

The Healthy Relationships Series: An Untapped Potential for Human Connection

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Abstract

Human connection fuels a sense of belonging, comfort and general wellbeing. In our ever-changing world of technology, relationships have become more and more complex. There is a shortfall when it comes to young adults understanding what a healthy relationship is, and how to create one. Supporting this claim, there is a growing body of research and evidence that indicates the dire need to teach young adults, including students, how to have healthy relationships (Khalifian, Murphy, Barry & Herman, 2016).

Unique to The University of Queensland (UQ), the Healthy Relationship Series (HRS) is a highly interactive, psychoeducational program consisting of four sessions, running over two hours once a week (or twice over semester break). The series aims to improve the connections that students have with important people in their lives, increase confidence, reduce psychological distress, create healthy relationships and improve students' sense of wellbeing. Dr Stallman (2010), who explored psychological wellbeing in university students, argued that there are several protective factors to alleviate psychological distress. These include high levels of connection and interconnection with friends and peers, living with a partner or family member and experiencing feelings of connection. The study further highlighted the need for universities to promote the wellbeing of students through targeted interventions (Stallman, 2010). Combining the findings from Stallman (2010) and Khalifian et al., (2016), HRS has risen to the challenge. This article will explore the potential of HRS developed and delivered by Diana Earl (author) at UQ in the context of the aforementioned nuances.

Keywords

Healthy relationships, connections, university students, interpersonal relationships, wellbeing, psychological distress, technology, gender-based violence, social media

Background

University is an exciting time for many young adults. This is the time where they embark on academic and intellectual journeys, engage in self-discovery, make new friendships and explore intimate relationships. Additionally, many students move away from home and experience new found freedom, some begin to see their family through the eyes of an adult, and for many of them, enter into their first serious or intimate relationship. Such new experiences are not without their risks. A study conducted by Dr Stallman (2010) explored student psychological wellbeing in two major universities. The study found that, compared to the general population, university students are three times more likely to experience psychological distress. Additionally, Andrews and Wilding (2004) have indicated that being at university can also lead to higher levels of stress, depression or anxiety, resulting in poor academic results, disconnection from others and other adverse psychological concerns. Both studies have also identified protective factors to mitigate the aforementioned risks, such as a sense of belonging, a perceived connection to others and supportive relationships with friends, family or peers (Stallman, 2010; Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

In our modern world, the way students and young adults create connections has changed with the introduction of new technologies (Jones, 2008). Things such as the internet and social media have served to present an alternative 'reality' where human connections have become muddled and complex. The media warps understanding of connections by showing examples where unhealthy interactions are glorified (e.g. The Bachelor, Married at First Sight etc.), and healthy interactions often dismissed. Furthermore, social media has played a big role in changing how young adults approach each other, make friends, find intimacy and view each other's lives (Jones, 2008). In such

a fluid landscape, the basics of what a healthy relationship is can be lost. This claim is highlighted at Student Services (UQ) where students reach out for support by seeking advice on making friends, dealing with conflict, stepping out of unhealthy relationships and generally feeling disconnected. This lends support to what external research indicates – students and young adults are seeking connections and ways to have healthy relationships. Such research argues that having healthy relationships and thriving connections can assist students in improving their confidence, mental and emotional wellbeing and their educational journey (Stallman, 2010; Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

Born from a desire to support these students and improve their wellbeing, the “*Healthy Relationship Series*” (HRS) was created. The series consists of four highly interactive, psychoeducational sessions, running over two hours once a week (or twice over semester break). Each session has a particular theme that introduces the basics of what a healthy relationship is, gives participants the opportunity to discuss with each other, reflect on their current relationships and interact through activities to solidify the topics. The series is run as a closed group with attendees opting in voluntarily and the topics build a practical framework around relationships, which includes follow up activities and tasks and items for self-reflection (Earl, 2019). Initially run as a pilot program in semester 1, 2018, the series has cemented itself as a regular part of UQ’s Student Services workshops. Evaluations and feedback administered at the start and end of the series showed that the pilot program was a great success with over 95% of participants indicating the series met their expectations and 100% of participants indicating they would recommend the series to someone else.¹ This has been replicated in each of the following series, with more and more students sharing their enjoyment of the series, success stories in session and positive feedback about the series. For more detailed information, including topics covered, participants who have previously attended the program, demographics and feedback, please refer to authors’ newsletter article written in the 2019 May edition of the ANZSSA monthly newsletter (Earl, 2019).²

Summary of evaluation of the program and challenges

Overall, results from evaluations gathered from participants of HRS showed consistency from the initial pilot program in Semester 1, 2018 to the latest program Semester 2, 2019.³ In each category investigated, results showed increases in levels of confidence and abilities in their respective fields, and a lot of promise for the future of the series. The results of the quantitative evaluations are not discussed in this paper due to several challenges. Primarily, there was a dropout rate of about 40% of participants between week 1 and week 2. In this sense, many students who took the initial survey did not partake in the final survey. Given this, results could not be quantified, as post-evaluation results may be skewed due to lower numbers. Reasons for dropout included clashes in timetables, inability to commit to all sessions, competing priorities, mismatched expectations of the program and changes in personal situations. In the future, the series will aim to compare pre and post evaluations of each individual participant in a de-identified manner. Additionally, other assessment tools will be considered to compliment the original survey. The Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (SPWB) is one such tool, with a focus on the subscales of positive relations with others, self-acceptance and personal growth (Ryff & Keyes 1995).

Positively, the evaluation allowed for qualitative feedback. For example, participants were asked in surveys to indicate the most valuable thing they learnt, what they most enjoyed and to provide feedback for the presenter. One student indicated they “*enjoyed the atmosphere the whole group built*

¹ In fact, in 2019 several participants requested to bring a friend or partner to the session, or had been recommended the series by a peer.

² Reference provided in the reference list below

³ The program runs once a semester and to date of publication, the program has run 4 series within semesters and one intensive series (winter break). It is anticipated that the program will continue to run in a standard format twice a year (once a semester) and in an intensive format twice a year (winter break and summer break). Given the likelihood that the program will run once more in 2019, more up to date information will be available after publication.

together”, whilst others commented that they liked “... *Sharing food/snacks. Pairing up and getting to know other people. Role-play when we [got to] know each other better*”. Others commented that they enjoyed “*the engagement with other people’s issues*” and “*participation in small group activities/discussion*”. As can be seen, the subjective nature of the questions posed allowed for a richer and deeper understanding of the personal growth that participants experienced. There was a large consensus that the most valuable things participants learnt were: boundary setting, communication, conflict resolution and “*Possibly learning more about myself and others - how we respond differently*”.

The feedback aimed at the presenter also meant that each series was adapted to better suit student needs and as such, the series evolved in nature. One student remarked, “*it was very beneficial, should be compulsory for everyone to attend :).... Would love to have an ongoing workshop through the semester!*”, whilst another commented “*every sessions was enjoyable*” and finally that “*I thought this course was absolutely beautiful and I learnt so much. Thank you*”

Despite the challenges encountered with the group (mostly the dropout rate), the feedback indicated that students greatly enjoyed getting to know each other, interacting face to face, storytelling and hearing real-life examples. The potential of this program is starting to be highlighted by the interest generated from students, the positive feedback and the potential it offers to overlap with other areas of student life such as; mental health, reduction in gender based violence, equality and better student engagement leading to higher connection with their university.

Potential of the program

There is much potential for the program to expand beyond helping students to have stronger and healthier relationships. For example, the series can help overcome the negative effects of social media and reality TV by helping to improve participants’ connection with themselves and each other. Discussions during sessions on how the media has influenced participants’ friendships and notions of romance were fruitful. Conversations also focused on how to create healthy boundaries when using social media or online dating, and even tips on how to overcome the negative effects of ‘perfect’ lives as seen on social media. Participants also remarked on how the program helped them to create new friendships with each other, allowed participants to link in with ongoing support and the improvements they were seeing in their current relationships. The real-life connections and sharing of stories throughout sessions allowed participants to move away from a fictional world, and to see themselves (and the important people in their lives) through a clearer lens improving their self-esteem and confidence.

The program empowered students by providing purposeful time to reflect and engage in self-discovery through activities in and out of session. Participants thus were able to identify and move away from engaging in negative patterns of interaction, and to start to pave the way for more positive interactions. Interestingly, several students continued with support after the program, in particular in the areas of conflict resolution. In follow up appointments, students identified that they themselves had been engaging in unhealthy practices and the series allowed them to identify this and find positive solutions. On two separate occasions, different participants booked follow up appointments together with a significant other to get support from a counsellor while they unpacked particular areas of the series as it related to their relationship.

The program shows enormous potential to improve students’ sense of wellbeing and reduce inequality. With a large focus on respect and acceptance, participants engaged in vivacious discussions around power-dynamics, equality in relationships and creating a culture of appreciation.⁴ By challenging pre-conceived ideas, many students began to understand how inequality occurs in

⁴Relationships types included friendships, virtual, family and professional

their relationships, and how this has effects not only on themselves but with the larger population. One participant noted that they had been engaging in negative power-dynamics in their relationships and had not been aware of this previously. The series helped the participant to identify such behaviours and provided a starting ground for more equal and respectful treatment of others. This shows great promise for the series to target other areas such as decreasing gender-based violence, addressing inequality and promoting healthy, positive communities.

Finally, as discussed in the feedback, participants noted that engaging with others was a highlight of the program. During sessions, participants would often comment that they were feeling stressed before arriving, but that by the end they were feeling calm and re-energised. The positive group-dynamics created allowed for supportive and engaging conversations and activities. Participants would often bring baked goods or fruit to share, give each other advice and engage with the content. Such positive engagement and feeling of belonging could have positive and long-lasting effects on participants' mental well-being and help reduce instances of psychological distress. Further research is needed to quantify the positive effects that the series can have but the initial investigations have paved the path for similar programs to be created and delivered.

Conclusion

The Healthy Relationship Series run at The University of Queensland by the author has shown high levels of potential to target wide-ranging areas of student and psychological wellbeing, gender-based violence and inequality. The program is unique to UQ in both its creation and delivery, and it is hoped other universities and tertiary education providers will work with the author to create similar programs. In our ever-changing world, human connection is still at the forefront of wellbeing – and we would do well to harness the potential it has for a brighter, more united world.

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