness-based apps, social media, and other lifestyle apps to maintain connection with others and/or reduce anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). Students not only benefited from these virtual experiences but also sought out additional ways to cope with stressors in virtual environments. In the remainder of this manuscript, we will explain a variety of experiential activities that are effective in the virtual environment and discuss how to effectively apply them with higher education students.

### **Experiential Activities**

Experiential activities are conducted in various ways in the classroom and take shape through both individual and group approaches. Educators are prompted to use experiential activities in conjunction with didactic materials to offer students opportunity to practice and understand concepts and gain personal insights (Kim & Lyons, 2003). Crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, can unexpectedly shift educators to a virtual learning environment. Here we explain how to carry from the classroom to virtual learning three different experiential activities: virtual warm up activities, RAIN, and an integration of the wellness wheel and scaling questions.

### **Warm Up Activities**

In the classroom setting, educators have long used ice breakers and similar warm up activities to both foster a supportive environment and provoke conversation among students. The use of warm up activities is crucial in the virtual learning environment due to the additional barriers to connection and engagement that occur in an online setting. Effective warm up activities help students to ease their anxiety, become more comfortable with one another, and prepare for the group process about to happen (Blatner, 1996). In addition, warm-ups provide students with structure and time to gradually have their mind focused, experience a sense of trust and safety, and get involved in the experiential activities.

Two approaches the authors have used for warm up during the COVID-19 pandemic include online polling and a polarizing emotions activity. Educators can access free online resources such as Poll Everywhere (Poll Everywhere, n.d.) or tools included within conferencing platforms such as Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2021) to create polls for their students. By using the polling platform, the educator inquires about the students' shared experience of the crisis. The online polling engages the students physically in an activity.



Additionally, the students connect through discussion of the polling items and are provided an opportunity to broach uncomfortable conversations surrounding the crisis.

Polarizing emotions is another virtual warm up activity that the authors recommend to use during the pandemic or a crisis situation with college students. The authors identified three sets of polarizing emotions and they are *feeling stuck vs. opportunity to pause*, *fear vs. gratitude*, and *losses vs. new insight and awareness*. Crisis situations such as the pandemic embody both danger and opportunity for students who are confronted with personal challenges (James & Gilliland, 2017). The positive outcome of a crisis situation when college students experience uncertainty and stress is growth and change. Using the polarizing emotions activity can facilitate college students to get in touch with their positive and negative emotions which is the first step of self-understanding. The group process also helps college students to realize that they are not alone and that they share similar experience with their peers. The interaction and discussion among college students can also support them to learn new meanings and coping strategies in order to deal with the critical situation.

Educators can begin with a brief sharing of some personal experience in regard to a crisis situation and introduce the polarizing emotions. Corey et al. (2014) stated that the leader's modeling and self-disclosure are instrumental for initiating a conversation in a group setting. Then college students are invited to discuss whether those emotions are relevant to their experience. Educators can use group skills such as active listening, reflecting feelings, summarizing contents, and empathizing with the situation (Corey et al., 2014). These skills facilitate college students' personal understanding and awareness and connect them with one another by linking their experience together. This activity aids to draw commonality of students'

experience and reduce their level of stress. In addition, it draws their attention to both negative and positive aspects of a crisis situation.

## **RAIN**

From her book *True Refuge*, Tara Brach introduced a mindfulness tool called RAIN (a four-step process) to help people stay at present in the here and now and work through intense emotions and difficult times in life (Brach, 2016). RAIN has been practiced by many Buddhist teachers and followers for over a decade of time, and it helps to clear one's mind and strengthen one's capacity to find deeper meaning and truth in crisis situations. RAIN redirects people's attention and brings self-awareness in times of confusion and stress. Here are the four steps of RAIN:

- R     Recognize What is Going On
- A     Allow the Experience to be There, Just as it is
- I     Investigate with Interest and Care
- N     Nurture with Self-Compassion (Brach, 2020, p.1)

### ***Recognize What is Going On***

Recognition means you hear or see what is happening in your life and pay attention to “whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations are arising right here and now” (Brach, 2016, p. 62). In crisis-like situations, this first step helps us to do a quick scan of our body to recognize how we are affected by the situation. It can be a critical inner voice, a trembling of hands and body, a sense of anxiety and helplessness, or a feeling of shame and fear. Recognition calls on our senses to understand what is going on inside of us.

### ***Allow the Experience to be There, Just as it is***

*Allowing* means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations be in you without trying to distance from them or change them in any way. We might recognize negative thoughts or fear and allow the experience to be there by whispering “yes”, “it’s ok”, or “I consent”.

*Allowing* gives us a moment to pause and deepen our attention and understanding (Brach, 2016).

### ***Investigate with Interest and Care***

As for many people, going through step one and two of RAIN can be of tremendous relief and reconnection with self in the present. In other cases, especially with life threatening challenges, we need to strengthen our mindful awareness with the I of the RAIN. “Investigation means calling on your natural interest – the desire to know truth – and directing a more focused attention to your present experience” (Brach, 2016, p. 64). Some questions can be helpful during investigation such as how am I experiencing this in my body? What am I believing? What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most want my attention? and What does it most need (Brach, 2016)?

### ***Nurture with Self-Compassion***

“Self-compassion begins to naturally arise in the moments that we recognize we are suffering” (Brach, 2020, p. 1). Through investigation, we are able to discover and identify our needs, our wounds, our fears, and or our hurts. We ask ourselves, “Do we need a message of love, reassurance, affirmation, forgiveness, or companionship?” It might be a soft and gentle voice of “I love you,” “I’m fine,” “I’m sorry,” or “I’m here for you.” We can simply and intentionally offer ourselves the nurturing we need like a loving parent who provides for her child with loving kindness.

### ***After the RAIN***

When the four-step process of the RAIN is completed, pay special attention to and acknowledge “the quality of your presence and rest in that wakeful, tender space of awareness” (Brach, 2020). The RAIN washes away the negativity of what we are facing in life. We can once again smell the freshness and cleanliness. The outcome of this mindful activity is to free us from the limiting sense of self, which stops us from being present, and to help us regain the truth and freedom of our being.

Educators can introduce the practice of RAIN after completing a warm up activity. Students are encouraged to focus on one thing that is stressful in their current situation. Students are then invited to *recognize* the stress and suffering of the moment while meditating on the situation and to *allow* whatever is there, be there. Sometimes, just to practice *Recognize* and *Allow* in the classroom without judgement is enough. However, if time allows, college students are asked to complete the whole process. They may even share what their experience is like *After the RAIN*.

### **Wellness Wheel and Scaling Questions Combined**

Myers and Sweeney (2008) developed a holistic wellness model titled the Wellness Wheel model. This model has been talked about and utilized widely over the years, particularly in the field of college student's mental health. For example, Princeton University (2021) introduced wellness wheel to the students as a wheel includes seven subcategories of wellness: Emotional, Environmental, Intellectual, Occupational, Physical, Social, and Spiritual Wellness. Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Texas A & M University, University of Nevada (2021) also introduced the wellness wheel to their students similarly. This model can be important and useful for the college students based on the definition by the Myers and Sweeney (2000) that “wellness as a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind

and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (p. 252). Each of the seven dimension is interconnected and college students can benefit from using the wellness wheel as a guide when striving to achieve a balanced and well-rounded wellness.

Solution-focused therapy is also called Solution Focused Brief Therapy, which focuses on finding strength and exceptions for people to better their lives in a shorter period than other treatment approaches (Corey, 2016). Scaling questions as a part of solution-focused therapy can be used as an assessment tool to explore students’ current state of wellness. Scaling questions ask students to explore and understand their conditions on a continuum (typically from one to ten, with one being the least desirable of the described condition and ten being most desirable of the described condition). This tool can be used to help achieve self-awareness and track the progress of students’ desired goals.

The idea of combining the wellness wheel model and the scaling questions is to help students obtain more self-awareness about their state of wellness, particularly on achieving more specificity via using measurement. The implication of this idea can be operated as follows:

1. The educator introduces the wellness wheel model to the college students.
2. The educator invites the college students to rate each of the eight subcategories of the wellness wheel model. The implication is simply to say the following: “Rank your level of satisfaction in each area of your life, one being the least satisfied and ten being the most satisfied.”
3. The educator uses processing questions to promote more understanding of the meanings for each rating. The example of the processing questions can be:
  - Identify the areas with the highest and the lowest rankings.

- Identify the areas of your life you would like to improve.
4. The educator looks for strengths in students to improve. For example, imagine a student has rated a wellness subcategory as being a four. The examples of the scaling questions focused on exceptions and strengths can be:
- Think carefully now. What prevented you from being a three?
  - What is the one doable thing you can do to make it from four to five?

### **Discussions**

In the implementation of experiential activities, it is important that educators are proactive to ensure that students have an overall successful and ethical experience. First, educators must understand their role in the classroom. Experiential activities can bring to the surface difficulties for students that may need to be addressed by mental health counselors and other support personnel. Therefore, educators do not want to step out of their roles as educators but instead know when and who to send students to for additional help. Second, due to the concerns that may arise educators should have information regarding resources available for students. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the key role universities and colleges play as a vital source of income, food, housing, and other resources for students (Lederer et al., 2021). Universities and colleges frequently offer students access to food pantries, low-cost medical care, free counseling, and other resources. Educators should be prepared to provide students with information regarding how to access these and similar resources in a virtual environment. As the pandemic has continued, many universities have opened up access to services for virtual students by moving services online or making connections with resource providers near the virtual student. Educators should be aware of who or what department to direct the virtual student to for assistance. Finally, many elements of nonverbal communication are lost in the virtual

environment. Educators must adjust their delivery approaches when offering experiential activities in a virtual environment to mitigate the loss of nonverbal communication. Examples of adjustments in delivery may include changes such as increased periods of silence, additional check-ins for understanding, and increased use of visual aids.

According to Barry et al., (2019), meditation tools, like RAIN, are effective in reducing depression and increasing both self-efficacy and resilience in college students. RAIN offers an invitation for participants to take a moment to pause in their busy lives and self-reflect. It is a simple but structural way to bring mindfulness and self-compassion to emotional difficult situations. When working with college students during the pandemic, RAIN can be particularly helpful to remind students to pause and be mindful whenever the crisis arises and to regulate their emotions with calm existence. With practice, RAIN assists us to be fully aware and awaken to our presence.

The wellness wheel model provides a visual and specific reference for the college students to conceptualize their mental health. When faculty integrated the wellness wheel into course work, college students' wellness scores increased significantly over the course of the semester with remarkable increases in stress management (Beauchemin et al., 2018). Additionally, the scaling question provides not only a measurement tool for both the educators and the students to read their current state of mind, but also it can be used to brainstorm the resolutions to improve the current state of the college students' wellness. The idea and practices of combining the wellness wheel and the scaling questions contribute to bringing in a compounded positive outcome by using two approaches together. These two tools also integrate well with one another. A reminder here is that the wellness wheel and the scaling questions are

usually used in the counseling and therapy setting. It would be helpful if the educators get some training and have opportunities to practice before using them.

### **Conclusions**

To cultivate wellness in a crisis situation such as a pandemic, the authors suggested several virtual experiential group activities namely, online polling, polarizing emotions, RAIN, and wellness wheel and scaling questions combined for educators who are trained in group process to use with their students. The objectives of using these activities are for educators to help college students regulate their emotions and experience, alleviate their stress and anxiety, and find new meanings and coping strategies so as to work through their crisis situation. It is the hope of the authors that these virtual experiential activities through practice can help to support college students when they are confronted with life challenges.



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