

StressLESS
Middle Division
Team
Single Year

PROJECT OVERVIEW:

Area of Concern:

The proportion of 15-16 year olds reporting that they frequently feel anxious or depressed has doubled in the last thirty years.¹ The increasing pressure the education system puts on young people is one of the main factors leading to these horrifying statistics. Anxiety, in general terms, is defined as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about an event, usually one with an uncertain outcome. Approximately 26% of people may experience an anxiety disorder,² where their level of stress becomes excessive and starts affecting their quality of life. Currently, it is estimated that 14% of teenage girls experience anxiety³ and research indicates that this is growing across a number of countries.⁴ This is particularly relevant for Mount St Benedict College (MSB), an all-girls high school. Through talking to the school psychologists, we confirmed that stress and anxiety issues are very common within the school community. Australian organisations and global institutes, including BeyondBlue⁵ and Kids Helpline⁶ offer support and information, as do mentor figures throughout the school. However, the strong stigma connected to mental illness makes a lot of girls reluctant to reach out. As our project progressed, we began to focus more on the stress that occurs inside and outside of school. At the beginning of 2015, we took a random sample of the student body to determine the nature of stressors specific to our school community. The results indicated that 96% of respondents were stressed about academic situations, and 41% were stressed about their health. This survey made it apparent that there is a need to reduce the amount of stress experienced by students. We are confident that education is a necessary tool to empower people to reduce stress.

Challenges Identified:

Realising the broad range of factors causing stress in an adolescent's life, with academic stress and general health having the largest impact on students, we had to consider the most effective ways to target these specific stressors. All students are subjected to a range of assessments and a significant complication of this is how to meet the requirements of tasks whilst experiencing minimal stress. We are aware that receiving assessment notifications can be a point of high stress for students. To implement and maintain changes to the assessment notification requires extensive consultation and approval, which takes a considerable amount of time. Due to the fact that students have individual methods of study, we needed to ensure our additions were user friendly and consistently interpreted in accordance with our initial intentions. Another challenge identified was ensuring that our initiatives were aimed at a primary school aged audience, so that they might develop efficient study skills and strategies to ensure good habits are in place before starting at MSB. We expected the older grades to be less receptive to some of our ideas, as they already have fixed routines in place; therefore we thought to contact feeder primary schools and instil good habits in this younger audience. When contacting various organisations to promote our project and reach out to the wider community, we encountered rejection from St Agatha's Primary School, Castle Hill Library⁷, Cotton On subsidiaries, and from our own college pastoral care system⁸. We were able to use this rejected feedback to investigate other areas to further develop our ideas. We managed to secure enthusiastic support from Hornsby Shire libraries⁹, and rather than targeting pastoral care lessons, we organised an after school session for years 7-12, in which we can further educate students.

¹ <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/increased-levels-anxiety-and-depression-teenage-experience-changes-over-time>

² <https://www.choice.com.au/health-and-body/conditions/depression-and-anxiety/articles/anxiety>

³ <http://www.headspace.org.au/what-works/research-information/anxiety>

⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2689466/Anxiety-depression-rising-teenagers-Australian-study-shows.html>

⁵ <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/> Beyond Blue Organisation Homepage

⁶ <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/> Kids Helpline Homepage

⁷ <http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/Library/About-Our-Libraries/Library-Locations-Opening-Hours-and-Contact-Information/Castle-Hill-Library>

⁸ Pastoral Care: programmed weekly support sessions in house or year groups to address holistic wellbeing

⁹ <http://www.hornsby.nsw.gov.au/library>

Underlying Problem:

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the levels of stress experienced by teenagers. A significant proportion of students at Mount St Benedict College acknowledged that stress is related to academic expectations and that this impacts their general wellbeing.

How might we, the StressLESS team, educate students from the wider Mount St Benedict College community about stress, so that they have the tools to manage stressors before they impact wellbeing?

Alternative Solution Ideas:

In order to address our UP we organised a variety of initiatives, which were narrowed down according to perceived effectiveness, likeliness of success and the surveyed need within the school community. Ideas such as partnering with a local nursery to supply cacti (to represent our logo) and distributing weekly articles, were discussed, but were eliminated from our action plan as they did not meet these criteria. To communicate effectively with an audience that spans beyond our school community, we generated social media pages (Instagram, Tumblr and WeHeartIt) and a website¹⁰. This publicised our project and provided extra outreach to the online community. To electronically connect and engage with the student body, we displayed positive affirmations throughout the school on monitors and created a Firefly (the school intranet) page. This provides easily-accessible means of assistance for students within the school and education about stress and anxiety. To help reduce stress surrounding assessment tasks, we have created changes to the assessment notifications that will help educate and encourage techniques that decrease academic-related stress. Oral means such as informative primary school sessions, an assembly presentation and a radio interview have been utilised, as they reach both our school community and school students in our wider local community in an engaging way. We also distributed informative bookmarks, posters, wallet cards and 'zines' (hand-made mini magazines) to both our school and local community. These provided means of informing our school students and others on stress and received a positive and interested response. We plan to have a display in two of the local libraries to publicise our project and educate the wider community. Additionally we conducted a minor incursion into adult outreach in our parents' workplaces with our infographic posters that were slightly modified for an adult audience. These have provided an opportunity for adults to have an ongoing conversation about stress with their children. We felt our chosen initiatives were the most successful in empowering our school and local community to recognise and manage stress.

Plan of Action:

In the time before the Australian National Bowl in 2015 the StressLESS team launched a number of initiatives in the school community, including Mental Health Week (MHW) activities – yoga sessions, DIY stress balls, mindfulness colouring – which were made available to all students. Continuing through from 2015, additions to the College assessment notification were made, several social media accounts were created and we distributed educational brochures, bookmarks, wallet cards and self-care zines that our team designed.

2015 - Term 4, October-December (after nationals):

- Run a post survey to assess our impact on the students at MSB
- Visit Samuel Gilbert Primary School to run a session with Grades 5 and 6 targeting the stress surrounding the transition to high school

2016 - Term 1, January-March:

- Discuss and brainstorm where we can take our project and what we will need to do in 2016
- Display positive affirmations on the digital screens around school
- Distribute posters outlining stress reduction techniques to all homerooms, as well as parent workplaces
- Contribute to a LibGuide (an online page available to the whole school) which acts as a database for student needs
- Create a StressLESS Firefly page available to all students
- Write an article for the magazine *Spine Out* explaining our project and its goals
- Create a display in the College IRC¹¹ with books relating to our project

¹⁰ <http://anxietyandstress-cmfps.weebly.com/> StressLESS Website Homepage

¹¹ Information Resource Centre (Library)

- Meet with the MSB Teaching and Learning Resource Team (TLRT) to finalise the changes to the assessment notification
- Create a video explaining the use of the study planner and study tips
- Talk to Mr Duncan, ICT Manger, about creating a StressLESS page on the Bennies app
- Make contact with Lucy Dahill regarding an interview on her community radio talk show “Stay in the Loop with Lucy” which targets many issues, especially mental health
- Make contact with the principal at St Agatha’s primary school, regarding running an information session with Grades 5 and 6 targeting the stress surrounding the transition to high school
- Contact local libraries about a book display and distribution of bookmarks, zines, brochures and posters
- Display and work on our project at the MSB Open Day
- Visit the Triple H studio and speak to Lucy Dahill on her radio talk show
- Write an article for the college newsletter about our experience speaking on radio
- Have a study day in the IRC to work on our report
- Speak at assembly about stress and management tools

Term 2, April-June:

- Mount a StressLESS display in Hornsby Shire library, confirmed for the 11th April
- Visit local primary schools to run sessions with Grades 5 and 6 to educate about stress
- Run a pastoral care session about stress
- Represent the college at the State Parliament House’s ‘Make a Difference Day’
- Launch the new assessment notification
- Host a ‘StressLESS afternoon’, where all students are invited to watch *Inside Out* and enjoy pizza, as well as fun educational activities, to end the term on a positive note
- Implement StressLESS page on Bennies App
- Run an interim survey to gauge impact of the project to date
- Attend the international conference in Michigan

Term 3, July-September:

- Run a second Mental Health Week
- Visit a selection of our 48 feeder schools to promote effective strategies in transitioning to MSB
- Hold a Fun Run event for the school and wider community

Term 4, October-December:

- Run a follow up survey of students, teachers and parents to assess the success of the changes made to the assessment notification and consequent levels of stress
- Reconnect with Triple H radio program
- Target Year 6 into Year 7 Orientation day, to determine the effectiveness of primary school sessions
- Publish articles in the College newsletter, yearbook, on Firefly intranet
- Endeavour to promote the project in local newspapers

IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAN:

Actions and Outcomes to Date:

Prior to the National Competition, we researched stress and anxiety in general terms in our school community. This included a random survey of over 195 students, which indicated academic situations as the most significant stressor, and listening to music as a popular strategy for minimising stress. This helped us to gain a better understanding of the topic, helping us to decide on future actions. We created a website and Instagram, Tumblr and WeHeartIt pages where education and StressLESS tips are posted regularly. From the 12th to the 16th October, we ran activities during MHW at the college, focusing on raising awareness and strategies for minimising stress. These activities included DIY stress balls, mindfulness colouring in, raising awareness of the semicolon project¹², an assembly presentation, yoga, and a youth group session, as well as classical music being

¹² <http://www.projectsemicolon.org/> An organisation which encourages a semicolon as an image that will continue the conversation on mental health

played in the mornings, positive affirmations on screens around the school, and the distribution of bookmarks. After the national competition, we immediately ran surveys to assess the impact of MHW on the students at the college. We completed distributing and collating the surveys quickly so that we could focus all our attention on improving our project. Through these surveys, we found that there was positive feedback, specifically towards the hands-on activities.

Students felt that the activities benefited them, particularly in the academic and social areas of their lives. However, there was some negative feedback about the classical music played in the mornings, suggesting that the songs played were sombre and too slow. Furthermore, one of the questions was aimed at finding out what activities students wanted to participate in, which was very useful for helping us to plan other initiatives to host. After reviewing these results, we launched straight into a new one-year plan. Our main aims this time were now to extend into the wider community, implement initiatives and plan for the international conference. To begin with, in late 2015, we ran a session at one of our feeder schools, Samuel Gilbert Public School, to educate children in Grades 5 and 6 about stress, and how to manage it. We created handouts, such as posters, wallet cards and brochures.

At the beginning of 2016, we distributed to homerooms the infographics regarding managing stress that were created previously for the primary school visit. Our team was engaged in making the zines, as well as an explanation video for the additions to the assessment notification (directed at the staff of the college). We displayed our project at the College Open Day to inform potential students and parents about the Community Problem Solving program and our StressLESS group. We participated in a radio interview with Lucy Dahill, planned, sought and gained approval for additions to the Bennies app as well as a StressLESS evening. As a team we are in the process of planning a community Fun Run. Furthermore, we have partnered with Hornsby and Pennant Hills Libraries to promote our project, along with strategies to address our underlying problem.

Organisation:

Our team meets weekly on Monday afternoons for an extended period. The purpose of these meetings is to plan and coordinate our strategies effectively and to maintain efficient group and individual work. Throughout the course of our project, we have undertaken multiple tasks which require us to be well organised. Keeping in contact through email with various organisations and individuals is crucial to the success of our project. In the act of contacting people who had the ability to help us promote our project, we were exposed to opportunities to collaborate with individuals such as Lucy Dahill (radio presenter of Stay in the Loop with Lucy) and organisations (such as various council libraries and primary schools) to promote and spread the concept of our underlying problem. Our team has also recently had the opportunity to attend meetings at lunchtimes and various times throughout the course of the day. These meetings have led to us being granted approval for our plans as well as being provided feedback. Caitlin, who acted as our secretary throughout the duration of our project transcribed minutes of all our meetings, allowing an up to date record of our progress to be available to look back on for future reference. While writing the report, we delegated the work for separate sections to various individuals, and editing was a whole group exercise. On 14th March we were granted permission to take a whole day out of class to work on the report for the International Competition.

Everyone was involved with all aspects of the project and ongoing research was conducted by all members of the team, communicated through our email system. However, the following are our main roles:

Secretary: manages minutes of meetings and keeps the files organised – Caitlin Kelly

Organisation Director: keeps the group on task – Anna Macoustra

Creative Producer: in charge of design and aesthetics – Alex Maher

Editor: coordinates the editing and proof reading of all materials – Annabel Fisher

Web Design Manager: maintains website and social media accounts – Emily James

Public Relations Managers: manages correspondence with external agencies – Eshaa Sood, Taly Denaro

Head Researchers: conducts ongoing research – Jess Kotzander, Nicole Sandow

Resource Identification and Utilisation:

Ongoing research into stress and anxiety has been conducted by various members of our group, utilising information from the 2014 Australian Wellbeing Survey¹³, WayAhead Mental Health Association NSW¹⁴, as well as various other websites.

To further develop our project we have had contact with a variety of individuals and groups, both in our College community and the wider community. Early in the year we remained in close contact with the TLRT in order to finalise the addition to the assessment notification. Mrs Gabrielle Keats, Studies Coordinator, was at the forefront of our communication with the TLRT, providing valuable advice and suggestions. Members of the Mind Your Language team, champions at the International Conference in 2015, attended one of our earliest meetings this year, sharing their experiences at internationals and giving us advice and a few ideas about how to develop our project further. Our interaction with external organisations includes our interview with Lucy Dahill on Triple H 100.1 FM. We also met with Mrs Kylie Gray, Marketing and Development Manager, to ask about strategies when contacting the media. Ongoing contact with our school counsellors has also been a valuable resource. Our school laptops have been utilised in every session and have allowed us to work efficiently and collaboratively on a number of tasks and also conduct a great deal of thorough research. Our emailing system and personal devices have also been invaluable for communication amongst group members.

PROJECT OUTCOMES:

Accomplishments:

During our project, our team has achieved multiple successes in realising our goal of educating and empowering individuals of our school and wider community in coping with stress. A post-survey conducted after the success of MHW provided our team with a statistical representation regarding student participation, overall enjoyment and how effectively their stress was reduced and wellbeing supported. The data collected confirmed that a wide range of students involved themselves in activities throughout the week that were beneficial in managing the stress they were experiencing and enabled us to further develop strategies that apply to our school and wider community. With the focus of our UP extending to the college community beyond just our student body, four students conducted an engaging and informative session at Samuel Gilbert Public School for Year 5 and 6 students, in which the students were provided with valuable coping strategies for the stress leading up to and during the initial years of high school. The feedback provided by both students and staff of the school was overwhelmingly positive. We have continued to contact other primary schools that feed into Mount St Benedict, to organise similar visits.

During our first meeting of 2016, we brainstormed and developed various ideas and initiatives to extend and further develop our project, both within our school and in the wider community. The social media accounts and website established last year have continued to be updated with the newest information and resources, with a short video containing positive affirmations displayed on the large screens throughout the College. Multiple meetings with the TLRT have allowed us to finalise our two week study tips and planner and an instructional support video for staff to ensure the resource is utilised effectively when it is issued in Term 2. A wide range of other resources including Zine Self-Care booklets, helpful contact posters, wallet cards, infographic posters, bookmarks and brochures were created and were provided to students and others on many occasions throughout the year including a college Open Day presentation and in homeroom time. We also had the opportunity on the 13th of March to discuss and promote our project to the local community on the radio show 'Stay in the Loop with Lucy' (Triple H 100.1 FM)¹⁵. Technological resources include an updateable intranet Firefly page and section on the 'Bennies App' involving personalised features such as a study timer, helpful tips and support networks.

A display of these resources as well as information regarding our project will be featured in both the Hornsby and Pennant Hills local community libraries. Many future activities have also been planned, including an

¹³ <https://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/2014-APS-NPW-Survey-WEB-reduced.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://wayahead.org.au/>

¹⁵ <http://www.stayintheloopwithlucy.com/blog/anxiety-with-mount-st-benedict-college>

assembly presentation communicating information about stress and mental health, visits to primary schools such as Thornleigh West, Beecroft Public School and Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School at Waitara, the launch of the assessment notification sheet, StressLESS movie and games evening and the continual updating of social media accounts and website.

Reflection on Outcomes to Date:

By implementing our project throughout MSB and the wider community, we have observed a positive impact, changing the views of many people about how serious prolonged stress can be. We believe that all of our initiatives have been successful in educating our community on what stress is and how to use coping methods in a healthy manner to combat stressors. These initiatives, whether they were aimed to educate or reduce stress, provided students a chance to discuss, relax and better understand what stress is, and each of these effectively addressed our Underlying Problem.

We have received positive feedback from many of the students and members of the public who have participated in the various initiatives we have run. After running the sessions at Samuel Gilbert Primary school, the staff were impressed with our project and the contribution we had made to the student's awareness of time management and transition to high school. The affirmations displayed around the school, as well as the managing stress posters we placed in homerooms, attracted a very positive response from teachers and students alike. Our proposal for an assembly presentation was received with enthusiasm by the Acting Assistant Principal, as were the plans for a page on the Mount St Benedict College Mobile App. This feedback has increased the confidence we have that our project has been successful to date, and encouraged the continuation of further outreach. The flat refusal of our request for a visit to a primary school, as well as a pastoral care session at our own college, was disappointing. However, we were undeterred and have made contact with other schools for further outreach.

This project has made us, as a group, aware of the effects of stress on both physical and mental health, so that we know how to recognise stress and manage it before it develops into a serious condition. With this knowledge, we have been able to educate others to empower them to target their own stress. However, it is important to measure stress levels to see what reduction has been achieved. We plan to use a post-survey early in Term 2.

Scope of Project:

The interest shown in our project throughout 2015 and 2016 is a clear indicator that our project's message has made an impact on the Mount St Benedict College and wider community. This is demonstrated through activities such as Mental Health Week and educating primary school students on how to organise their high school work.

Through the outreach we have conducted, our project has made an impact in the community, as students at Mount St Benedict College are adopting the strategies we have promoted into their everyday routines. As well as the students at our school, members of the wider public are able to observe and appreciate our work through programmes and resources, such as the radio show, Stay in the Loop with Lucy, our interaction with local primary schools, our website, self-care booklets, the displays in local libraries and social media platforms. Two of our team members attended the 'Make a Difference Day' at our state's (New South Wales) Parliament House, where they had a wider forum for promoting the project and encouraging fellow students to manage their own stressors in healthy ways.

Through the response we got from our trial run of our assessment notification modification, we feel confident that MSB students will be able to correctly integrate our study planner into their study routine once it has been implemented into the assessment notification. The wider MSB community, including local primary schools believe that educating students about stress management is an integral part of learning how to manage a balanced lifestyle. The eagerness shown about our project shows how the wider community supports our cause and believe in what we are trying to accomplish. As a result of our project resonating with a majority of people, StressLESS has made an impact on the wider community shown through the interest and positive feedback we have received from Stay in the Loop with Lucy, local primary schools, the MSB TLRT and the Hornsby Shire libraries. Our social media accounts are growing in followers (currently exceeding 500 on Instagram) as our message is continuing to spread.