

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Feasibility and Effectiveness of a Web-Based Positive Psychology Program for Youth Mental Health: Randomized Controlled Trial

Manicavasagar, V., Horswood, D., Burckhardt, R., Lum, A., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., & Parker, G. (2014). Feasibility and effectiveness of a web-based positive psychology program for youth mental health: Randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 16(6), 17-Feb. doi:10.2196/jmir.3176

SUMMARY: Researchers have begun to examine the efficacy of providing online programming for youth to increase mental health and resilience. This study examined the effectiveness of a website devoted to engaging youth in activities centered on five main components of happiness: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Results indicated that youth who regularly used the website showed decreases in mental health problems and increases in well-being.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth who utilized the intervention website at least three times a week experienced significant reductions in depression and anxiety and significant increases in well-being.
- One third of youth assigned to use the intervention website did so for at least 40 minutes per week.
- Many participants who reported not using the intervention website stated that it seemed to be aimed at younger individuals and that the content did not vary enough to keep their interest.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Help families identify websites and online games for their children that may increase well-being
- Work with youth from military families to create safe online spaces (such as closed groups on social media) through which they can support each other

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Consider developing online content for youth in military families, including games and other interaction targeted at increasing well-being
- Consult youth in the development of online content directed toward youth to determine what they find most exciting and interesting

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support the development of online spaces for youth of military families
- Encourage training for those who develop websites for youth regarding the effectiveness of including content that increases the main components of happiness

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through flyers at schools throughout Australia.
- Researchers assigned participants to use the intervention website or a control website without interventions for at least an hour a week for six weeks.
- Measures included questionnaires regarding anxiety, depression, stress, and well-being at the beginning of the study and at the end of six weeks, which were then analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the intervention website.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 154 Australian youth (68% female).
- Youth ranged in age from 12 to 18 years old, with an average age of 15 years old (SD=1.7).
- The participants in the intervention group did not differ from those in the control group on depression, anxiety, or stress at baseline.

LIMITATIONS

- Youth who consistently used the intervention website may differ from those who did not in ways that makes them more likely to show increases in mental health with this type of intervention.
- The sample was limited to Australian youth. It is unclear whether results are generalizable to American youth.
- There were concerns that the content was not age-appropriate; different findings may have occurred if the content had been more interesting and engaging for older youth.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Develop and evaluate online interventions for military youth addressing some of the specific concerns in that population
- Work with youth in the development of online content and then evaluate its effectiveness
- Replicate this study within an American sample

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