(Mental) Healthy Habits

Problem & Motivation

Beginning at the turn of the millennium, increasing obesity rates in America brought a focus on physical health. Now, many factors seem to have contributed to an increased discussion about mental health, such as the increase in technological distractions, increased academic pressure at younger ages, and national tragedies involving individuals declared mentally ill by the media. Depression and anxiety are major concerns among students seeking help (Fig 1). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, with 350 million people affected[1]. A new range of applications now focuses on mental health. However, most apps seem to focus on either treatment and diagnosis or mindfulness through meditation programs. While treatment and mindfulness are important facets, there should be ways besides meditation to start improving mental health at a smaller scale before diagnosable mental health issues.
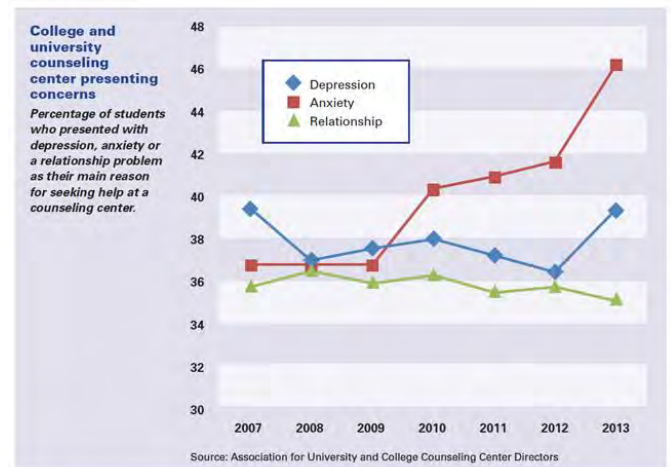

Figure 1. Graph depicting the percentage of students listing different mental health reasons for seeking help.
Source: http://www.apa.org/Images/2014-09-pressure-chart2_tcm7-175017.jpg

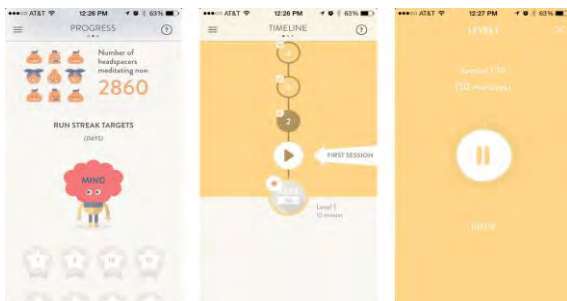

Figure 2. Screenshots from Headspace iPhone app depicting meditation goals.
Source: http://www.imore.com/best-meditation-apps-iphone-omvana-headspace-breathful-and-more

Figure 3. Screenshot from Pplkpr application and optional wearable biometric sensor.
Source: http://pplkpr.com

Analysis

A couple of the biggest problems surrounding mental health are the stigma surrounding individuals with mental illness and the tendency to use words like "depressed" and "anxious" in ways that do not actually imply a presence of the disorder. Tackling these issues at a societal level is slow moving and difficult. Dealing with depression is difficult since the cause is complex and still not completely understood[2]; this is an area better handled by health professionals. Referencing the physical health analogy, as a society we have become aware of making conscious decisions to maintain physical health as part of a lifestyle rather than waiting to treat obesity. Thus, it may be possible to make similarly conscious decisions to maintain mental health, rather than only focusing on treating mental health at the level of depression or anxiety.

As mentioned above, the currently popular apps that target mental health seem to focus on either treatment/diagnosis or meditation. Examples include HeadSpace, which is designed to "address sleep issues, anxiety, depression and stress through guided meditation programs" (Fig 2), and BetterHelp, which matches the user with a mental health professional and lets them "do therapy [at their] own time and pace."[3] HeadSpace and similar apps encourage regular use, which is important in tracking lifestyle habits. BetterHelp and similar apps encourage professional help. For the sake of the problem of making constant small decisions to track mental health habits, it seems it would be better to follow the model of HeadSpace. In the vein of tracking, there currently exists an app called Pplkpr (People Keeper) that allows the user to track how they felt around certain people in order to identify potentially toxic relationships[4]. The principle of quick entries, simple mood assessments and simple data analysis (Fig 3) could be helpful in addressing the issue of mental health beyond relationships.
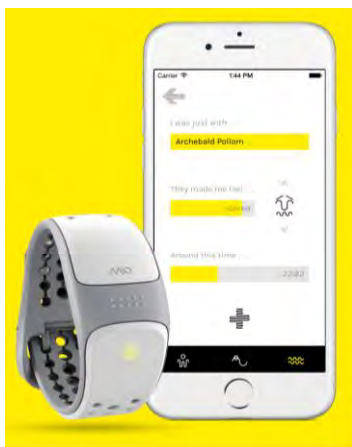
[1] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en/
[2] http://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/what-causes-depression
[3] http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/9573-mental-health-apps.html
[4] http://pplkpr.com/

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Assignment 1b: Project Proposal

Problem & Motivation

In our daily lives as college students, it is often easy to feel overwhelmed with our schedules and lose track of the things that make life enjoyable. How do we stay motivated and excited about our daily lives when we are studying eight hours a day? How do we cope with negative feelings what they sky is gray and we are bored? For many people, college can also bring many changes to our lives such as a new environment, new people, and new responsibilities, thus it can be further challenging to remember the importance of a healthy lifestyle while adapting to these changes. According to the National Alliance on Mental Issues, more than 80 percent of college students felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in the past year and 45 percent have felt things were hopeless. In some cases, feelings of sadness and unhappiness can lead to more serious mental health issues. Per the National Data on Campus Suicide and Depression, one in every 12 U.S. college students make a suicide plan. As our time in college can significantly shape our future lives, it is important to learn how to maintain a happy lifestyle.

healthy body + healthy mind = happy life
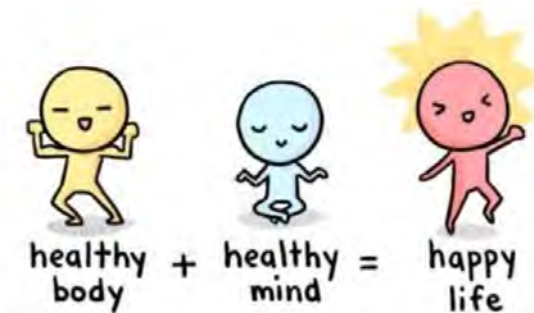
Problem Analysis

College is an important time to build healthy habits and lifestyles as we become more independent. Society stresses our physical health through discussions of eating, sleeping, and exercising, but we often gloss over our minds. Furthermore, remembering to get enough sleep, to exercise, and to eat a balanced meal almost comes naturally to us as solutions to maintaining a healthy and happy lifestyle, but focusing on our mental health is a challenge in many ways. With the stress of school in addition to caring for oneself, it is important to establish a healthy habit of being emotionally mindful. Approaches to having a healthy mind can range from something as simple as keeping a gratitude journal to meditation or listening to music. Developing a way to monitor our personal emotional health while tracking these activities can help in building lasting habits. In addition to tracking our happiness, simple reminders to consider our emotional health can also help establish the importance of mental health with

physical health. Thus, by providing a centralized way to maintain a healthy mind, college students can become more aware of their emotional health and develop a happy lifestyle.

Sources:

http://www.csc.edu/bit/resources/statistics/
http://college.usatoday.com/2016/01/30/mental-health-by-the-numbers/