

The use and feasibility of an ACT-based course for increasing well-being in high school students

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Background

A recent survey showed that 24.2 % of Danish 16-24 year olds, of which many are in high school, experience 'high stress' that may negatively affect many aspects of their lives. High school students typically face many pressures and challenges, including growing academic expectations, changing social relationships with family and peers and the physical and emotional changes associated with maturation. School-based preventive interventions could represent a possible solution.

Aim

To pilot test the use and feasibility of an ACT-based course - delivered by high school student counsellors - developed to increase well-being and prevent stress in high school students.

Methods

• 'The good life' is a newly developed course for high school students which introduces ACT principles and ACT exercises during three 1½ hours sessions.

Session 1
 Introducing values and 'valued living' (slides & movie clip)
 Exploring personal life values and introducing valued actions
 Introducing the metaphor "surfing the waves of life"

Session 2
 Introducing 'How do you deal with difficult stuff in life' (slides)
 Illustration of barriers, control/avoidance strategies and their lack of workability (e.g. polar bear, finger trap)
 Introducing mindfulness committed action

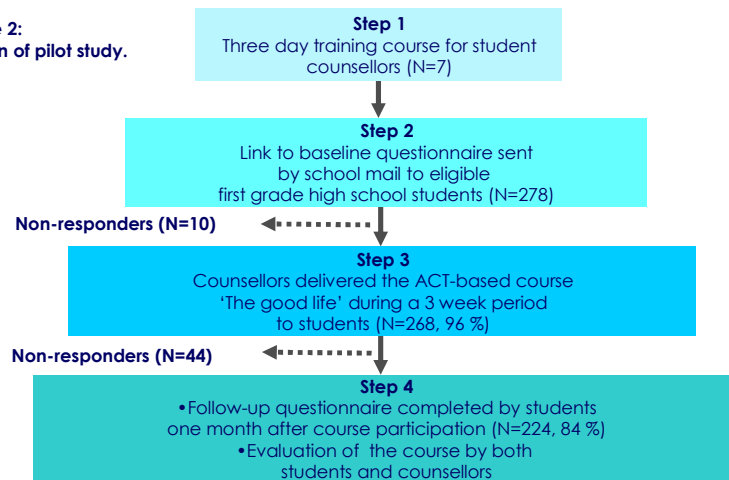
Session 3
 Introducing 'Acceptance' and 'Willingness' (slides)
 Illustration of fear and flight response
 Mindfulness exercises on acceptance and defusion



Figure 1: Overview of course content: 'The Good Life'

• Seven student counsellors were trained by ACT specialists as course instructors. After their own delivery of the course to students they provided a both quantitative and qualitative evaluation on use and feasibility.
 • All first grade students from a high school (US: senior high school) in Aarhus, Denmark, were invited as participants and asked to complete questionnaires on e.g. self-perceived stress, somatic and emotional distress prior to and approx. one month after course participation.

Figure 2: Design of pilot study.



Results

A majority of the students found the issues of the course to be important and relevant. The lowest score was observed for motivation following the course (Table 1).

Table 1. Student attitudes toward the course (N=213)

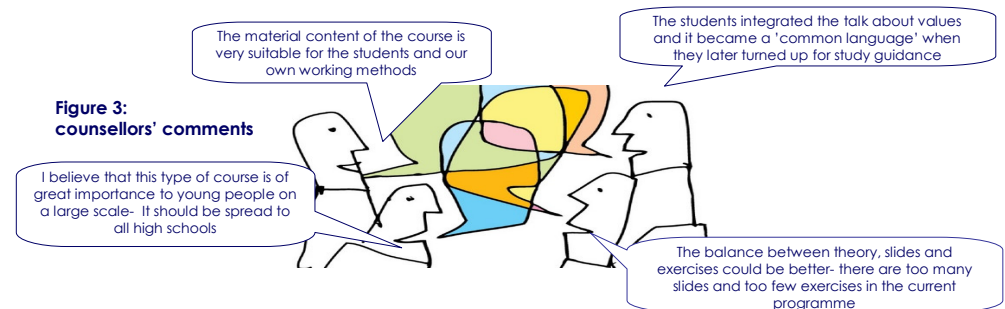
| Statement | Agree % |
|--|---------|
| It's important to work with the themes of the course | 77 |
| I learnt something new and worthwhile | 56 |
| The course has initiated new thoughts | 61 |
| The course has helped me to focus on what is important in my life | 48 |
| The course has provided me with some tools to cope with difficult thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations | 41 |
| All in all, I feel motivated to use what I have learnt in the future | 39 |
| I would recommend the course to other high school students | 62 |

The counsellors' evaluation of the use and feasibility of the course was overall very positive; however, it was pointed out that the programme should be refined with inclusion of more active exercises and reduction of time spent on slides and 'mini lectures' (Table 2 & Figure 3)

Table 2. Counsellors' attitudes toward the course (N=7)

| Statement | Strongly agree | Partly agree |
|---|----------------|--------------|
| The course form and its material are suitable for high school students | 3 | 4 |
| The themes of the course are important and relevant for high school students | 5 | 2 |
| The course has provided me with some tools that I can use when helping students to cope with difficult situations, thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations | 6 | 1 |
| All in all, I feel motivated to be a course instructor in the future | 5 | 2 |
| I would recommend the course to other high school counsellors | 6 | 1 |

Figure 3: counsellors' comments



Overall, there were no significant difference in students' reports on self-perceived stress, somatic and emotional distress prior and 1 month after course participation. However, in the subgroup of students with a high stress score at base line (N=78/224, 35%) a significant lower proportion reported high stress at follow-up (N=60/224, 27%) (McNemar's Chi(1)=18, p<0.001).

Discussion & Perspectives

• The pilot study has provided valuable insight into the use and feasibility of 'The Good Life' course and identified areas for development and refinement.
 • The course has the potential to be a popular, affordable and effective approach to high school-based mental health interventions.
 • Measures of mental health, well-being, resilience and ACT specific skills as well as of academic performance and school absence, with long term follow-up, will be further identified, and ultimately a large randomised controlled trial will be essential to determine efficacy.