

Guided Development of Healthy Coping Mechanisms

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Introduction: Across all age ranges and communities, depression is a major issue in America. Despite this, pathways to treatment & recognition are often stigmatized and seen as risky to access. In order to improve the capability of individuals to handle stressful situations as a method of mitigating risk, my project seeks to diffuse beneficial coping mechanisms. Additionally, I hope to provide informative resources on local sources of support through the platforms I use to gather data.

Overview & Background: 22% of high school students have seriously considered attempting suicide, while 18.8% have intentionally injured themselves. These two statistics are connected, as repeated incidents of non-suicidal self harm are correlated to a greater risk of suicidal ideation. In order to increase the toolkit students have to face difficult emotional situations, the development of healthy coping mechanisms is key. When children are able to redirect their struggles into habits that are beneficial for them, and when they are more aware of mental health resources in their area, they are less likely to die. At my school, in Alameda County, 2 students died of suicide in short succession, including my best friend. In order to prevent such scenarios in the future, early prevention that is prevalent throughout the community must be done. It is impossible to ensure that individuals never face a traumatic scenario, but it is possible to modify their response to it, and diffusing protective resources will benefit both my community, and the district as a whole.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This project focused primarily on coping mechanisms as the mechanism of prevention, seeking to reduce the likelihood of unhealthy stress or self harm. Additionally, the presentation portion of the workshops involved education on peer-supported mental health while the collaborative portion involved in-person application of stress management mechanisms.

At the end of each workshop, students were given an opportunity to fill in google forms containing quantitative survey based questions that intended to measure the effectiveness of the coping mechanisms and information provided. The goals of the surveys were to assess retention of the peer-support information provided, alongside the potential impact of the coping mechanism practices within the workshop.

All in all, the project was designed as an early-intervention initiative rather than a clinical mental health assessment. Its primary purpose was to increase awareness, reduce stigma surrounding

emotional struggles, and provide students with accessible coping tools and mental health resources.

Participants:

The project was primarily conducted at Emerald High School in Dublin, California. Participants consisted primarily of high school students from multiple classroom environments and grade levels who attended presentations and workshop sessions centered on emotional well-being and coping management awareness. Attendance at workshops was not optional nor individually selected, in order to avoid bias that could result from self-selecting participants. Instead, workshops were held during classes amidst the normal school day, leading to a wide range of diversity in interests and mental health understanding within those who attended.

By presenting in different classroom settings, the project aimed to reach a broad range of students with varying experiences, stressors, and levels of familiarity with mental health education. Workshops were scheduled around teacher availability and were delivered in classroom settings including biomedical, culinary, and general education environments. Activities were adapted to fit each classroom atmosphere, and each classroom had a maximum of two activities per session.

Each workshop was facilitated by at least two student presenters in order to improve organization, engagement, and supervision during activities. Prior to presentations, teachers and staff were made aware of content and were contacted with details. In certain classes, teachers did not provide students device access to fill in the surveys right after the workshop. This reduced the yield rate of impacted sessions, but did not largely modify the data.

Workshop description

Students participated in guided journaling exercises where they reflected on stressors, anxieties, and emotional burdens. These activities encouraged emotional acknowledgment and externalization of stress in a structured environment. One activity involved students anonymously writing down stressors before symbolically discarding the paper as a representation of emotional release and stress management. Additional emotional processing activities included reflective artwork, self-portraits, tearing newspapers to create collaborative art projects, and coloring exercises intended to promote relaxation and mindfulness.

Students also participated in calming and mindfulness-based exercises intended to reduce anxiety and increase emotional regulation. These activities included grounding exercises, sensory-awareness practices, mindful observation activities, and quiet recreational exercises such as board games, reading, and calming media. Sensory-based coping tools such as scented lotion and textured objects were additionally incorporated into workshop sessions.

In culinary classroom settings, students completed mindful eating and cooking activities that emphasized present-moment awareness and sensory observation. These exercises

demonstrated practical grounding strategies commonly recommended for stress and anxiety management. The workshops emphasized that mindfulness techniques do not eliminate stress entirely, but instead help students regulate emotional responses during difficult situations.

An additional focus of the project involved reframing common hobbies and everyday activities as intentional coping mechanisms. Many students already participate in beneficial activities such as reading, listening to music, drawing, exercising, cooking, journaling, or gaming, but may not consciously recognize these behaviors as healthy emotional regulation strategies. Specific examples mentioned within the presentation were small browser games, mentioned in order to connect to the audience of high school students due to the high prevalence of browser game use. The workshops emphasized that coping mechanisms need neither to be conventional or out of the ordinary in order to be effective. By presenting hobbies through the lens of emotional management, the project aimed to help students intentionally apply healthy behaviors during periods of stress rather than relying on harmful coping mechanisms.

Several workshop activities were adapted from emotional regulation and distraction strategy resources commonly recommended for stress management and self-harm prevention. Activities included squeezing or throwing ice cubes, punching pillows, dart or sponge tossing games, grounding exercises, relaxation activities, and artistic expression exercises. These activities were selected because they provide safer alternatives for emotional release while remaining practical and accessible for students. The specific resources for this set of prevention mechanisms was derived from The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery.

At no point in the workshop were students asked to share their own individual mental health or self-injury experiences. Due to school policy restrictions, explicit mentions of self-harm were also prohibited, limiting harm reduction protocols to acting within the scope of non-specific unhealthy coping mechanisms. While this restriction prevented the workshops from directly addressing issues around self harm, it potentially widened the capability of workshops to address unhealthy coping mechanisms that fall outside direct non-suicidal self injury (ie. binge eating).

Resource Distribution

Students received information regarding:

- Mental health support services
- Crisis resources and helplines
- Therapy and counseling access
- Healthy coping strategy recommendations
- When and how to seek additional support

Resources were distributed through classroom presentations and social media posts. Example social media posts are included in the figure below, and the specific QR code to the aforementioned Cornell Self Injury And Recovery Research Program guide to alternate habits to use in the place of self harm were attached. The social media posts did not match the school's

individual guideline of avoiding self harm, and mirror how a wider application of this project would function.



Data Collection

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project and gather meaningful data regarding student coping awareness, the project utilized an anonymous Google Forms survey distributed to participating students following workshop sessions and presentations.

Because the topic of emotional well-being and coping mechanisms is highly sensitive, significant consideration was given to survey structure and wording in order to improve both student comfort and data reliability. The survey was intentionally designed to avoid highly personal or emotionally invasive questions that could discourage participation or influence response accuracy.

Initially, longer written-response questions and detailed prompts were considered. However, the survey format was revised to prioritize quantitative questioning methods in order to reduce variation or risk. Questions were converted into simplified yes-or-no responses and 1–5 scale-based questions in order to improve clarity, accessibility, and participation among a high school audience.

The wording of questions was additionally adjusted to avoid judgmental framing regarding students' existing coping mechanisms. For example, instead of asking students whether their coping mechanisms were "healthy," questions focused on whether students would apply the coping strategies introduced during the workshop. This revision reduced the likelihood of students feeling criticized or defensive while still providing evaluative data regarding workshop effectiveness.

The final survey included a combination of yes-or-no and scale-based questions assessing prior awareness of healthy coping mechanisms, confidence in stress management abilities, willingness to utilize coping strategies introduced during the workshop, perceived usefulness of workshop activities and resources, and awareness of emotional support systems.

Example survey questions included:

1. Did you know what a healthy coping mechanism was prior to this presentation?
2. Would you apply the coping mechanisms covered in this workshop?
3. On a scale of 1–5, how confident do you feel managing stress after participating in these activities?
4. On a scale of 1–5, how confident do you feel supporting your peers after participating in these activities?

All responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifying information was gathered. Since the general age and demographic range of the audience is already known due to the school based setting, there was no research-level gain from understanding any personal information.

Results:

The project demonstrated measurable increases in student awareness regarding healthy coping mechanisms, emotional regulation strategies, and peer-supported mental health intervention. Impact was evaluated through pre- and post-workshop surveys distributed to students participating in the presentations and activities. Across several workshop sessions, the original EWBC project presented to more than 220 students and collected over 140 anonymous survey responses. The modified D1 project added 40 more responses to the data.

Prior to the intervention, survey data indicated that many students lacked confidence and awareness regarding emotional well-being and support systems. Before participating in the workshops, only approximately one-third of students reported feeling aware of warning signs associated with emotional distress. Approximately half of surveyed students reported feeling confident responding to emotional struggles in themselves or peers, while only slightly more than 60% reported knowing where to locate mental health support resources.

Following the workshops and activities, survey responses demonstrated substantial increases in student awareness and confidence. After participation in the project, 87% of students reported that they could recognize behaviors indicating emotional distress. Additionally, 79% of students stated they felt more comfortable either seeking support themselves or encouraging others to seek support when needed.

The project also produced measurable increases in student confidence regarding stress management and emotional regulation. Following participation in the CALM activities and mindfulness-based exercises, 74% of students reported feeling confident managing stress after

the workshop sessions. Students frequently described feeling calmer, more emotionally aware, and better able to regulate stressful emotions after completing grounding exercises, mindfulness activities, journaling exercises, and sensory-awareness activities.

One of the most significant findings involved students' willingness to apply coping mechanisms introduced during the workshops. Survey data demonstrated that 95.5% of participating students stated they would use at least one coping mechanism introduced through the presentations, activities, or workshop resources. This finding suggests that students perceived the coping strategies presented as both realistic and accessible within their everyday lives.

Survey responses additionally demonstrated that many students had limited prior understanding of what qualified as a healthy coping mechanism before participating in the workshops. While students often reported already engaging in activities such as listening to music, drawing, exercising, journaling, gaming, cooking, or reading, many had not previously categorized these behaviors as intentional emotional regulation strategies. Following the intervention, students demonstrated increased recognition of how common hobbies and grounding activities could function as positive coping mechanisms during periods of stress or emotional distress.

Classroom observations further supported the survey findings. During workshop activities, students increasingly participated in discussions regarding stress, grief, emotional pressure, and coping strategies. Interactive exercises encouraged participation even among students who initially appeared hesitant to engage in conversations regarding emotional well-being. The activity-based and depersonalized structure of the workshops appeared to reduce discomfort surrounding mental health discussions and allowed students to participate without feeling individually exposed.

Discussion:

Several limitations should still be considered when interpreting these findings. The project primarily measured short-term perception changes and self-reported confidence rather than long-term behavioral outcomes. Although students reported increased willingness to utilize healthy coping mechanisms, the project did not evaluate whether these coping strategies were consistently maintained over time. Additionally, because the project was conducted within a single school community, findings may not be fully generalizable to broader adolescent populations with different cultural, educational, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, the project demonstrated that school-based emotional well-being initiatives centered around coping awareness, peer support, and practical emotional regulation strategies can positively impact adolescent mental health awareness and support-seeking behavior. The findings suggest that preventative mental health education presented in accessible, activity-based, and peer-supported formats may help strengthen emotional resilience and contribute to healthier school communities overall.

Future work:

Future expansion of this project will focus on increasing accessibility to coping mechanism education and mental health resources throughout the broader community. While the initial workshops successfully reached students within classroom settings, the next phase of implementation aims to extend outreach beyond school campuses, reaching into community services and public events. In order to maximize accessibility, brochures will include QR codes linking directly to the project survey, educational materials, and additional online resources regarding emotional well-being and coping management.

An important component of future implementation involves placing brochures in accessible community spaces, and adapting them to a wider range of ages. Libraries, local businesses, community centers, and public events represent potential locations where mental health resources can be distributed to individuals who may not otherwise encounter school-based programming. Future outreach efforts will involve contacting local libraries and organizations to request permission to provide brochures and educational materials within their facilities.

Future implementation may also align with broader statewide early childhood mental health initiatives such as California's First 5 program. First 5 California focuses on supporting the healthy development of children ages 0–5 through early intervention, family education, and community-based support systems. While this project currently targets adolescents, aligning future outreach with First 5 principles highlights the importance of early prevention and the long-term benefits of introducing emotional regulation and coping awareness at earlier developmental stages.

In the inverse direction, the future implementation of this project could also intentionally involve areas frequented by those from older age groups. By including older populations in outreach efforts, the project would help bridge gaps in mental health awareness across generations, ensuring that both youth and adults are equipped with consistent, accessible information about healthy coping strategies, emotional regulation, and available support resources.