

Rising Mental Health Needs among College Students

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Mental healthcare needs among university students are receiving greater concerns in the past years. The occurrence of students being diagnosed with mental health difficulties have been increasing. Not only the low academic achievers are facing higher stress and tensions, those who performed extraordinary well are not uncommon among the list of suicides and suicidal attempts.

Mental health problems may be caused by, other than genetic tracks, social and societal factors. Family life and relationships are influential to mental health, also the existence of peer support. Lately other societal changes particularly the frequent and popular use of digital devices attracted many research interests among student affairs professionals from all over the world including China. Use of digital devices is considered to be related to longer period of fatigue and shorter period of exercise, in the time span of a day. Internet over-dose will further lead to sleep deprivation which is related to many kinds of mental illness.

Sleep is an important physiological requirement of human beings, an active process of restoring human spirit and relieving fatigue. Moreover, it is a basic indicator in evaluating body health (Bixler, 2009). The frequency and duration of using electronic products before bedtime have a serious impact on sleep quality among students (Chu, Han, & Ai 2018; Shen., *et al.* 2016). Those who continued to use mobile phone after lights off for more than 60 minutes suffered from a sleep deprivation rate of over 30% (Shen., *et al.* 2016). Abbey, Walter and Frank (2014) rightly pointed out that the use of mobile phones was related to the quality of sleep rather than the length of sleep.

Melatonin, a hormone produced by the pineal gland at night, is involved in the regulation of the sleep/wake cycle. Since melatonin will be suppressed by light, exposed to the blue light from sources including computers, cell phones and iPad may affect sleep. (Garfinke, Laudon, & Zisapel, 2008; Crowley, Acebo, & Carskadon, 2007).

Interestingly, mobile phone addiction, the same research showed, was more common among students with extraverted personality than introverted. However, there are other habits that affect sleep quality for example alcohol use. Taylor and Bramoweth (2010) found that 11.6% of students drank alcohol as a sleep aid. Alcohol allows people to fall asleep quickly, awaken them later continually and left them with poor sleep ultimately. (Taylor and Bramoweth, 2010). Alcohol use increases the risk for obstructive sleep which in tern causes headache, fatigue, sleepiness, mental retardation, memory loss and inattention in the next day.

Two exploratory studies were launched last year at our university to find out the health issues related with sleep. First of all 359 students were selected randomly to participate in a survey when semester commenced in September 2018. Measurements taken include Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, Mobile Phone Dependency Inventory, Eysenck Personality Questionnaire and Beck Depression Index. Post test was carried out at the end of the same semester in late December 2018. Results showed that 44.6% and 47.6% of students have exhibited mobile phone dependency and depressive symptoms respectively. Sleep deprivation is found only mildly related to phone overuse ($r = 0.121^*$) but with more so with depression ($r = 0.548^{**}$). Sleep deprivation is also mildly related to psychoticism (Spearman $p = 0.208^{**}$) and neuroticism (Spearman $p = 0.251^{**}$). The Spearman correlation between sleep problem and extrovert personality is $p = -0.052^*$.

What can help college students to recover from sleep deprivation that are caused mainly by academic stress and assignments, quickly? Exercising perhaps is the best answer. Unfortunately, college students no longer exercise regularly. In other words, incentives and monitoring are necessary in the process to re-make regular exercising a habit.

A parallel attempt employing health management approach was launched in late November 2018. 87 students were recruited to participate in a "Health Pioneers" program. They were given, each -a digital wrist that measured for a period of 5 weeks their walking steps, sleeping time and duration of deep sleep. Their InBody composition and analyzer were also measured before and after. Results of 76 students who stayed through the experiment showed all of them except 7 have a minimum of 7 hours of sleep. Except 15 all walked more than 6000 steps a day. A total of 35 out of 76, or 46%, recorded InBody improvements.

The effect of this experiment is fascinating though not conclusive. Nevertheless, it is a direction for student affairs people to further explore.

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