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Occupation-Based Interventions to Address Mental Health of Graduate Students

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Introduction

- Capstone project: ACOTE focus area of program development, with emphasis on the mental health of graduate students
- Solid evidence supporting the effectiveness of art-based and leisure therapy to support mental health challenges exists among a wide spectrum of populations.
- The focus of each decompression session placed on creative arts, leisure, social activities, and discussions

Site Description

- Nova Southeastern University, Tampa Bay Regional Campus
- Project performed in hybrid format (bulk of tasks completed remotely)
- Sessions performed once per institute (from February to April)
- Sessions located in Mental Health Lab, Room 1306

Summary of Needs Assessment

- There remains insufficient evidence on the promotion of group-based therapy for health science students at the graduate level
- Research does not reflect the implementation of art/leisure-related sessions for health science graduate students at the preventative and early stages of intervention.
- Unhealthy coping can lead to a sense of inadequacy and undue stress, resulting in a negative outlook and burnout
- Through the implementation of group occupation-based sessions, students are allowed to gain the personal growth needed to overcome life's adverse events and manage stressful challenges.



Literature Review Summary

- Literature from DaLomba et al (2021) found that those with decreased self-efficacy were least likely to have the intrinsic motivation to pursue learning at a profound level. These factors demonstrate a need for students to gain tools on how to improve self-perception and boost intrinsic motivation, leading to improved academic performance and decreased burnout.
- Negative feelings students experience derive from the ineffective ability to cope with additional stress placed from school obligations, leading to exhaustion and burnout. 87% of 118 participants experience daily exhaustion.
- Themes in the literature have all led to an overarching concern regarding the utilization of behaviors that increase resiliency.
- A study by DeWitt et al., (2019) found that stress levels of OT students reached beyond the threshold, with a moderate level of resiliency. These findings reflect the need for improved stress management for graduate OT students.

Group Intervention Measures, with Sensory Components:

- Group sessions for individuals with similar needs allow each member to feel a sense of "normalcy" and acceptance, thus improving social participation. According to a study of five individuals diagnosed with depression, after engagement in a sensory and group-based therapy, they reported feeling a sense of validation and recognition, while gaining an opportunity to reshape their daily routines (Woolley et al., 2019).
- Physiological factors such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR), deep breathing, and outdoor activities, provide a sensory aspect to the sessions as well, which are proven to decrease stress, anxiety, and depression levels.
- Creative arts/leisure activities also provide sensory elements, thus impacting stress/burnout levels in graduate students, facilitating an opportunity for peers to express thoughts and emotions creatively. Creative activities also promote self-esteem, along with healthy alternatives to unhealthy coping, which impact engagement in meaningful activities/tasks.

Capstone Project Description

- The decompression sessions allowed each member to address issues surrounding their mental health through engaging activities, discussion, and take-home tools for carryover.
- Group participation was voluntary and 30-45 minute semi-structured protocols were organized for each session.
- The initial session consisted of an intake survey to gain feedback on what each person has already implemented for stress reduction and what each member aspired to gain from the program.
- The pre-and post-session surveys measured the participants' level of stress on a Likert scale to compare stress levels from the beginning of each session to the end of the session.
- At the end of the session sequence, a comprehensive survey was used to seek feedback on the overall benefit of participation in the sessions.

Session 1: February 23 rd	Session 2: March 15 th	Session 3: April 18 th
Theme: Coloring Mandalas	Theme: DIY Bath Bombs	Theme: Painting Sentiments
5 members	11 members	4 members

Dates, themes, and number of members who participated in each session.

DECOMPRESSION SESSIONS!

FEELING OVERWHELMED? YOU ARE NOT ALONE! COME DECOMPRESS FROM STRESS!

ACTIVITIES, GAMES, AND DISCUSSIONS RELATED TO ALLEVIATING STRESS, BURNOUT, AND ANXIETY

JUDGMENT-FREE ENVIRONMENT TAILORED TO GRADUATE STUDENTS OF ALL HEALTHCARE PROGRAMS

LET'S BREATHE, RELAX, SOCIALIZE, AND HAVE FUN!

PROGRESSIVE MUSCULAR RELAXATION TECHNIQUES (PMR) PAINTING DIY CRAFTS, AND MORE!

WHEN:
• FEBRUARY 23RD
• MARCH 15TH
• APRIL 18TH
1:00 PM - 1:30 PM

WHERE:
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
TAMPA BAY REGIONAL CAMPUS
ROOM 1306

Decompression Session Flyer

Name of Group: Painting My Sentiments (45 minutes)
Purpose: To allow the individual to recognize their current sentiments (stress, anxiety, burnout, sadness, etc.) relevant to their context and recognize techniques to alleviate those sentiments.
Location: MH Rm 1306
Introduction: Goal of activity, why, rules of session (5 min)
Ice breaker: What's one thing that always brings a smile to your face, no matter how tough your day has been? It can be anything (small/big, silly/serious).**Goals:**

1. Through self-expression, cultivate a sense of satisfaction and pride in the accomplishment of one's work.
2. Identify sources and practical solutions to negative feelings.
3. Share and discuss paintings that represent one's "happy place," why, and how one achieves that place.
4. Allow the individual an opportunity to feel relaxed, thus leading to rejuvenation required to engage in personal and academic occupations.

Materials:

- 9x12 size canvas/paint-friendly paper (15), or any size available
- watercolor or tempered paint
- Paintbrushes
- Water
- Disposable aprons
- disposable cups
- disposable plastic tablecloths or trash bag for table
- Large zip-lock bags

Directions (20 min):

1. Split members into groups of 5
2. Cover tables with cloths for easy clean-up.
3. Retrieve 2 canvases/paper.
4. Retrieve watercolor paint.
5. Retrieve cup of water
6. Place paintbrush into water to prep.
7. Place wet paintbrush into paint color of choice.
8. Proceed to paint a picture that represents current feelings onto first canvas (allow for 10 minutes). Painting can be abstract or concrete.
9. Place water into a disposable cup to clean the paintbrush.
10. Repeat the previous process of wetting the paintbrush and placing it into the color paint of choice, followed by painting (until the process is complete)
11. Set aside the first painting to allow it to dry.
12. Retrieve second canvas.
13. Paint a picture that represents your "happy place." on second canvas. Allow for 10 minutes to paint canvas.
14. Each person, if desired, will share paintings (10 min discussion).

Sample Protocol- page 1

15. Retrieve large zip-lock bags.
16. Place paintings into large zip-lock bags (place paper towel between both paintings when in the bag, if concerned with colors bleeding into both pictures).

Discussion/Processing (Closure/Discussion of today's session) (10 min) discuss the following:

1. Explain your picture (concrete/abstract). What do the colors/patterns represent?
2. How easy was it to transition from your initial place to your happy place?
3. What were your thoughts during the painting activity? Do you have any thoughts at all?
4. How do your current feelings compare to your "happy place?" Are they the same/different, and why?

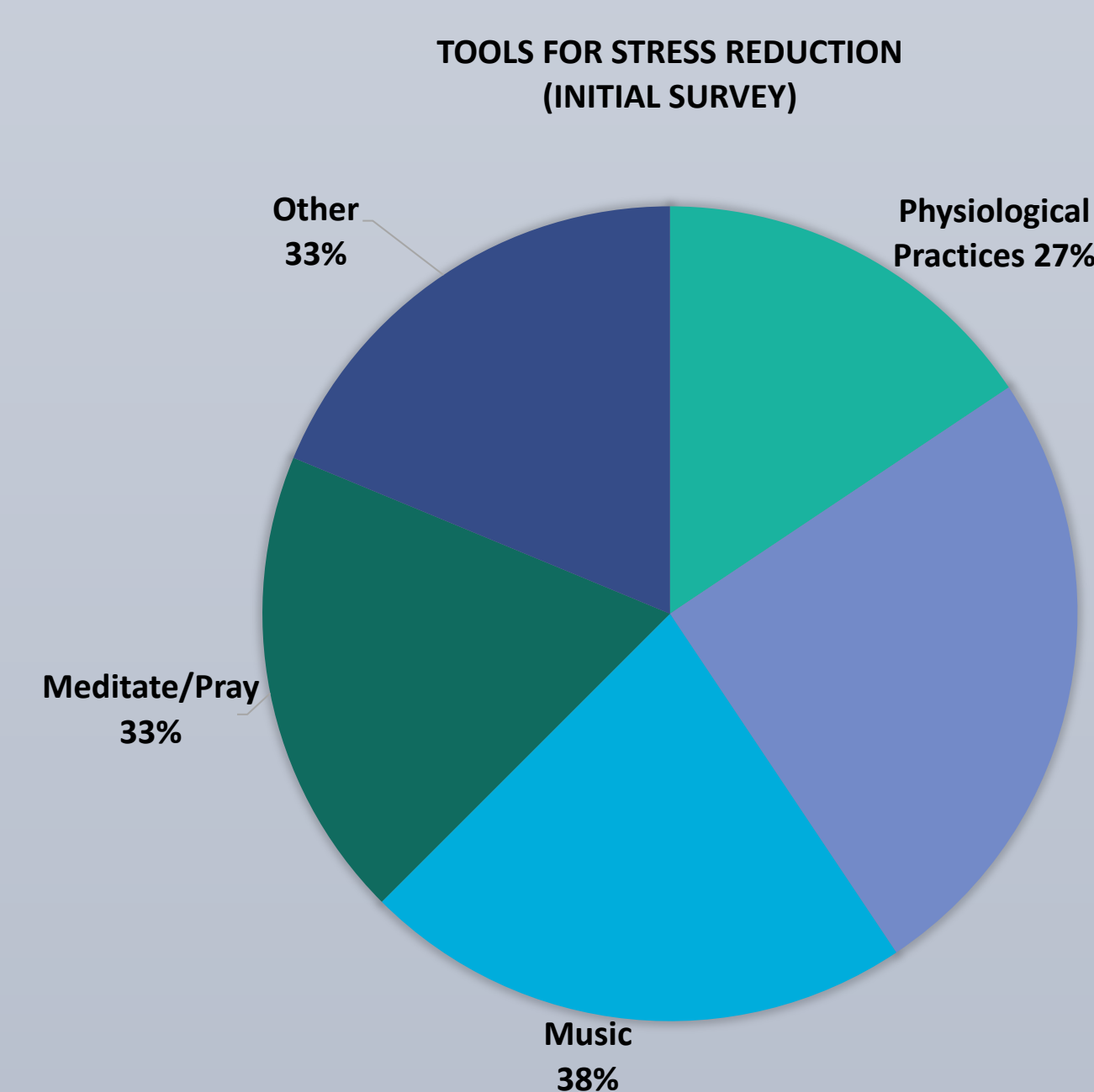
Benefits: Graduate students who deal with stress, anger, anxiety, and sadness regarding current sentiments, addressing depression, and burnout, individuals with the desire to express internal feelings regarding life's circumstances, facilitate a sense of belonging.

Leadership style(s): Facilitative

Adaptations to activity: paint one picture and discuss at a time (5-minute discussion after each painting is complete); provision completed painting examples; increased time for completion, music in the background.

Evidence in support:
Hu, J., Zhang, J., Hu, L., Yu, H., & Xu, J. (2021). Art therapy: A complementary treatment for mental disorders. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.688005>

Sample Protocol- page 2



Physiological tools: deep breathing, yoga, massage, etc.
Other: eating, sleeping, talking on the phone, outings

Pre-session Survey

1. On a scale of 1-5, how are you feeling today overall?
(1= happy/confident) (5= extreme upset/stress) Please circle one.

1. Happy 2. Content 3. Slight worry 4. Stressed 5. Extreme upset/stress

Post-session Survey

1. On a scale of 1-5, how are you feeling after today's session overall?
(1= happy/confident) (5= extreme upset/stress) Please circle one.

1. Happy 2. Content 3. Slight worry 4. Stressed 5. Extreme upset/stress

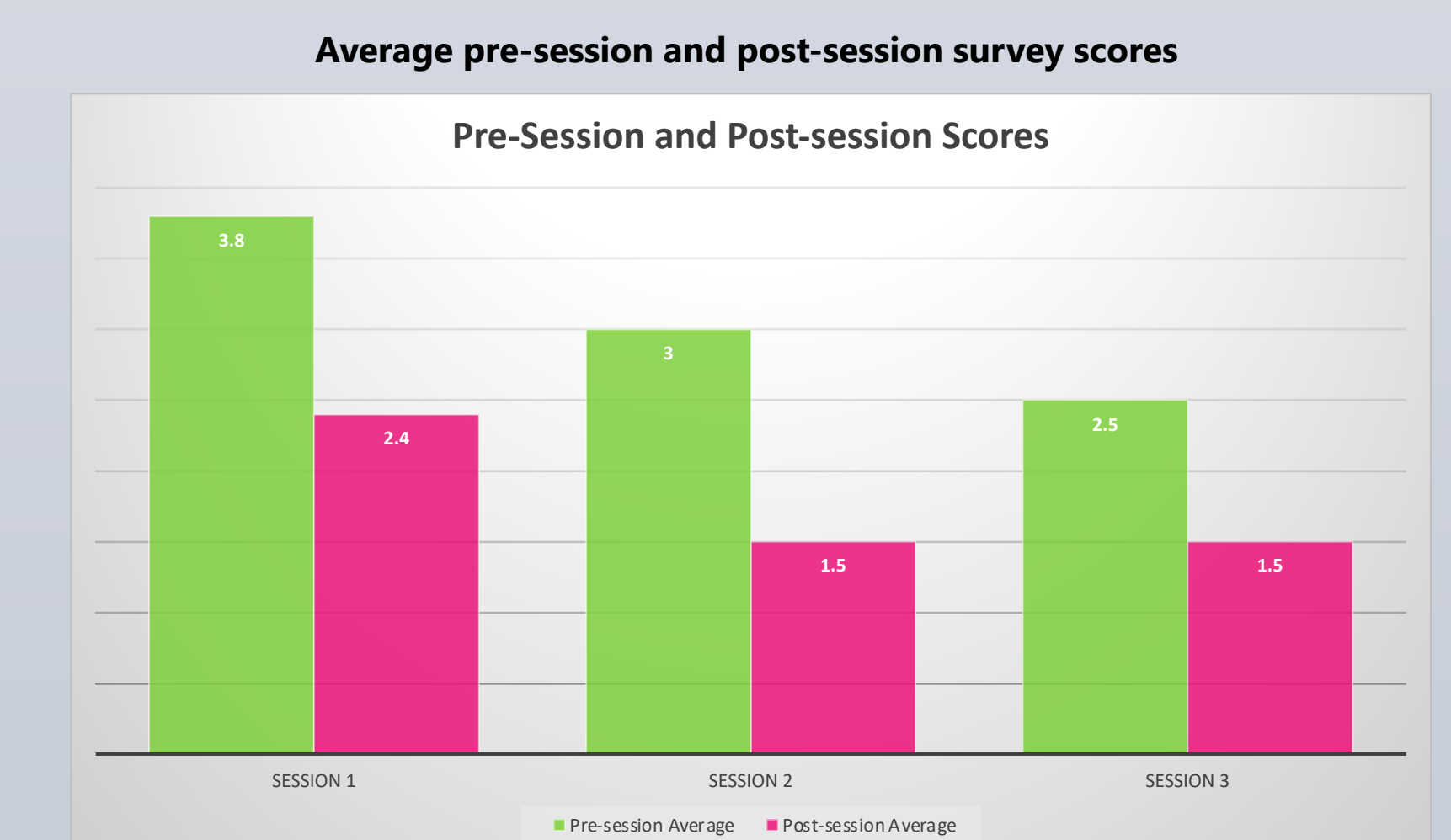
2. What part of today's session impacted your overall morale? Elaborate below:

3. Are there any suggestions you would like to provide for future sessions?

Learning Objectives Achieved

- Create a judgment-free environment by implementing therapeutic use-of-self modes during group discussions and activities.
- Help graduate students identify and promote healthy coping techniques to mitigate stress and pressures of their graduate program, through self-reflection tools, mindful activities, and open dialogue.
- Build a sense of belonging and community amongst peers through participation in group discussions, activities, and peer-to-peer support.
- Develop organizational skills required to create and implement a novel mental health-related program.
- Enrich the knowledge and skills required to provide occupation-based mental health services to promote wellness.

Results/Implications for OT Education



The goal is to achieve decreased scores from the pre-session compared to the post-session averages. The decrease in scores from the pre-session to the post-session represents a positive change in emotional state, as the aim is to reach the lowest score possible on the Likert scale. For example, a score of 1= happy; a score of 5= extreme stress.

- All the participants mentioned how the sensory aspect of the sessions helped lower their stress levels and promote relaxation (dim lighting, scents from the essential oils, and soft music)
- Participants expressed that the sessions promoted peer-to-peer support and cultivated a greater sense of belonging and overall social participation.

Implications:

- The goal was for the outcome of this project to set the foundation for future supplemental mental health support programs for graduate students at NSU TBRC.
- Therefore, for future continuation of the decompression session program, it is recommended to create an anonymous survey before and after engagement in the sessions to quantify how the sessions impacted motivation to engage in obligatory tasks.
- It is also recommended to implement budgeting and institute scheduling at least 2 weeks ahead of time to prevent planning challenges.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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References Available Upon Request