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Complementary Therapies in Libraries: A Future Perspective

Kellie Sparks

Abstract

Academic libraries can assist in the efficacy of student learning by offering specialized programming, spaces, and knowledge opportunities that delve into the use of complementary practices and techniques. By regularly offering resources that may be considered non-traditional such as meditation and yoga, libraries can assist students in gaining a greater awareness of themselves and their environment. Libraries can provide these services at the point of need and not limit these methods to only particular times of the academic year. Libraries can also become spaces for further research since much is still being examined regarding the effects of complementary practices on learning and wellness. Although the library's involvement with such practices has not been thoroughly examined, the concept has the potential to be viable as we move into a more transformative educational system.

Keywords: Complementary Therapies, Academic Libraries, Contemplative Studies, Stress Reduction

Bio: Kellie Sparks is the Evening Reference Librarian at the University of West Florida Libraries. As the Psychology & Philosophy liaison librarian and co-chair of the libraries' outreach committee, Kellie actively seeks out opportunities to promote student well-being and success while connecting students with the library.

Introduction

As the landscape of education transforms, it is the function of the academic library to transform and even transcend expectations. By offering cutting-edge programming, spaces, and knowledge opportunities that delve into the use of complementary therapies, librarians can extend their active participation in the cultivation of student learning. The library can become a place that consistently supplies activities, resources and therapies that enhance one's ability to create and accumulate knowledge. These activities can also allow the library to become a setting for further research on the effectiveness of these therapies with the student body.

By introducing therapies such as meditation, hypnotherapy, and biofeedback in a place of calm, comfort, and safety, students may be more apt to partake of and utilize these services throughout the academic semester. While many libraries do

provide these kinds of services during high-stress academic periods such as Finals Week, this presents a question of how libraries can assist students with managing their academic stress over time. Why limit therapy events to special times of the year? Why not provide them on a daily or weekly basis?

What are Complementary Therapies?

Complementary therapies are a distinct field that encompasses two major categories: natural products and mind-body practices. These therapies are referred to as complementary since they are often utilized in conjunction with Western medicinal practices (National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health, 2017). These categories include a broad range of well-known practices including meditation, mindfulness, hypnosis, and yoga. Complementary therapies also include practices such as Reiki, various Chinese medicine approaches such as acupuncture and Ayurvedic medicine, and tai chi. This paper will focus on mind-body practices and how providing these services within a library can have the potential to impact students' academic performance.

Why Do They Provide an Opportunity for Libraries?

Libraries are a natural gathering place for students in terms of academic activities. Complementary therapies provide an opportunity for libraries to become a place of comfort for those experiencing test anxiety and academic-related stressors. At the University of West Florida, using data from the American College Health Association's 2016-2017 National College Health Assessment, it was determined that nearly 60% of our students had experienced "overwhelming anxiety" at some time during that twelve-month period. We felt this was too large a percentage of our students so we determined that providing complementary therapies as a service might help the students feel more confident in tackling their academic studies while enhancing their well-being. As Owen and Rodolfa (2009) state, "Student mental health is a campus issue, not just a counseling center issue."

Other research studies have examined exactly how anxiety and stress can impact academic performance, showing that elevations in corticosteroid levels (hormones released during times of stress) can impair declarative memory, concentration, and learning. High levels of stress can also make it more difficult for students to concentrate and comprehend information (Paul, Elam, & Verhulst, 2007). However, complementary therapies have the opportunity to help students develop coping strategies to overcome these negative effects and improve their academic performance.

The integration of complementary therapies within the library, provided on a

regular basis, creates the opportunity for students to become familiar with these techniques during less stressful times of the year. By giving students the option of experiencing these tools in a safe place, with few barriers to access, it is more likely that they will utilize them at the time of greatest need.

Using complementary therapies also present a unique opportunity for libraries to partner with campus units such as Counseling and Psychological Services as well as with community businesses and groups that provide similar services. For example, the Harvard University Center for Wellness (2017) currently provides Reiki, acupuncture, and massage for their student body. The library could potentially partner with this campus unit to provide those services on a more regular basis in order to increase student access to these services.

In summary, there is a great opportunity for libraries to become an initial point of contact for academically beneficial complementary therapies on campus while enhancing the library's design as a calm learning space and repository of resources.

Complementary Therapies and Their Potential to Help Students

Meditation, hypnosis, and yoga can be excellent choices for students who wish to engage with complementary therapies to enhance their academic performance. Meditation is the practice of focusing our attention and being aware of when the mind wanders. This improves our focus when we're not meditating. Focused attention is analogous to a muscle that must be strengthened through regular use.

Results from one research study that examined students who meditated or used diaphragmatic breathing showed significant increases in students' academic learning and achievement (Paul, Elam, & Verhulst, 2007). Research has also demonstrated that meditation has the potential to enhance brain attention and the speed with which the brain processes information (Jha, Krompinger, & Baie, 2007; Slagter et al, 2007). It also has the ability to enhance one's problem-solving ability (Raingruber & Robinson, 2007). Results from cognitive therapy research have also found increases in metacognitive awareness, increases in working memory capacity and sustained attention due to practicing meditation (Chambers, Chuen Yee Lo, & Allen, 2008; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

A study by the late researcher Catherine Kerr from Brown University found that people who practiced mindful meditation were able to adjust the brain waves that filter distractions and increase productivity quicker than those who did not practice meditation. This ability to filter could be connected to their enhanced ability to remember and incorporate new facts during the research study (Kerr, Sacchet, Lazar, Moore, & Jones, 2013).

In a study completed by Hampton University, 56 undergraduates who were enrolled in an introduction to psychology course were divided into a meditating group and non-meditating group. The meditating group was instructed to complete a simple meditation that used natural breathing, relaxation, and attention-focusing techniques for 10 minutes at the start and at the end of each study session. Each group study session lasted one hour. A significant finding was the difference in the cumulative GPAs of the meditation groups. The research found that not only were the semester GPAs of the meditating group significantly higher than those of the non-meditating group, the cumulative GPAs were also higher (Hall, 1999).

Another complementary therapy that can potentially assist students with performing better academically is hypnosis. A study from the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa utilized two experimental and two control groups of psychology students. The experimental group took part in two kinds of hypnosis: active alert and relaxation hypnosis. The control group took part in either progressive relaxation or no hypnosis at all. Their early grades were used as a pre-test while their grades after the intervention served as the post-test. Based on results, the two hypnotic training groups experienced a significant impact on their academic achievement compared to the control groups (De Vos & Louw, 2006). Many other research studies point to hypnosis as a means for students to reduce anxiety and stress while improving their emotional state, thus positively affecting the academic performance of the individual (Sapp, 1990).

Yoga is another example of a complementary therapy that can be utilized as a stress reliever. A research study published in the International Journal of Yoga studied 800 adolescent students and showed that the students who practiced yoga performed better in academics than those that did not. The study illustrated that low-stress students performed better than high-stress students which further demonstrated that stress can affect student academic performance (Kauts & Sharma, 2009).

What is the Current Landscape?

Numerous libraries provide stress relieving activities such as therapy dogs, massage, coloring tables, playdoh, meditation, and yoga spaces during Finals Week. As previously mentioned, while these events are incredibly valuable, students experience stress at other times of the academic year as well. By providing more frequent access to these activities, students can have tools to help manage and even embrace their stress throughout the semester.

Research is still limited in regard to complementary therapies within libraries but the concept is growing in popularity. While this paper has highlighted research with positive results, there is still relatively limited research on how these practices

affect students' academic performance and there are studies which have mixed outcomes. This provides an opportunity to delve further into appropriately designed research which will be valuable to the fields of psychology, health, and libraries.

In addition to the inclusion of meditation, hypnosis, and yoga, there are several other related trends catching hold in libraries. One is the creation of dedicated contemplative spaces such as meditation and prayer rooms, yoga spaces, and relaxation rooms. Another is libraries that are providing quiet areas for students who wish to relax and destress. Finally, technology such as the Fitbit and light therapy boxes for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) are being circulated in libraries like Lawrence Public Library in Kansas and Salisbury University in Maryland (Lawrence Public Library, 2017; Salisbury University, 2017).

As the current landscape broadens with a variety of different library offerings, we can look toward a promising future for the use of complementary therapies within libraries.

What is a Future Perspective?

Academic libraries can make wellness a daily priority and not limit these kinds of contemplative resources and therapies to only special events or finals week. We can forge a deeper connection with University Counseling and Psychological Services to partner and provide services in the library on a more regular basis at the point of need. For example, if Counseling Services is already providing biofeedback as a resource for students, then we can invite them into the library to provide it on a more regular basis.

We can increase access to these services by providing training and professional development to librarians who are interested in learning more about, and facilitating, these kinds of stress-relieving techniques. With this training, librarians could create similar spaces outside the library – like in a dorm residence or a popular study spot inside the University Commons/Student Union. These services and resources could also spark the interest of other departments such as Health Services, Housing and Residence Life, and Campus Life and Diversity to potentially host these services as well.

A pathway towards increasing the awareness and usage of complementary therapies within libraries is to increase programming by including contemplative studies and neuroscience experts. Incorporating these experts into regular programming can assist in educating and exciting students about how the brain actually responds to these kinds of therapies. By allowing the library to be a space where critical discussion and experimentation happens, students may be less fearful and become more apt to try these kinds of resources. Educating students

may help to destigmatize these kinds of therapies and help students understand the value they offer.

As a library, we can go beyond what has been offered before, like the standard therapy dog event. One approach is to provide self-care resources for check-out at the desk such as Muse meditation headbands. The University of West Florida's John C. Pace library is currently getting feedback and gauging interest in these headbands with the ultimate goal of making them available for check-out. We can offer a variety of technologies as a means to uplift students. For example, the University of Texas at Arlington Link Research Lab (2017) has introduced students to the Empatica E4 wristband – a band that measures heart rate variability and electrodermal activity. By researching this technology, students can potentially have a tool to better understand how emotions can impact learning. Another option would be to provide LibGuides that provide access to meditation apps like SWAY. The SWAY app (2017) allows the user to have a more interactive meditation experience and is geared toward providing a tool for meditation in active, noisier places such as a library.

We can also provide spaces for gaming with virtual or augmented reality to help students relax. We can offer stations where students can sample specific aromatherapy scents designed to promote relaxation or mental focus. We can offer therapies like Reiki in the library where students can gain awareness surrounding how their own energy can be affected by stress. Studies have examined the effect of Reiki on stress hormones, blood pressure, and heart rate. There has been slight evidence for Reiki to reduce anxiety and pain, induce relaxation, and strengthen overall well-being (Miles, 2007). Reiki is also being integrated into workplace wellness programs as well as university wellness centers.

An excellent example of how one library provides these options is the Humboldt University Library (2017) in California. They have spent a year offering patrons a drop-in “brain booth.” The booth is full of resources such as biofeedback tools that measure heart-rate variability as you relax, noise canceling headphones, sound stations, gaming stations, virtual reality stations, light therapy stations, coloring pages, and more. All of these resources provide students the chance to try a variety of different tools to help them learn about metacognition along with the positive effects of taking a mental break from study.

Another option might be to create LibGuides that contain audio options with binaural beats or provide pre-loaded iPods with these tools to help students relax before a test or after a stressful day of studying. One example of this is the Counseling Center at University of Florida (2017), which offers preloaded biofeedback iPods that include binaural beats to students who need to destress. This is a great example of how a university can provide sound therapy to students who would like to enhance their well-being and academic performance (Colzato,

Barone, Sellaro, & Hommel, 2017).

Daniel Levitin, a professor, musician, and neuroscientist who wrote *This is Your Brain on Music*, has stated that by entering into a mind wandering mode for fifteen minutes, you hit the reset button in your brain. This mind wandering mode allows your brain to restore the neurochemicals that have been depleted by focused activity such as studying. You can reach a mind wandering mode by listening to music. Music can assist in the achievement of a relaxed state of mind since brain waves and sound waves are measured the same way, in hertz. Our thoughts create frequency waves and the mind has a natural response to certain sound waves or oscillations called the “frequency following response.” According to Levitin, our mind will naturally synchronize with these states of music (Levitin, 2006).

Finally, we can become a space for further research. As mentioned before, research is limited so we can provide an opportunity for librarians and other scholars to research these kinds of therapies and how it affects academic performance and well-being while utilizing the library. As we move into a more holistic view of how students function within academic settings, we can provide the necessary tools for students to reach their full potential. Broadening access to resources that are designed to uplift, educate, and ease the daily stress of academic life can only benefit those seeking to achieve their goals.

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