Breaking Grad: Building Resilience Among a Sample of Graduate Students Struggling with Stress and Anxiety via a Peer Coaching Model – An 8-Month Pilot Study

Rebecca R. Fried[1,2], PhD, CPCC; Melanie-Anne P. Atkins[3], PhD; & Jennifer D. Irwin[1,2], PhD, CPCC

1 Health & Rehabilitation Sciences, Western University, London, Ontario; 2 Faculty of Health Sciences, Health Promotion Research Laboratory, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada; 3 Faculty of Education, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

The **PURPOSE** of this mixed methods, eight-month-long pilot study was to investigate graduate students' (*n* = 11) experiences in a peer coaching program intended to address students' challenges with stress and anxiety, while enhancing their resilience. **METHODS:** Participants engaged in peer-based mentoring/coaching sessions and worked with each other in seven different dyads for 24-28 sessions throughout the study; and utilized Motivational Interviewing[1] via Co-Active Life Coaching[2] tools as a way to structure the mentorship relationship. **DATA COLLECTION:** Participants' psychosocial experiences were assessed via semi-structured interviews and validated questionnaires, such as the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)[3], the Mental Health Inventory (MHI)[4], the Short Form (36) Health Survey (SF-36)[5]. Data collection occurred at pre-, mid-, and immediate post-intervention. Quality assurance steps[6] were enacted throughout data collection and analysis. **ANALYSIS & FINDINGS:** Inductive content analysis[7] revealed participants viewed the program as having a positive impact on their ability to cope with stress and anxiety, and enhance their resilience. One-way, repeated-measures ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant findings. **CONCLUSION:** This pilot program is encouraging and should be assessed with a larger sample.

BACKGROUND

Graduate Student (GS) Mental Health

- GS are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to the general population[8]
- Approximately 60% of GS feel hopeless, exhausted, overwhelmed, and sad and/or depressed nearly all the time; and that 10% of GS confessed to thoughts of suicide within the past year[9,10]

- In a survey of Canadian graduate students regarding their mental health and wellbeing (*N* = 2001)[11]
- 51% of GS did not feel supported by their academic institution

- 70% of GS felt pressured to overwork
- 67% of GS reported feeling anxious with respect to finishing on time (and balancing their workload)

- 63% of GS described feeling anxious and fearful of failing and/or appearing weak

Mentoring

- Vital component of addressing mental health issues[12]

Motivational Interviewing via Co-Active Life Coaching (MI-via-CALC)

- Combined approach of Motivational Interviewing[13] and Co-Active Life Coaching[14]

- Intention is to address a client's ambivalence toward behaviour changes and to create solutions to elicit changes through powerful, open-ended questions

- Essential for positive mental health

Resilience

- Ability to recover from, and cope with, difficult life situations[15]

FINDINGS

Table 1

Quotations Supporting Themes from Pre-Intervention

Presence of Stress (School, Deadlines, Comparisons)
School
"I don't know what a healthy school experience would look like…it's so far away from what we manage…"
Feedback
"…Getting feedback, knowing where I am, and. … now the tasks are too long and there's nothing that you are getting back. … I do not feel that I have finished. … there is no specific thing that you have to submit and get grades…"
Comparisons
"…I am a little unsure and sometimes I might get jealous [when] comparing myself [to my academic colleagues]…"
Support (Social, Supervisors, School)
Social
"…Being away from my country, from my community, my friends, I feel isolated. … which makes [life and school] more stressful."
"…We still do everything together. … that has been awesome…to go through everything with them and feel comfortable…"
Supervisors
"…I have [a] complicated relationship with my supervisor. I'm afraid to talk with [them]."
"…I have a really great supervisor, who is always like, "What you're doing is enough," which is sometimes the best thing to hear…especially when I feel like [I'm not doing enough]…"
School
"…Because they have to appeal to so many people, you get [university support] services that feel like platitudes…"
"I couldn't count on [the university]…they were really unprepared, or they didn't care enough. … I didn't feel supported."
Balance
"…I want a balance of everything and trying to get that balance was a stressor…I'm studying too much, I'm not going out to have fun, I get stressed. If I'm having too much fun and I'm not studying, I get stressed. It's just at the back of my head…"
Physical Activity
"…I love exercising…[it's] radically changed my ability to…shake off whatever has been bothering me all day."
"I would love to go to the gym but [you have to] pay for each class…and I don't work. … if I want to do more than one class [I can't]…"
Relatively Resilient
"…I'm pretty resilient, but then deep down I don't know how to let go of some things."
"…I have high levels of resiliency. … I had challenges last year and I was able to get rid of all the stress that was associated with it."
"I'm pretty resilient…it doesn't matter what situation I face, I'm able to make it through and survive."
Increased Coping Skills and Strategies
"…If I participate [in this study], I will gain skills to communicate with people and also [have] the skills to cope with stress…"

Table 2

Quotations Supporting Themes from Mid-Intervention

Improved Mental Health (Better Emotional Health, Increased Self-Awareness, Reduced Stress)
Better Emotional Health
"My emotional health has improved 70% through this program…when I did the questionnaire…I compared my emotions…to when I first did it…I realized a big difference. I was so happy…I was too depressed when I did it the first time. There's a huge difference…"
Increased Self-Awareness
"…It's [the coaching] been positive. I'm continuing to always have a hundred questions for myself. … evolv[ing] in knowing yourself so you can continue to do the work that you want to do and continuing to have the relationships that you want to have. … in the past I've shelved a lot of emotion or stress or anxiety about different things because it was too challenging to look in the face…"
Reduced Stress/Better Equipped
"…It [the coaching] has made me more easy going. … Stress is still there. It's not that it's disappeared completely…I'm getting better at dealing with it [the stress]…"
Increased Resiliency
"I improved [my resiliency] a lot. … I never expected to be at this stage. … I'm really thankful!"
Improved Communication (Listening Skills, Less Advice-Giving, Acknowledgments)
Listening Skills
"…Half the time when you're listening to someone you just zone out. Now…I know I can focus when I try and…be open-ended about it, non-judgmental…I'm more open to listening…in a way that I'm totally involved with what the other person is saying."
Less Advice-Giving
"…I definitely try to give less advice now…"
Acknowledgments
"…Being acknowledged really helped me change my perspectives. In hard or difficult situations, I used to be stuck…through being coached I was able to see through a different lens. … to feel the strength that I have the resiliency…"
Social Support and Connection
"…[The coaching] helps me work through things. … we're all graduate students. … a lot of what people want to change or think more about are things I completely relate with. … it's nice when somebody's vulnerable with you about something that you also feel a little insecure about."
Accountability
"…[The coaching's] given me an accountability, whether it's a discussed, blatant accountability or…that I'm going to be talking with somebody about it."
Shifting Perspectives
"…Through the support of the coaches…I changed the way I see myself and the experience."
Difficulty Scheduling
"…The challenge is we do not have regular meeting times [with our partners]. … it's hard to get ourselves and other people together."

Table 3

Quotations Supporting Themes from Post-Intervention

Sense of Connection and Support
"…[Grad school] can feel isolating. … any opportunity to make a meaningful connection with people you didn't previously know is welcomed…[the coaching] had a really good impact on me…"
Improved Mental Health, Resiliency, and Awareness
Mental Health
"I'm willing to take the time to try and focus on my mental health. … [the intervention] gave me permission to thoroughly explore other options…to be the best version of myself in a mental health way."
Resiliency
"…There's been some vicarious resilience I've been able to glean from listening…to other people solving their problems out loud. I may not have had a similar goal…but I can bring some of those things into my life, as well."
(Self-) Awareness
"…Being self-reflective and identifying what might be helpful for me in the change I want to make…[I'm] a more well-rounded person in terms of dealing with my own and other people's conflicts…"
Increased Confidence
"I noticed how my energy changed. … I have more self-confidence knowing that every person is naturally creative, resourceful, and whole…it's empowering…"
"I really decreased my sense of trying to change situations for other people…this gave me confidence…in my abilities and other peoples' abilities to deal with whatever happens…"
Gained Skills (Listening, Shifting Perspectives, Acknowledging)
"I learned new skills in supporting myself and overcoming difficulties."
Listening
"[I] thought [listening to my receiver] would be difficult…it was refreshing to see that I could actually listen to a person."
Less Advice-Giving
"…I definitely try to give less advice now…"
Shifting Perspectives
"I enjoyed the idea that experience is this weird, amorphous thing that is intangible; but impacts us in really physical ways. It's not of one particular kind. Nothing is inherently good or bad. It's the perspective you bring…"
Acknowledging
"…I always end my interviews with an acknowledgement…that has been received positively…"
Program Frustrations
Scheduling
"…scheduling is very hard. Scheduling with grad students who are different…"
Pairings
"…it wasn't very good that [the pairings] turned to [me] coach[ing] somebody and somebody else coaches me."
"…[Having different partners] really works better for me…I'm the receiver and this is the coach [for] two sessions and…[in] one month you will meet two different people."
More Practice
"…I always feel like I need more practice and for some reason the practice that we got wasn't enough."
Skill Level
"I felt that maybe some people did not know what the tools are or how to use them."
Public Spaces
"That was uncomfortable for me. … those sessions weren't as beneficial because they were in loud or crowded places."
Positive Experience
"I felt excited and full of energy. … the most positive thing that happened to me throughout my year…"
"…Incredibly rewarding. … this was a super cool program, I'm really glad I was involved."
Implement Program for All Students
"I would love to see this utilized in a university setting. I've talked…a lot…about this. … I've been able to garner a lot of interest from people…"
"I would recommend this program for any student I know."
Continued Interest in Program
"…I would love to have this program again. … I would love to stay engaged with it."
"I really like this [program]… if you are planning to have something similar to this at the university in the future…I would love to participate."

Table 4

Repeated-Measures ANOVAs (Pre-, Mid, & Post-Intervention)

Scale	*F*-Statistic	Mean, Standard Deviation (Pre-Intervention)	Mean, Standard Deviation (Mid-Intervention)	Mean, Standard Deviation (Post-Intervention)	Statistical Significance (Between Time-Periods; $p < .05$)+
Brief Resilience Scale*	[$F(1.22, 12.18) = .22$, $p > .017$]	$M = 3.14$, $SD = .69$	$M = 3.21$, $SD = .62$	$M = 3.26$, $SD = .80$	Over time♣: No ($p = .70$)
Mental Health Inventory – *Total*	[$F(2, 20) = 1.51$, $p > .05$]	$M = 67.27$, $SD = 13.42$	$M = 75.00$, $SD = 11.68$	$M = 73.55$, $SD = 13.92$	Over time: No ($p = .24$)
Anxiety	[$F(2, 20) = 2.01$, $p > .05$]	$M = 46.18$, $SD = 21.49$	$M = 57.09$, $SD = 23.81$	$M = 53.45$, SD = 23.21	Over time: No ($p = .16$)
Depression	[$F(2, 20) = 2.06$, $p > .05$]	$M = 59.09$, $SD = 17.44$	$M = 70.91$, $SD = 13.57$	$M = 69.09$, $SD = 17.87$	Over time: No ($p = .15$)
Behavioural Control	[$F(2, 20) = .18$, $p > .05$]	$M = 66.82$, $SD = 19.40$	$M = 70.00$, $SD = 10.95$	$M = 70.91$, $SD = 18.28$	Over time: No ($p = .84$)
Positive Affect	[$F(2, 20) = .74$, $p > .05$]	$M = 50.45$, $SD = 15.88$	$M = 55.91$, $SD = 15.30$	$M = 57.27$, $SD = 18.62$	Over time: No ($p = .49$)
SF-36 – *Physical Functioning**	[$F(1.33, 13.30) = 1.96$, $p > .017$]	$M = 96.82$, $SD = 5.14$	$M = 87.27$, $SD = 26.11$	$M = 85.45$, $SD = 19.42$	Over time: No ($p = .19$)
Role Limitations Due to Physical Health	[$F(2, 20) = .14$, $p > .05$]	$M = 72.73$ $SD = 42.51$	$M = 75.00$ $SD = 27.39$	$M = 68.18$ $SD = 41.97$	Over time: No ($p = .87$)
Role Limitations Due to Emotional Health	[$F(2, 20) = 0.39$, $p > .05$]	$M = 27.27$ $SD = 29.13$	$M = 39.39$, $SD = 29.13$	$M = 39.39$, $SD = 44.27$	Over time: No ($p = .68$)
Pain	[$F(2, 20) = 1.39$, $p > .05$]	$M = 80.00$, $SD = 23.21$	$M = 79.09$ $SD = 23.59$	$M = 65.68$, $SD = 27.46$	Over time: No ($p = .27$)
Energy & Fatigue	[$F(2, 20) = 1.23$, $p > .05$]	$M = 37.73$, $SD = 17.23$	$M = 41.36$, $SD = 20.38$	$M = 46.36$, $SD = 20.99$	Over time: No ($p = .31$)
Emotional Well-Being	[$F(2, 20) = .81$, $p > .05$]	$M = 57.09$, $SD = 20.17$	$M = 64.00$, $SD = 17.25$	$M = 64.36$, $SD = 17.75$	Over time: No ($p = .46$)
Social Functioning	[$F(2, 20) = 1.23$, $p > .05$]	$M = 54.55$, $SD = 21.85$	$M = 67.05$, $SD = 21.12$	$M = 62.50$, $SD = 29.05$	Over time: No ($p = .31$)
General Health	[$F(2, 20) = .26$, $p > .05$]	$M = 69.55$, $SD = 21.96$	$M = 71.82$, $SD = 21.13$	$M = 70.91$, $SD = 19.21$	Over time: No ($p = .78$)

Notes. *Mauchly's test of sphericity was violated; Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied. Adjusted *p* values were calculated using adjusted degrees of freedom; $p < .017$.
+ $p < .05$ unless marked by *.
♣ Over time = any differences between related means *overall*

A visual inspection of the means indicated improvements – means for every scale increased from pre-intervention to mid-intervention, and from pre-intervention to post-intervention. Some means decreased slightly from mid-intervention to post-intervention.

Findings are similar to those in a previous MI-via-CALC study addressing undergraduate mental health, wherein statistically significant results were found in a favourable direction for all scales from pre-intervention to mid-intervention and from pre-intervention to post-intervention, but not from mid-intervention to post-intervention[16].

stress
Weak
Hurt
Pressure
Tired
Worry
Pressure
Anxiety
Fear
Pressure
Tired
Worry
Pressure
Anxiety
Fear
Pressure
Tired
Worry
Pressure
Anxiety
Fear