University students’ perceptions of an on-campus peer health program for fostering positive body image and self-esteem.

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Abstract

Colleges and universities are considered “breeding grounds” for body image concerns and eating problems. Thus, on-campus programs targeting positive body image in university students are important. Currently, through their Peer Educators, Brock University’s Student Health Services runs an annual two-week program to promote positive body image and self-esteem. The purpose of this study was to investigate students’ perceptions of each element of this program. The study assessed the students’ perceptions through immediate feedback from individuals receiving an affirmation or visiting the information booth, and through focus groups. Immediate feedback questions were completed by 170 participants, including 81 participants filling out in-person questionnaires and 17 participants partook in focus group discussions. Each on-campus campaign pass included key questions. Focus groups were led by the principal student investigator. Participants were recruited through posters around campus, social media pages, and word of mouth by Peer Educators. All questions were related to each component of the program that examined students’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the outcomes of the program.

Introduction

Body image is a set of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours an individual has in regards to his or her own body (Muth & Cash, 1997). In college students, negative body image is common, and colleges have been called “breeding grounds” for body image concerns and eating problems (Cash, 1997). In college students, negative body image is recognized as important and effective at achieving its goals, but believed there was a need to reach a greater portion of the student population. These results can help direct body image and self-esteem programs at colleges and universities in the future.

Health Services

In week one, Peer Educators completed two to three one-hour sessions per day from Tuesday to Friday to distribute an approximate total of 800 affirmations. Each on-campus campaign pass included key questions. Focus groups were led by the principal student investigator. Participants were recruited through posters around campus, social media pages, and word of mouth by Peer Educators. All questions were related to each component of the program that examined students’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the outcomes of the program.

The hallway booth and activity questionnaires completed by 21 participants were considered key to assessing students’ perceptions of each element of this program. The majority of participants found the affirmations to be a positive effect in someone’s life. Through reflection and discussion with the Peer Educator, students were asked how they could help foster positive body image and self-esteem within their family members, friends, and the Brock community. Throughout the two-week program, posters and a banner (See Images 2) promoting positive body image and self-esteem among students were put up around the school. To date, there has been no systematic evaluation of the program, and particularly students’ responses to it. Therefore, the present study investigated student perceptions of this program.

Methods

The present study assessed the perceptions of specific components in 2 ways: through immediate feedback from individuals, and through focus group discussions. Each on-campus campaign pass included key questions. Focus groups were led by the principal student investigator. Participants were recruited through posters around campus, social media pages, and word of mouth by Peer Educators. All questions were related to each component of the program that examined students’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the outcomes of the program.

Results & Discussion

The majority of participants found the affirmations to be a good and effective way to have a positive effect in someone’s life. From the 113 questionnaires, 89.4% of participants said that the affirmation had a positive effect in their day. 86% believed it was an appropriate way to foster positive body image and self-esteem among university students, and 92% said they would pass the affirmation on. Positive comments from female students included that the affirmation brightened their day and made them feel happier. One female said that affirmations are a “good way to make people feel better about themselves.”

Focus group discussions were able to find students’ opinions on specific affirmations. For example, Affirmation 1 (Your smile makes me smile. …) was a popular choice among participants. Most agreed that it was simple and positive. A female student shared that she smiled when she read it and a male said he liked it and said it was great because affirmations can make people feel better about themselves.

The banner was a very accepted component of the program. Both male and female focus group participants had positive comments about the content of the banner. Most agreed that it was a very good message.

Conclusion

Overall, most participants agreed that this program is effective in a positive way and helps foster positive body image and self-esteem among university students, but the exposure is not big enough. Based on their perceptions, programs must be more visible to reach more students. We live in a media driven world where students are constantly on their phones and computers. Incorporating social media services such as Twitter and Facebook into the campaign is highly suggested, as well as creating short videos and distributing them on campus. It is essential that these platforms be inclusive for everyone. In conclusion, body image and self-esteem programs should carefully consider how to maximize visibility across campus, incorporating various forms of media and ensure that all components are inclusive.

Website

http://www.brocku.ca/dean/careers/health/services/