

Education for mental health case study

Time to Thrive/Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience

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Context

Following piloting a 10-session on-campus programme called 'Time to Flourish' which ran in 2018-19 (Foster and Zunszain, 2019), Dr Gisele Dias and Dr Patricia Zunszain developed a more scalable module to support student's wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic called 'Time to Thrive'. 'Time to Thrive' was run for the first time in June 2020. It was delivered online with asynchronous pre-recorded lectures and focused on three topics (tackling loneliness and improving wellbeing; managing stress, developing resilience and improving the way we live; and learning positive psychology and solution-focused skills). In addition, 'Time to Thrive' incorporated experiential homework exercises, and there was student interaction and peer learning through asynchronous discussion board forums.

Outcomes of module

The programme aims to:

- + Develop the scientific underpinnings of wellbeing and flourishing (based on positive psychology and coaching psychology principles and frameworks).
- + Develop valuable academic and life skills (eg, identifying and maximising use of personal strengths, creating vision, goals and action plans).
- + Reduce stress and resilience (eg, prioritising, cognitive reframing, relaxation techniques).
- + Acquire a better sense of meaning and purpose for thriving in and outside of academia (eg, by understanding values and developing a sense of meaning and purpose).

Sessions

Week 1

Topic 1: Tackling loneliness and improving wellbeing

Week 2

Topic 2: Managing stress, developing resilience and improving the way we live

Week 3

Topic 3: Learning positive psychology and solution-focused skills

+

Key module information	
Typical intake	150 students
Format	Three X 1-hour online asynchronous lectures; Experiential homework tasks; Discussion forums
Level of study	Postgraduate taught
Status	Optional
Credited	No
Assessment	No
Assessment feedback	N/A
Location	Online
Teaching staff	Dr Gisele Dias and Dr Patricia Zunszain
Duration/frequency	Weekly over three weeks

Development of module

Dr Gisele Dias and Dr Patricia Zunszain both work at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London (KCL), and met when they were lab-based neuroscientists. Patricia is the IoPPN Student Achievement and Academic Skills Lead, and Gisele is additionally a Coaching Psychologist and trained Cognitive Behavioural Therapist, both with an interest in student mental wellbeing. Student feedback across IoPPN postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes indicated the need for further mental wellbeing support. Gisele and Patricia were invited to an Education Away Day in 2018, where they were able to discuss their ideas for supporting student wellbeing in the IoPPN.

Dr Gisele Dias and Dr Patricia Zunszain went on to develop a pilot module called 'Time to Flourish' in the summer of 2018. They used ideas from students of where they needed support and what skills they needed to develop to improve their wellbeing. This was comprised of 10, two-hour weekly, synchronous, face-to-face sessions for PGT students in the IoPPN in 2018/19. The module was theory-based and organised around the PERMA model: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment (Seligman, 2012). Experiential weekly practice exercises were encouraged outside of the sessions including 'using your strengths in a new way', savouring, 'best possible future self', 'gratitude visit or letter', 'unexpected acts of kindness', pride, gratitude journal, and social connection.

There was a need for a more scalable format of 'Time to Flourish' as it was resource demanding for staff (20 hours teaching) and, in that format, it was not feasible to roll out to larger or multiple cohorts. There became an immediate need to support students through the Covid crisis in 2020. Therefore, 'Time to Flourish' was adapted to develop the 'Time to Thrive' programme. The change in name was in response to student feedback, as the word 'flourish' was viewed as a feminine word, whereas 'thrive' was perceived as more gender neutral.

Pedagogic approaches to promote student wellbeing

- + Content was informed by student interests and students were encouraged to balance that with a scientific underpinning of the programme content in the discussion forums and in their engagement with experiential exercises. For example, offering a prompt like 'Did you know that focusing on personal strengths is good for your health and mental health? Shall we give it a go?' is possible to engage students. But then making a short list of relevant references available if anyone in that particular group was willing to know more about the studies in the field.
- + Using a solution-focused approach to mental health. For example, using terminology that validates the lived experience of students without disregarding any negatives while gently encouraging them to consider their personal resources for setting and achieving wellbeing-related goals.
- + A mindful attitude approach ie, one that is open, present-orientated, flexible and non-judgmental. For example, encouraging students to gently bring the focus of their attention to the present moment while adopting an accepting and non-judgemental attitude towards themselves whenever they feel they are struggling in a situation.
- + Participation of colleagues as guest lecturers - In future iterations of 'Time to Thrive', we intend to bring in again guest lecturers to talk about specialist areas, as we did in 'Time to Flourish'.

"I think when you are part of a network of people who understand the value of the project and are willing to contribute and for some of them, also to gain experience in the field of student mental health, the collaborations emerge almost naturally. Patricia and I have been very fortunate in having amazing researchers, from early career to senior academics, wanting to support this initiative."

Dr Gisele Dias (Programme lead)

Challenges

- + Whilst online delivery offers opportunity for a wider network of pre-recorded guest lecturers, the challenge is offering synchronous engagement. So, if we move forward with bringing in guest lecturers in future iterations of 'Time to Thrive', we will need to check with the guest lecturer how much more they'd be willing to give on top of the pre-recorded session or check whether in the core team we have the resources to support discussions on those specific topics recorded by an external colleague.
- + Not having a full understanding why some students drop out or disengage. With those who have engaged, there has been research conducted via survey/interviews/focus groups on both strengths and areas for improvement of the programme. This has not yet been extended to those students who dropped out.
- + Creating a dynamic interaction when the content is asynchronous. To overcome this, discussion board forums were created that related to the experiential exercises.

"These [discussion boards] were really popular and appreciated by students, especially in the first weeks of the programme when they were not in 'dissertation writing' mode yet."

Dr Gisele Dias (Programme lead)

- + Peer learning was difficult in asynchronous sessions. In the face to face 'Time to Flourish' sessions, students had the opportunity to work in small groups or pairs. However, this wasn't possible in the 'Time to Thrive' asynchronous sessions. Peer interaction and learning was encouraged via discussion forums. On a trial 4-week run of 'Time to Thrive' with students in the online IoPPN MSc programmes in 2021, we offered live drop-in sessions on MS Teams to overcome this limitation. The sessions were well-received by students; data analysis on this trial is currently underway.
- + Concerns around confidentiality, in sharing experiences amongst students. It was made explicit that discussion forums were closed and should not be shared outside the group, so students felt comfortable sharing real life experiences that enabled them to learn techniques.

Advice for other academics from module leaders:

- + For anyone setting up a similar programme, it's important to involve students in the process. Ask students what they want and how they want it.
- + Spend time talking to students about their values and what a meaningful/purposeful life and career are, coupled with a discussion on the importance of developing a mindful/compassionate attitude towards themselves to help them build a solid basis to support them when moments of stress and adversity arise (eg exams, writing up dissertations/thesis etc).
- + Make sure to look after your own wellbeing and, whenever possible, try and experiment the concepts and techniques that you will be discussing with your students as well.

Future development plans

- + Expanding beyond the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience.

“We are really keen to offer ‘Time to Thrive’ to other student groups, both UG and PGT, across faculties at King’s. Ideally though, we would be looking into engaging with these students/ student reps to get a sense of the elements that they’d want in the programme, and then analyse any potential need for adapting our current format/content.”

Dr Gisele Dias (Programme lead)

- + Plans to make ‘Time to Thrive’ a credit bearing module.

“One example is that Patricia, myself, Dr Donata Punttil and Dr Carolina Kralj got funding from the Curriculum Innovation call to have ‘Time to Thrive’ as starting point for the development of a service-learning module in January 2021. The 15-credit module is called ‘Self-identity and intercultural/intergenerational learning’ and will be offered [again] this coming Jan, to teach students on the core content from Time to Thrive and have them apply it with older adults, as a way to tackle loneliness and promote wellbeing in both populations.”

Dr Gisele Dias (Programme lead)

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