

Creative Interventions to Increase Counselor-in-Training Wellness

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### Abstract

Wellness is a broad term that emphasizes a person's current state of mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and professional wellness. Professional counseling was built upon the foundations of wellness and practitioner self-care. While counseling programs understand the importance of wellness and counseling ethics emphasize the necessity of professional wellness, students frequently do not feel prepared or trained enough in wellness dimensions. This manuscript provides a rationale for a program wellness model and outlines a proposed series of interventions aimed at increasing students' understanding, ability to self-assess, and strategies related to self-care and wellness.

Wellness, as it relates to counselors and counseling, is a broad term. It emphasizes a person's movement and growth toward wholeness and happiness through a combination of physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and attitudinal life domains (Meany-Walen, Davis-Gage, Lindo, 2016; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). The counseling profession is built on the foundation of wellness and emphasizes a holistic approach to client care as compared to the medical model of illness practiced by other professional helpers (Myers, et al., 2000). In fact, the American Counseling Association's (ACA; 2014), *Code of Ethics*, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015), and Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES; 2011) *Best Practices in Clinical Supervision* declares wellness evaluation, practice, and maintenance as a critical part of ethical professional behavior and the responsibility of the counselor and the supervisor/counselor educator. As stated by ACA, "Students and supervisees monitor themselves for signs of impairment from their own physical, mental, or emotional problems and refrain from offering or providing professional services when such impairment is likely to harm a client or others" (ACA, Standard F.5.b). Without wellness, counselors may be at risk for not responding effectively or empathically to their clients (Newswald-Potter, Blackburn, & Noel, 2013).

However, little research has been published that describes how counselors, or counselors-in-training (CIT) develop and/or maintain wellness. Roach and Young (2007) studied the trajectory of CIT's wellness over the course of their academic program. The researchers found that students who engaged in wellness-focused courses fared better than their counterparts who did not participate in wellness-focused courses. Additionally, Smith, Robinson, and Young (2007) found students experienced increased psychological stress as they move from didactic to clinical courses such as practicum and internship. Thus, as evidenced by the literature, students

require support within the program. Therefore, several interventions are outlined below to assist CIT's in integrating wellness practices into their developing skill set. .

Several studies over the past decade emphasized the usefulness of wellness-focused training to improve CIT's wellness (i.e., Lenz, Sangganjanavanich, Balkin, Oliver, & Smith, 2012; Lindo et al., 2016; Meany-Walen et al., 2016; Wolf, Thompson, Thompson, & Smith-Adcock, 2014). A qualitative study in which practicum students received wellness interventions and discussion throughout their practicum group supervision revealed that the direct and intentional focus on wellness and self-care practices was instrumental in CITs' development of wellness practices and understanding of its importance (Meany-Walen & Davis-Gage, 2016). Lenz et al. (2012) found promising results for improving CIT's wellness after implementing a Wellness Model of Supervision (Lenz & Smith, 2010). Lindo et al. (2016) implemented a one and a half hour workshop in which mental health practicum students learned about the risks and symptoms of burnout, were taught the benefits and definitions of wellness, and created personal wellness goals. The researchers found that CITs developed an increased understanding of wellness, burnout, and strategies to improve their wellness. In addition, Meany-Walen et al. (2016) used a single case research design and found very effective treatment results at improving mental health practicum students' Total Wellness after implementing an adaptation of Lenz and Smith's Wellness Model of Supervision over the course of a semester. Lastly, Wolf et al. (2014) found that students who participated in wellness workshops demonstrated increased wellness and described positive outcomes from participation in the workshops. The interventions and methods of research varied across studies. However, a common finding emerged. CITs showed improvement in their wellness as a result of an intentional focus on wellness as a requirement of course work. |

### **Proposed Practices**

Findings from the aforementioned research ignited our interest and the development of a proposed wellness plan that accompanies a traditional counseling program and utilizes the talents of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) Chapter members and leaders. Specifically, findings from Roach and Young (2007) that illuminated CIT's psychological stress over the course of a training program, and findings from Lenz et al. (2010) and Meany-Walen et al. (2016) suggested deliberate and repeated engagement in wellness focused activities improve CITs' total wellness are the foundation for our proposal.

### **The Role of Local CSI Chapters**

As one of the largest international associations of professional counselors, CSI (1999) is dedicated to its mission of "Promoting Excellence in the Profession of Counseling," which includes the component of counselor wellness. Members who meet the qualification of the organization through excellence in academics and skills, have the opportunity to serve as leaders within their local chapter, as well as at the international level. These unique opportunities prepare them for leadership roles both within the communities and the field.

In our proposal, Chapter Faculty Advisors (CFA) and counselor educators (CE) will supervise and collaborate with CSI student members/leaders in the planning and implementation (where appropriate) of the wellness interventions. While CFAs and CEs will implement and facilitate the interventions, CSI student members/leaders will have the opportunity to develop and practice counseling skills, practice gathering resources for classroom implementation, participate in lesson planning, learn about using research in presentations and present material as appropriate. The activities have been designed to promote professionalism, leadership, and excellence in counseling. Furthermore, create opportunities for CSI leaders to build relationships

with students and faculty, practice active listening skills, and respond emphatically to students as they participate in classroom implementation. Herr (2010) notes that CSI values diverse leadership styles that are fitting of an organization's unique vision and goals. As chapter members/leaders collaborate on the implementation of the proposed interventions, they will have the unique opportunity to provide services to fellow students while at the same time, gaining invaluable experiences.

### **Proposed Interventions**

In the following section, we outline the goals for our proposed wellness program. We provide a step-by-step description of the interventions that includes intervention goals and the following wellness program goals:

#### **Wellness program goals**

1. Students/group members will develop a deeper understanding of the dimensions of their wellness and how it impacts their work;
2. Students/group members will engage in activities that teach them to monitor their individual levels of wellness;
3. Students/group members will gain awareness of individual levels of wellness and risks to their impairment;
4. Students/group members will begin to implement individual wellness strategies when they notice impairment; and
5. CSI Leaders will develop leadership and counseling skills.

### **Interventions**

#### **Intervention 1: “Listen up, be well, help others”**

The objective of this intervention is that participants will gain a better understanding of what wellness is and how it pertains to them. Materials needed to facilitate this intervention include the completed presentation, refreshments if deemed necessary and a wellness assessment. We recommend the following steps to prepare for the intervention. Student leaders will collaborate with CFA or designated CE to generate a list of approved and appropriate wellness topics. Students will then brainstorm personal wellness and stress examples that cover a wide variety of topics. Using these examples and topics, student leaders will create both the presentation to be delivered and the accompanying handouts to be approved by the supervising CE or CFA, while being mindful of the wellness assessment to be administered prior to the presentation. Once the presentation and handouts have been finalized, student leaders in conjunction with the CE will determine which parts, as appropriate, will be presented by each individual. The CFA and/or CE will schedule a time to deliver the presentation, notify the program members and give the presentation. We recommend that this activity is implemented as part of New Student Orientation.

**Intervention 2: “Research says that the well stay well and help the unwell become well”**

The objectives of this presentation/discussion based intervention is to increase student understanding of wellness, provide opportunities to practice wellness techniques and goal setting, as well as being able to identify a minimum of five benefits of active practice. Most, if not all of the materials needed to create the presentation and discussion topics can be accessed through internet or library. While ideally this type of presentation and activity would already exist as a part of current coursework, CSI representatives can coordinate with the CE and/or CFA to create a pragmatic presentation and activity structure.

While CEs and CFAs are responsible for dictating the content and delivery of the presentation and the activity, they can involve student leaders as they see fit. We recommend student leaders be involved in the creation of the presentation and potentially be tasked with researching the content to be presented. Content should include wellness dimensions, how to set wellness goals, articles or resources about wellness. We recommend presenters give personal examples of stress and how to manage them. Specific experiences related to dimensions of wellness and being a student maybe particularly helpful.

### **Intervention 3: “I’d rather be mindful than mindless”**

The objective of this activity is to encourage students to monitor their daily wellness levels and reflect upon factors that impact them. We suggest integrating this as part of class curriculum as the intervention is designed to be implemented over the course of a semester. This creates the opportunity for students to begin to identify and address changes in their wellness levels across the wellness dimensions as needed. Student levels of wellness will be measured and tracked using a wellness assessment, such as the Stress Reaction Inventory (American Counseling Association Taskforce, n.d.), Self-Care Assessment Worksheet (Saakvitne, 1996), or Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL Inventory; Myers et al., 2000), which will be identified and procured by the leading CFA and/or CEs. Additionally, the group leader will need to select and prepare several mindfulness activities to provide to the group such as meditation, guided imagery activities or breathing exercises. As deemed appropriate the leader may involve student leaders to help with this process. Once activities and the instrument are approved, the leader will administer the assessment to all group members to determine the group’s present knowledge and needs surrounding wellness, establish a plan for the first session and provide group members with their results and an initial evaluation of their levels of wellness. The leader will then discuss and educate group members on mindfulness; covering what mindfulness is and how it relates to personal wellness. Following the discussion,



the leader will practice and teach one of the activities to the group to assist them in understanding how to do the activities. Group members are then responsible to monitor their own wellness weekly through use of the assessment and whatever other measures may be assigned, as well as engage in the assigned wellness activities. The leader is responsible to periodically check in with group members' wellness score and activity engagement.

At the end of the semester, the group will meet to discuss what they observed about their wellness over the course of the semester especially in regards to the mindfulness activities and the impact they may have had on their wellness. Some examples of processing questions include: (a) What did you notice about your levels of mindfulness over time? (b) How did you know that your wellness levels changed? (c) What impact did the activities have on your wellness? (d) What connections can you find between mindfulness and wellness? (e) What are your thoughts about achieving wellness (as compared to wellness being a process)? (f) What activities did you find particularly helpful? (g) Which ones weren't beneficial? and (h) How could you implement this in your day to day life?

#### **Intervention 4: It's okay to "like" yourself**

The objective of this activity is to increase student understanding of how electronics such as fitness trackers and phone applications, in addition to social media accounts impact their wellness through a semester long intervention. The activity will also provide students with opportunities to practice time management skills, journal and reflect with other students. CEs facilitating the training will need to recruit members to participate in the activity, though this activity could easily be implemented into an existing class structure. Data related to the potential positive and negative effects of social media relevant to students will be beneficial to include in the presentation. It is suggested that as an introduction and prior to delivery of the presentation,

students and facilitators generate a list of all the social media outlets they are aware of and use. This is followed by a discussion of the individual's personal perceptions of social media, their own use and the risks and benefits associated with it. We recommend delivering the presentation and following it with a discussion on student's perceptions of electronics and social media on their wellness assuming the new information has altered their perspective slightly. Students will then set individual goals, which may include time or usage limitations, on their social media use over the next semester and engage in a weekly journaling session noting their social media wellness goal. At the end of the semester, we suggest the group meet in person to process their experiences. Journals should not be required to be turned in, but serve as a reference for participants to refer back to when reflecting on their experiences with the group. It should be noted, though this intervention is designed to be a semester long, time frame can be adjusted on the CE's availability and could be done in a two-session brownbag format.

Sample process questions facilitators may choose to ask include: (a) To what degree were you able to meet your goals? (b) What was this experience like for you? (c) In what ways were you impacted? (d) What were you most surprised by? (e) What did you notice about yourself? (f) Did you like what you noticed? (g) How will this experience impact your habits moving forward? (h) How did this impact the different dimensions of your wellness? and (i) What types of changes did you notice in others?

#### **Intervention 5: "As if I didn't already have enough writing assignments"**

The objective of this intervention is to help increase student insight into their thoughts and behaviors through reflective journaling. Students will keep a weekly wellness journal and explore negative self-talk and thoughts.

At the beginning of the semester, the CFA or CE will meet with the group and help them to develop a plan for their individual wellness journals. A discussion will be lead to inform students the concepts of negative self-talk and recognition of negative thoughts and how to reframe those to be more positive. Students are then responsible for complete their weekly journal entries. Monthly, the CE will check in with students, we suggest implementing this as 30 minutes at the end of a class session.

**Intervention 6: “Sometimes I eat pizza, sometimes I eat pizzas”**

The objective of this activity is assist students in gaining a better understanding of their personal nutrition and how it impacts their wellness. We suggest this activity be run in conjunction with CSI in a workshop format. CSI members will screen interested participants for food allergies prior to adding them to the workshop. The CFA or CE presenter will develop a presentation and handouts related to the importance of nutrition on wellness and the impacts it can have focusing specifically on body and brain functioning. To accompany the presentation, several “brain” healthy recipes will be compiled noting potential substitutions for potential allergies.

We suggest students be broken up into groups of 6 to 10 to discuss current eating habits and the impact stress can have on those. After, the discussion the presenter will present on the brain and body connection and provide helpful handouts. Following the presentation, students will be instructed to log their eating habits, particularly in relation to stress.

Either the CFA or CE will follow up with students after several weeks to process their experiences. Examples of potential process questions include: (a) What patterns did you notice? (b) How willing were you to try the “brain” food? (c) How, if at all, did it impact your wellness?

(d) In what ways might you attempt to alter your habits moving forward? (e) How might culture impact what you eat and how you eat when stressed? (f) How easy was it to make these changes?

**Intervention 7: “Sometimes we mix the paint colors, and it’s awesome!”**

The objective of this intervention is help students gain awareness and insight into their thoughts, behaviors and emotions through the use of creative processes such as painting, drawing or modeling clay/play-doh. We recommend the facilitator be comfortable facilitating a non-structured art intervention and seek supervision. We suggest they seek supervision or consultation with the CFA if this idea makes them uncomfortable. The CE will need to gather a variety of art supplies such as pom-poms, tongue depressors, crayons, markers, paints, clay, pipe cleaners, glue, scissors, etc. Anything will do. You can even use recycled items (e.g., toilet paper rolls or egg cartons) or nature (e.g., rocks, twigs, or flowers). This can be done with the assistance of student leaders, but should follow some mentoring on the activity, its purpose and how it is beneficial.

Facilitators will introduce the art activity using a simple prompt, for example, “You are going to create an image of \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., your wellness, how you feel, your current stressors, etc.) using the art materials here (or nature outside).” Leader will then allow students time to express themselves creatively using the supplies. Following the intervention the facilitator will process the activity the group.

The following examples of process questions the facilitator may want to ask: (a) What did you notice about yourself (how you were feeling, what you were thinking, what you were doing, how you were doing it) as you were engaging in the art activity? (b) How did it feel to not have specific instructions of the intended outcome? (c) What did you notice about the energy in the room as you were creating? (d) What did you notice about others as they created their

project? (e) What did you create? (f) How did you decide what to create? (g) What were you most surprised by? and (h) What do you believe influenced your art or your mood as you created your art?

### **Intervention 8: “Are you living or just existing?”**

The objective of this intervention is to help increase counselor-in-training awareness of mindfulness of wellness in outdoor activities and facilitate awareness of group membership and how the two may be connected. As the activity is done in groups it also increases the potential for students to create and strengthen interpersonal relationships through team building exercises and gain a better understanding of their leadership qualities. CEs will need to select an outdoor activity but we suggest activities such as nature hikes, obstacle courses and mindfulness walks. We suggest focusing on group activities/interventions that focus on team building and identifying group member strengths either through task completion or problem solving.

As CE's prepare the intervention, they should consult with the program faculty to determine feasibility of activities and appropriateness. Taking into special consideration the needs of participants, which may include a wide variety of abilities and ways to ensure everyone is able to participate. They also need to consider setting limits to ensure safety of the participants. On the day of the intervention, the CE will introduce the chosen activity to students and either assign or allow them to choose groups accordingly. Following the initial activity instructions CE's will be responsible for monitoring the students' as they participate ensuring safety and encourage the students to have fun and engage in their group.

Following the activity, the CE will process the experiences with the large group. We have included the following example questions: (a) What was this like for you? (b) What were your initial thoughts of this activity? (c) How were your initial thoughts confirmed or challenged after

this activity? (d) What was your role in the group (e.g., leader, follower, rescuer, entertainer, competitor)? (e) How is that similar or different from other roles you play? What did you need from your group members? and (f) What made this \_\_\_\_ (meaningful, boring, hard, easy, fun, lonely)?

**Intervention 9: If a picture is worth a thousand words, why can't I submit my Instagram account as my thesis?**

The objective of this activity is to increase student awareness of the wellness activities that occur on campus or in their community by exploring, taking photos and sharing these snapshots with the group. CEs should discuss with program faculty whether the activity will be conducted on campus or in the community. Additionally, the CE will need to decide how they plan to share the photos. The authors suggest the internet, projection or a PowerPoint work well for this activity. CEs will need to communicate to the group prior to starting the intervention that if the activity is to be done on campus, they will need to bring a device (e.g., cell phones, digital camera, etc.) that can capture photos and be able to share these with the class.

When CE's introduce the activity, we recommend the following phrase: "You are going to take a picture of something (on campus or in community) that reminds you of wellness. You will be sharing this picture with the group using \_\_\_method." Give students an appropriate amount of time to complete the activity based upon the setting. Once the pictures are taken, students will prepare to share their pictures according to the method that was set previously. After all the pictures have been shared, CE's will facilitate a discussion on what was chosen and what it represents.

We have included the following examples of potential process questions: (a) How did you choose what to photograph? (b) How does it relate to wellness? (c) How were other people's wellness pictures similar or different from yours? and (d) What did you learn from others?

### **Projected Outcomes**

The interventions proposed above address the multiple dimensions of wellness and have been structured to allow for development and growth of individual wellness strategies over time. The progression outlined above encourages students to start with a solid foundation of wellness knowledge and progressively adding to it throughout their time in the program. While students are completing their internship courses, we recommend university supervisors follow recommendations of Lenz et al. (2010) and Meany-Walen et al. (2016), who suggest intentional and consistent wellness-focus, which is necessary for optimal student growth and the development of career long wellness habits (Smith, Robinson, & Young, 2007).

As the CIT's begin to develop increased awareness of their own wellness, the interventions move into activities that require less monitoring and more self-exploration. The interventions can be modified and implemented in a variety of ways to suit individual or program needs. Additionally, specified interventions at critical points in CITs' training may help to maximize the impact of wellness interventions.

Not only may the interventions help facilitate CIT wellness, the interventions proposed will provide multiple opportunities for CSI student leaders to collaborate with and learn from the CFA and program faculty. A potential benefit of creating a portion of the activities is that CSI student leaders may show increased wellness, improved leadership skills, and a better understanding of counseling techniques. Providing a unique opportunity to not only develop individual wellness but to connect wellness to their individual leadership style.

Wellness and how it is defined and implemented remains highly individualistic. One aspect that continues to remain undisputed is the intentional implementation of wellness-based training throughout the counseling curriculum to increase the likelihood students recognize and use self-care strategies (Meany-Walen et al., 2016). Research indicates the use of self-care strategies directly connects to prevention of compassion fatigue and burnout (CACREP; 2015, Meany-Walen et al., 2015).

Counselor wellness remains an integral and ethical part of both professional behavior and client treatment. Through the interventions outlined, CEs are able to provide CITs the opportunities to gain increased awareness regarding their individual wellness, which maybe otherwise absent in their curriculum. In addition, implementation of the interventions encourages CITs to begin integrating self-care strategies and wellness based practices into their professional and personal lives. |



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