

The impact of an emotional fitness and resilience building intervention – MYTERN - on the psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, resilience and distress levels of first year university students

Abstract

The rising prevalence of mental health problems within the university student population has been well documented, yet few resilience-building interventions embedded within the first year curriculum have been empirically tested. This thesis evaluates the impact of a time and cost effective intervention (*Mytern*) which was embedded into a first year compulsory course in one Australian university, and delivered via a brief movie on DVD, a mini manual and a daily SMS.

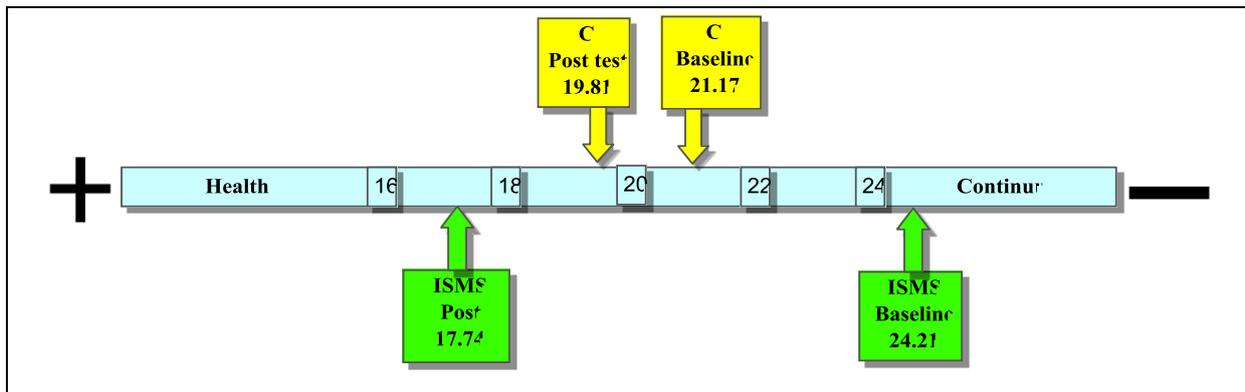
By adopting a salutogenic perspective and employing a mixed method approach, the study gathered data from surveys of wellbeing, semi-structured interviews and SMS feedback. Participants were divided into 3 groups: control (C), intervention involving DVD and mini manual (IA), and intervention involving DVD, mini manual and daily *Mytern* SMS (ISMS). One way ANOVA involving planned contrasts were used to investigate differences between the groups from baseline to the end of intervention, with results indicating that the intervention SMS group (ISMS) experienced significant positive changes in all 3 surveys of wellbeing (FS Diff = 5.74 ± 5.86 , $p = .000$; SWLS Diff = 5.53 ± 5.16 , $p = .000$; CD-RISC Diff = 3.84 ± 3.77 , $p = .000$) and a decreased score in psychological distress (K-10 = -6.47 ± 7.18 , $p = .000$). The results for the ISMS group supported the hypotheses that the intervention (*Mytern*) would increase students' psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction and resilience, and decrease levels of psychological distress. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data added depth to the quantitative results by revealing how the resilience-building intervention developed a feeling of connection and a sense of control within a large number of students; enabling them to feel better mentally and physically; perform better academically; whilst encouraging them to continue at university.

The contributions to knowledge include the generation of the Anonymous Caring Connection Theory (ACCT), which helped to explain the connection that was created

between the student and the daily *Mytern* SMS; as well as empirically testing a resilience-building intervention that has the capacity to be embedded into a first year course and implemented within a tutorial by tutors. The study findings indicate that equipping students with a skill to reframe the daily stressors of university and life may increase wellbeing, increase resilience, reduce distress and as a result may result in increased student retention.

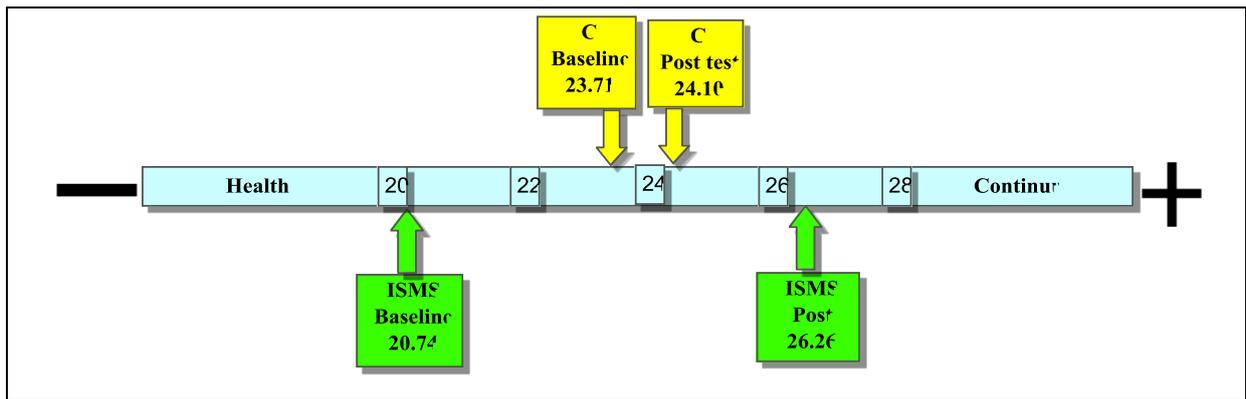
MYTERN Research

The major health constructs which are incorporated into the intervention **MYTERN** are resilience, positive emotions and mindfulness. These three constructs combine to form a powerful intervention that was able to positively impact university students' psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction; resilience and distress levels (Foster, et al., 2013), as illustrated on following health continuums. The figures depict the scores recorded before the intervention (baseline) and after the intervention (post). The yellow scores represent the control group who did not receive **MYTERN**; the green represent the intervention group who received the **MYTERN SMS**.

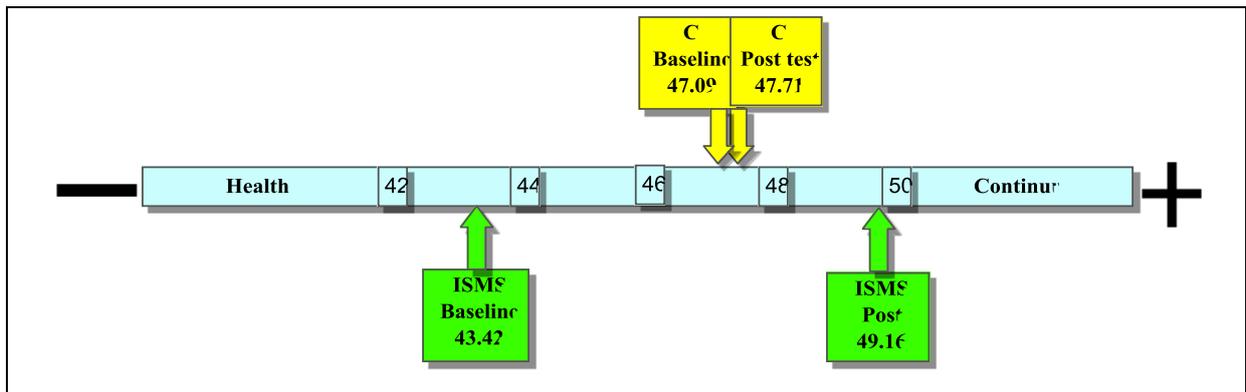


K-10: Measuring psychological distress levels (C=control, ISMS=**MYTERN** SMS Intervention) NB.

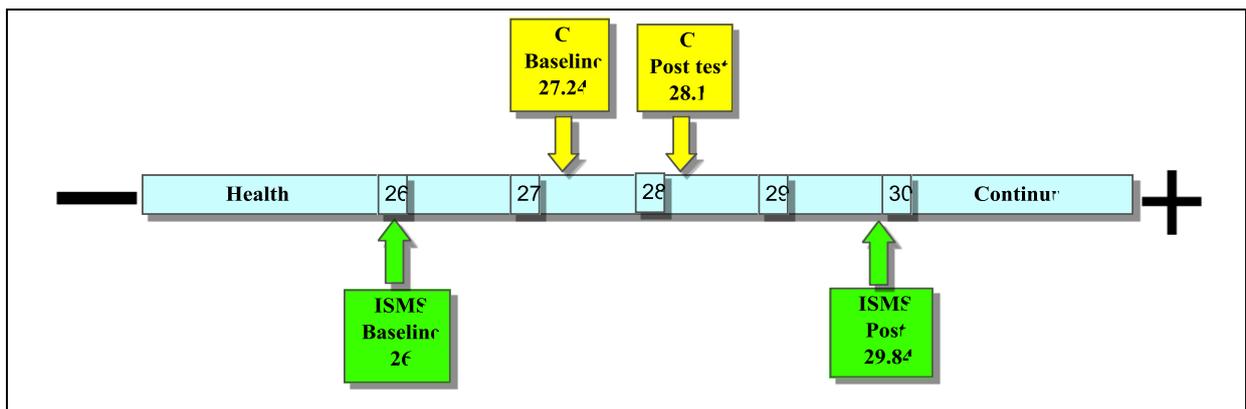
Health continuum is reversed as lower the level of psychological distress are positive



SWLS: Measuring satisfaction with life (C=control, ISMS=MYTERN SMS Intervention)



FS: Measuring psychological wellbeing (C=control, ISMS=MYTERN SMS Intervention)



CD-RISC: Measuring resilience levels (C=control, ISMS=MYTERN SMS Intervention)

**Anonymous Caring Connection Theory (ACCT): an emerging theory from the PhD ,
illustrating why MYTERN positively impacted today's student**

A major theme that emerged from the interviews within the PhD surrounding **MYTERN's** impact on first year university students (Foster, 2013) was that of disconnection. However, the study highlighted that this disconnection was dichotomous in that it was both positive and negative. The students talked about the negative side of disconnection in terms of experiencing social isolation such as: *'I don't understand that I don't - well I don't fit in'; 'there's not really somebody that I could just go to and talk to'; and you 'feel so alone sometimes in your studies, really disconnected, especially when you're at home all day', because 'we all feel disconnected at one time or another'.* Whereas the positive side was expressed in terms of the disconnection that anonymity formed: *'It's less personal. It's less accusatory'.* Rory felt that it helped create a situation where you weren't judged. He believed that if he knew the person sending the text that he might also have felt *'like you owe them one.....obligated. The anonymity helps you deal with stuff yourself, just dealing with that myself, in all these situations anonymously'.* Sam reiterated this perspective by stating:

'I think anonymity's a good thing, because some people don't want to feel responsible to reply, or feel the need that they need to say something, because they don't. All they need is just to receive the text and they can do what they want from there.' (Sam)

When students signed up to receive the SMS, it was completely anonymous. The researcher would receive a text saying 'MYTERN'; their number would then be added to a list, subscribing them to the service. As the students were disconnected from the sender, and the sender from them, they were able to see the texts objectively, feeling no obligation or responsibility to either read the text or act upon it. Students indicated that they didn't want to connect with someone in order to seek a solution; it was the freedom that the anonymity provided that helped to create the solution.

The anonymity also created the freedom to be able to subscribe to the texts without anyone having to know that the student was in need of receiving support. The anonymous self, as well as the digitized self, can go anywhere in hyperspace, 'unencumbered by traditional values or meanings' (Cupchik, 2011, p. 325). This freedom gave students the opportunity to anonymously participate in the program, thus including those students who may otherwise have not engaged with any form of support (i.e. counselling).

While discussing the digitized self in the internet age, Cupchik (2011) updates Descartes classic 'cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am)' to 'I am responded to, therefore I am' (p.324). It was the

shift from 'think'ing to being 'responded to' which Cupchik had observed that added to the explanation of how/why a connection was created between the student and the **MYTERN** SMS. Accompanying disconnection and anonymity in the emerging theory was the daily SMS, which represented a regular positive response, adding to the connection that was ultimately formed.

The procedure of subscribing to the daily SMS may be compared to posting your status on Facebook, and then awaiting a response. Once the students subscribed to the service, the response then came daily via the **MYTERN** SMS. The SMS appeared to act as a daily affirmation; not only affirming the individual student's existence but also reinforcing that there was '*someone out there who cared*'. This notion of caring was referred to by all the students, reflected in statements such as:

Just to know that somebody is thinking about you

It makes you feel someone's out there caring

You just know that someone's on your side

Knowing that there's someone out there saying, come on guys, you can do this

It felt like it was somebody trying to help and let you know that you're not the only one out there

The study revealed that through a combination of disconnection (both positive and negative), anonymity, and being the recipient of a regular positive response via the daily **MYTERN** SMS (caring), a feeling of connection was generated within the participants.

Statements such as '*a one-on-one personal connection*' and '*it was kind of like having a little friend in the phone, that sort of gives you that connection*', emphasised how it was 'connection' that played a major role in the success of the intervention; instigating the salutogenic changes experienced by the students.

It was through combining the major themes of disconnection (both positive and negative), anonymity, and the regular positive response of the SMS which resulted in the creation of the Anonymous Caring Connection Theory (ACCT). (See Figure 39)

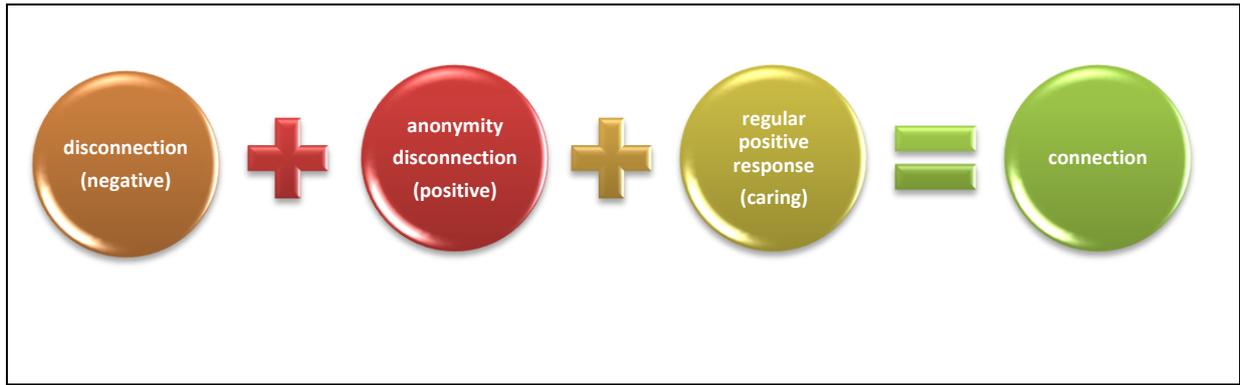


Figure 39. Anonymous Caring Connection Theory (ACCT)