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Improving College Student Health: From Stopping Smoking to Healing Eczema

Amy Ratkovich, Lauren Fletcher, Prathyusha Gubbala, Erik Peper & Rick Harvey
San Francisco State University

I am proud to label myself a nonsmoker... diligently performing practices has profoundly helped me eliminate my troublesome craving...The conscious efforts I have made over the past month have helped me regain control of my life and helped me gain a newfound feeling of security and peaceful bliss (at six month follow-up is still a nonsmoker).

--L. F., student who became a non-smoker after smoking up to two packs a day since age 11

I have been struggling with eczema for most of my life and up until I began this course, I was feeling very hopeless with regard to managing this condition without the use of potent, costly and potentially dangerous drugs. My self-healing project also proved to be empirically successful, as was evidenced by the fact that my eczema shrunk in size from 72 mm in length and 63 mm in width as measured at baseline to 0 mm in length and 0 mm in width by the final day of this project.

--L. C., student who experienced scaly skin patches since childhood

Many of the health ailments we face today are due to stress (American Psychological Association (2007). According to American Medical Association (Cohen et al, 2007), stress is often a silent killer because it is commonly believed that we cannot do anything about undue stress in our lives. In fact, many diseases are impacted or even caused by stress, so the cure is often learning to manage it and setting our minds to healing it (Peper, Harvey, Takabayashi, & Hughes, 2009). More than 74% of symptoms experienced by patients when they visit their primary care provider are of unknown etiology as shown in figure 1.

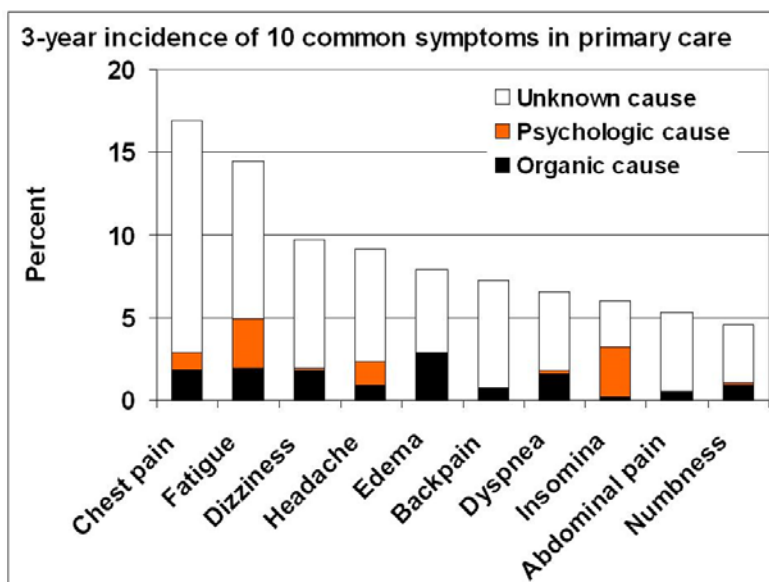


Figure 1. Three-year incidence of ten common symptoms observed in primary care. 16% of the symptoms have organic causes and 10% of the symptoms have psychic causes, while 74% of the symptoms have unknown causes. Graph drawn from the original data in Kroenke & Mangelsdorff, 1989.

Most likely, these symptoms are a manifestation of stress, anxiety and depression. College students equally report high stress levels: a factor that may put them at higher risk for future illness. Thus, teaching students lifelong stress management and self-healing skills as part of a university curriculum would offer students ways to cope with stress and, optimize their health.

BACKGROUND OF THE “MAKE HEALTH HAPPEN” PROGRAM

Every semester since 1976, 110 to 180 undergraduates enroll in a three-unit Holistic Health class on stress management and self-healing at San Francisco State University. Students are required to undertake self-healing projects using techniques that focus on awareness of stress, dynamic regeneration, cognitive stress reduction, imagery for healing, and behavioral change. They all work on a self healing project which have been grouped into five categories of changes in: mood, physical symptoms, lifestyle, behavior, and, reduction in substance use, as shown in Figure 2.

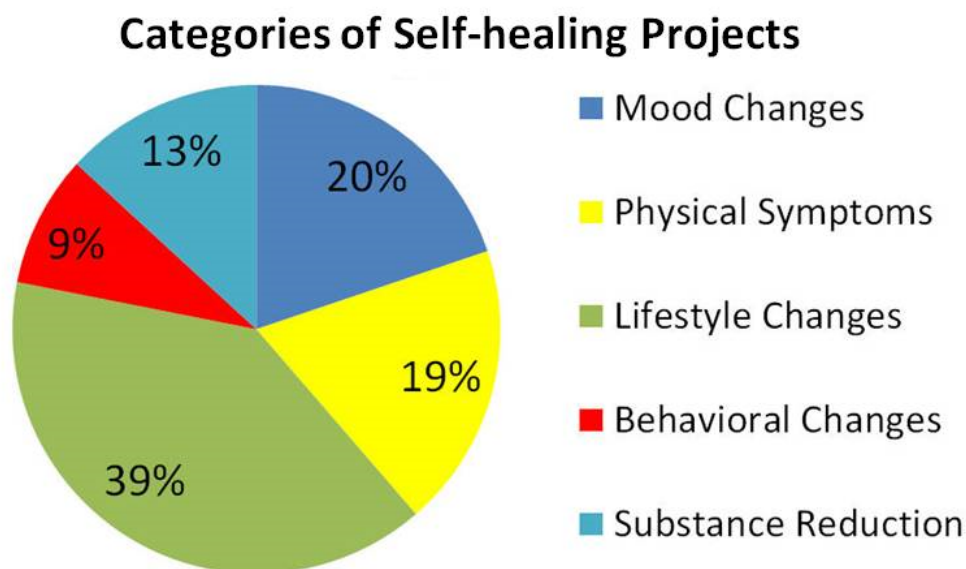


Figure 2. Distribution of students' self-healing project categories.

In previous anonymous surveys, students report significant benefits from their self-healing projects. For example, in 2003, 107 students (average age 25.7; range 18-57) reported that their self--healing projects were highly beneficial (Peper, Sato-Perry & Gibney, 2003).

The purpose of this research is research is to identify which methods or techniques the students used which contributed most to their success in achieving their self- healing goals.

Method

Participants

110 students' papers describing their self-healing project were included in the analysis. There were 66 females and 44 males with an average age of 24.0 years (SD, 5.8). These students were enrolled in a 3 unit class, Holistic Health Western Perspectives, to fulfill an upper division General Education Requirement.

Procedure

The students were required to keep track of a daily sequence of self -healing practices including awareness of stress, dynamic regeneration, breathing, hand-warming, cognitive stress reduction, imagery for healing, and behavior change as described in the book, *Make Health Happen* (Peper, Gibney & Holt, 2003). The course culminates with a 4 week self-healing project in which each student works on a personal health concern by developing and implementing a self-healing plan such as stopping smoking, reducing eczema, eliminating warts, reducing back pain, lowering depression, controlling anger or anxiety, as well as increasing exercise frequency, improving diet, etc.

The self-healing papers were analyzed for the factors that the students reported were essential for

their success such as the strategies created for self-healing (the plan), as well as the types of methods the students used most often. The papers were scored by three student researchers who rated the success of the categories in the project from 1, “Not at All” to 5, “Very Successful.” An overall rating of success was also given to each project. In addition, the students also rated their own success on an anonymous assessment form.

Results

The students reported that they benefited highly from the self-healing practice and were very successful in achieving their self-healing goals as rated through their own self-assessment ($x=4.1$; $SD=0.85$ (scale from 1 not successful to 5 very successful), while the researchers’ analysis of the papers as outside readers rated them slightly lower $x=3.4$; $SD=0.98$ (scale from 1 not successful to 5 very successful) as shown in Figure 3.

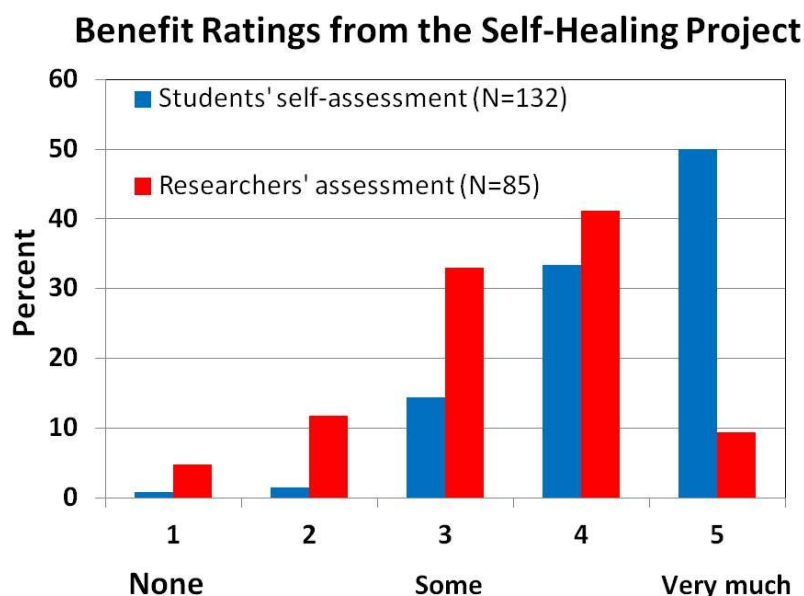


Figure 3. Ratings of self-healing benefits through students’ self-assessment and researchers rating the papers.

The major factors contributing to students’ success in benefiting from their self healing projects (e.g., increasing fitness, changing diets, changing internal dialogue, reducing anxiety, pain, substance abuse) are shown in Figure 4.

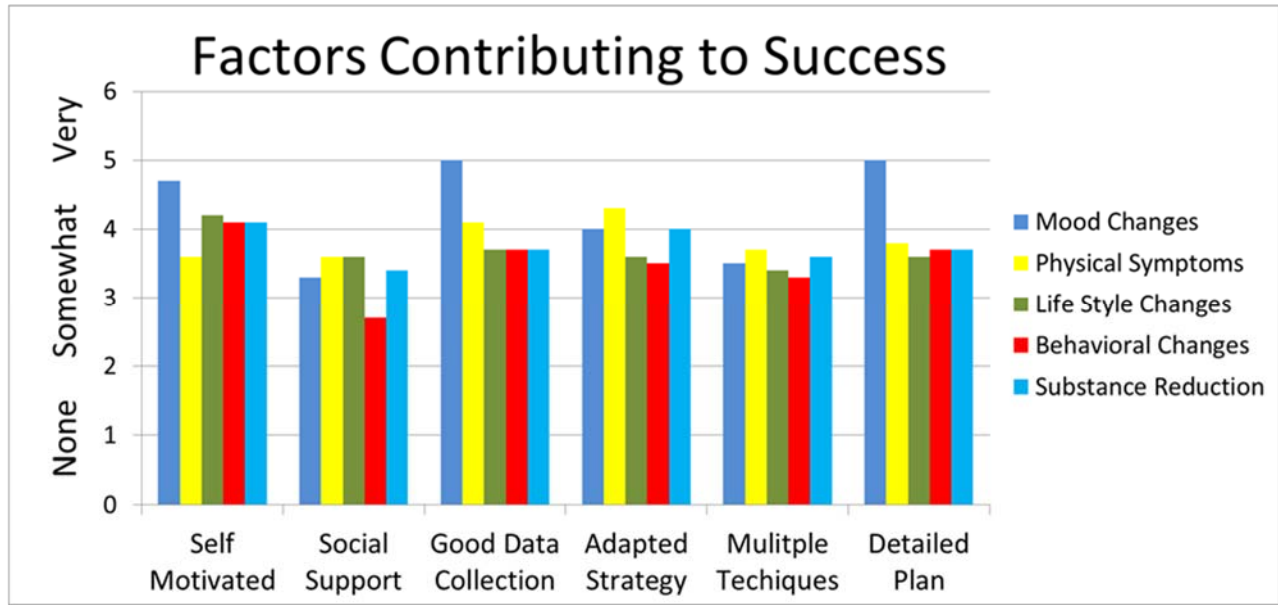


Figure 4. Factors which students described as having significantly contributed to the success of their self-healing project.

Various methods and techniques taught over the course of the semester were implemented within the self-healing projects. Overall, most students used various combinations of techniques to achieve success. The distribution of students implementing the different techniques is listed in Figure 5.

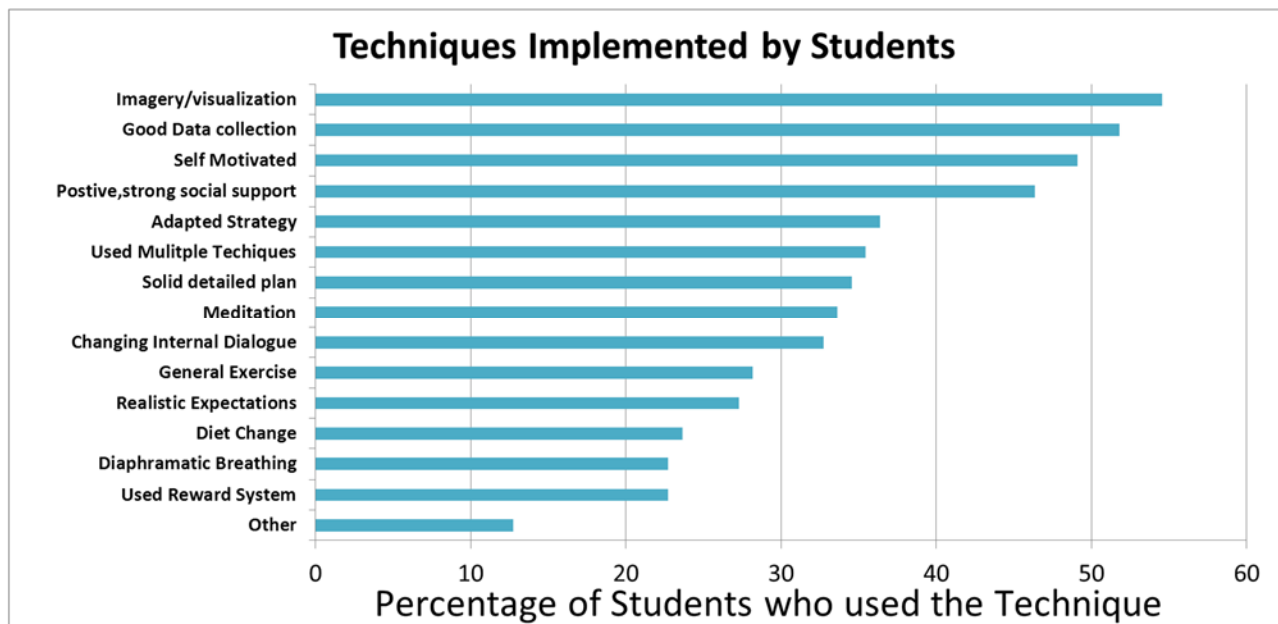


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of various techniques utilized by the students in achieving their self-healing goals.

The themes common to the success of the self-healing projects are illustrated by two representative examples: (1) becoming a non-smoker after smoking since age eleven; and, (2) healing whole body eczema.

CASE ILLUSTRATION 1: Becoming a Non-Smoker

A twenty-year old female student had been dealing with her addiction to smoking cigarettes for the past nine years. Her addiction and cravings had consumed her life, and she felt trapped because no matter how hard she tried the cigarettes always found a way back into her life. After gaining knowledge of the self-healing techniques, the student felt confident that she would be able to eliminate her habit once and for all and become a non-smoker. Her progress throughout the semester with controlling her cravings and eliminating her smoking habit is graphed in Figure 6.

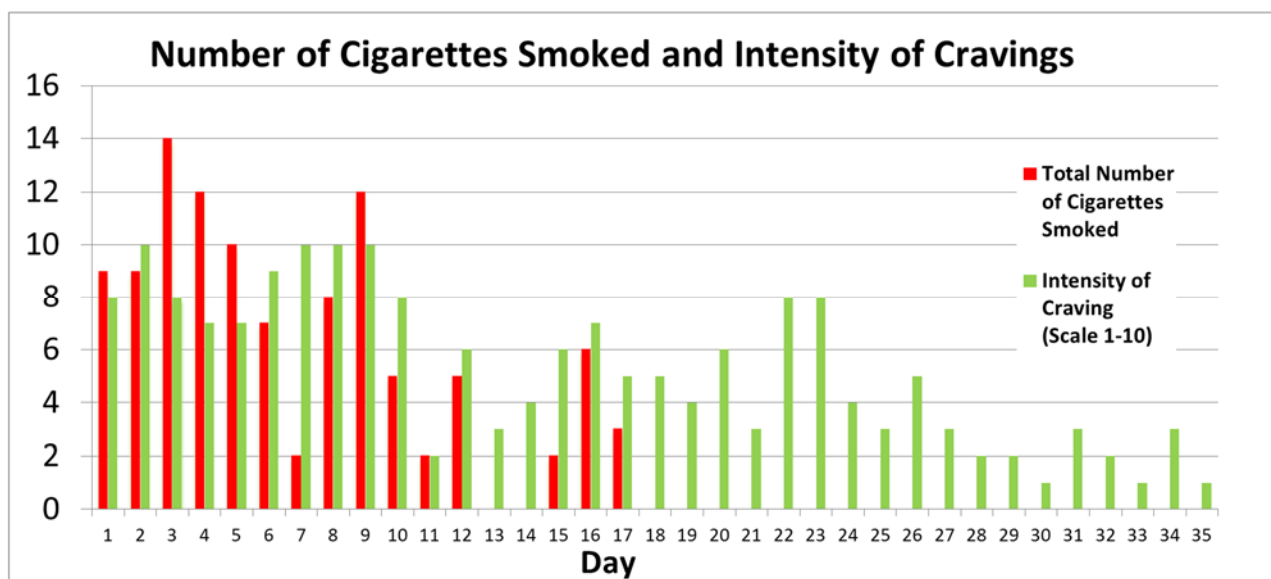


Figure 6. Student's record of cigarettes consumed and intensity of cravings experienced. Intensity of cravings was recorded on a scale of 1-10 where 1=very little, 10=intense craving.

Why was the student successful in becoming a non-smoker?

The student identified the following reasons why she was successful in stopping smoking as well as why she has remained a non-smoker:

- Identified a healing project that she wanted to do so she was self-motivated and adapted her strategy as the project progressed
- Re-framed her internal language from being a smoker to being a non-smoker
- Received positive social support from her roommates to be a non-smoker
- Developed substitute habits for smoking such as using a pen as a cigarette, hand warming and the quieting reflex whenever she became aware of the cravings
- Experienced physical benefits of being able to walk up the stairs without running out of air

- Kept daily logs and charts which she filled out and provided feedback

CASE ILLUSTRATION 2: Eliminating Eczema

Ever since she was a young child she has had to deal with eczema. After visiting a dermatologist, the student found that the prescribed creams only helped relieve the symptoms temporarily. She was concerned with the life-long side effects of taking powerful prescriptions on a daily basis that she began to look for alternative treatment options. After visiting numerous doctors and seeing no results, the student decided to take matters into her own hands by choosing to focus her self-healing project on improving the eczema on her left elbow. Her progress with healing her eczema is shown in Figures 7 and 8.

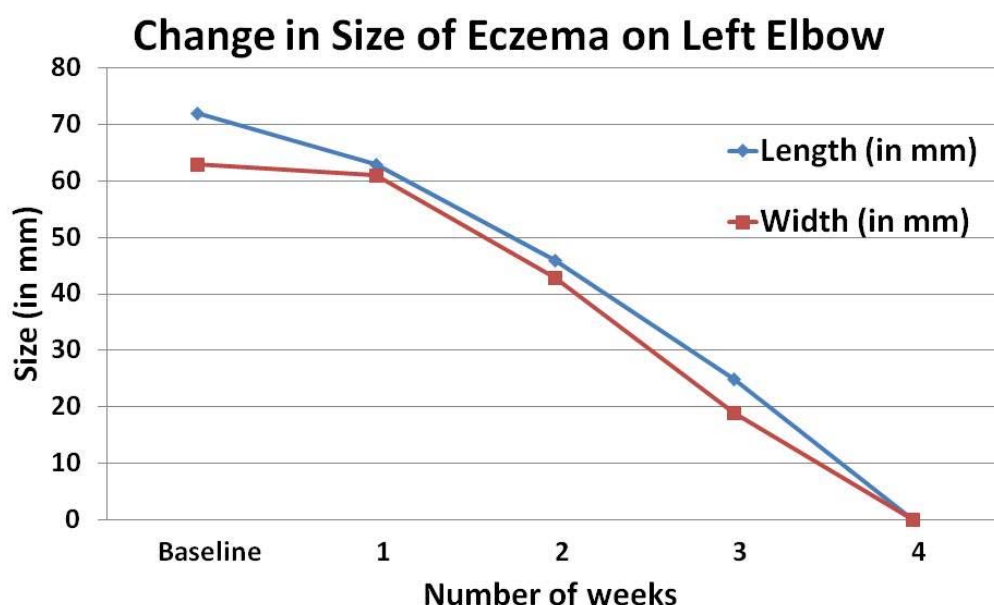


Figure 7. Self-measurement of change in eczema while performing the self-healing project.



Figure 8. Pictures depicting the prevalence of eczema before and after performing the self-healing project.

Why was the student successful in healing eczema?

The student identified the following reasons as to why she was successful in reducing her eczema.

- Ate a healthy, unprocessed, vegetarian diet rich in omega-3 fats
- Exercised (running) 3-4 times per week
- Practiced self-healing imagery every morning upon waking up as well as right before going to bed at night
- Practiced the quieting reflex (QR) throughout the day as she experienced stressful moments
- Kept a detailed daily journal to observe patterns and draw connections between eating/exercise habits and eczema flare ups
- Made the conscious decision to take her health and healing into her own hands

Conclusion

Students benefit highly through active participation and practice of self-healing techniques on a daily basis. Through self-experience, they *KNOW* that change is possible. For many students this was first time that they experienced mastery and empowerment over their own health. This mastery experience which is common among many students was described by L.C. who successfully healed her eczema: *“I have gained much wisdom from this project...I am ultimately responsible for my own health and well-being...I feel empowered, optimistic, and appreciative of every moment.”* In conclusion, we recommend that universities offer semester long stress-management self-healing classes to promote student health so that students may experience that they are able to affect their health and well-being. Furthermore, we recommend that this type of class be offered at universities so that students can achieve lifelong health skills.

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