STRESS MANAGEMENT AND THE ABILITY TO STUDY – A GROUP INTERVENTION FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Stress and burn out among medical students

- In Finland, 1/3 of students experience considerable stress (Kunttu & Huttunen 2009)

- In some international studies, medical students have more stress than peers, especially at the end of the studies (eg. Dyrbye, Thomas & Shanefelt 2005; Voltmer, Kötter & Spahn 2012)

- In Finland, medical students have a lower risk for study burnout and more study engagement (Salmela-Aro & Kunttu 2010)
• Finnish medical students still feel they lack
  • guidance on time management
  • guidance on how to cope with work related stress

• The experience is shared by newly graduated physicians
  (Hoffren & Kääpä 2010; Hoffren & Kääpä 2009)
Stress management skills for the students of medicine

• Internationally, stress management and well being courses have been successfully organised for medical students
  
  (eg. Finkelstein, Brownstein, Scott & Lan, 2007; Holm, Tyssen, Stordal, & Haver, 2010; Saunders ym., 2007)

• In Finland, no previous research on stress management interventions for the students of medicine
Stress management and the ability to study – a pilot course

- Students at the **clinical phase** of their studies
  - advertised for students with high levels of study-related stress
  - 8 participants
  - 5 x 1.5 hours

- Students filled in a questionnaire on their needs and their stress symptoms beforehand -> emphasis on those themes

- Detailed feedback questionnaire at the end of the course
Goals

- **Short term goals:**
  - to improve students’ stress management and study skills
  - students’ studies advance
  - well being improves
  - study burnout is prevented

- **Long term goals:**
  - better skills to cope with stress as a newly graduated physician
Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

- Suitable for short interventions, found to be effective on stress management courses in work life (eg. Flaxman & Bond 2010)
- Acceptance and mindfulness strategies combined with behavioral change strategies

- What kind of life would you want to live and what is standing in your way?
- Rather than changing or getting rid of difficult thoughts and feelings, one is to accept them and commit to valued action
Acceptance and commitment therapy approach on the course

Three core processes:

A) Clarification of personal life values and goals
B) An accepting mindful* observation of thoughts and emotions
C) Rehearsal of study skills in real life situations such as time management, creating realistic study goals, prioritizing study tasks

* Paying attention to the present moment on purpose and nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn 1991), often using breathing as a way to anchor oneself to the present moment
Working methods on the course

- Group discussions
  - What causes stress in medical studies?
  - How would you define a ’good doctor’?

- Psychoeducation
  - Stress
  - Realistic time planning
  - Handling difficult thoughts and feelings
• **Exercises** during and between sessions
  
  • Creating study goals
  • Prioritizing tasks
  • Keeping a log on stress related thoughts, emotions and behaviors
  • Role playing

• **Guided mindfulness practise** at every meeting
  
  • Focusing on breathing and the present moment sensations, feelings and thoughts (5 – 20 min)
Students’ feedback

- The course **met students’ expectations** either ’well’ or ’very well’ (1= not at all, 5= very well)
- All felt that they can **use the skills** they learned on the course on their studying either ’well’ or ’very well’
- **Most appreciated according to open feedback**
  - mindfulness exercises
  - group discussions
  - reflections of stress related thoughts and emotions
- **Improvement suggestions**
  - a longer course
  - the content could be useful for all medical students
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Implications for student counselling

- Learning **mindfulness and acceptance strategies** proved to be especially useful when counselling students who experience stress, more than behavioral change strategies alone.

- How to cope with difficult emotions and thoughts might be an important part of the self-regulation of studying in medicine.

- Designing learning environments that better enhances stress management skills is needed.


