

A Project for the Support of the Well-being of University Students Based on an Analysis of the Stress Susceptibility of Students from Various Fields of Study

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to present a peer project aimed at promoting student well-being. It is based on an analysis of the susceptibility to stress of students from different study fields (Tošnerová, Tošner, 2002) and published results of international authors – e.g. Reddy, Menon, Thattil (2018), Böke, Mills, Mettler, Heath (2019). The project focuses on salutoprotective resources applicable in the university environment in various situations (e.g. in the prevention of academic failure, development of selected life competences, with an emphasis on the promotion of self-efficacy, etc.); it is then modified in practice with regard to the specifics of particular students (from a particular field of study) so that based on the given survey, students receive specific recommendations aimed at preventing those stressors that are typical for that particular target group. The project is based on the principle of the peer interaction of university students studying to be wellness specialists and is significantly linked to real-life practice.

Key words: susceptibility to stress, well-being, university students, healthy lifestyle, peer program

Introduction

With growing interest in the quality of life as an important component of human health in counterbalancing the increase in stress, not only in society but also in our personal lives, the frequency of

the use of the term well-being is increasing.

Kebza and Šolcová (2005) suggest that personal well-being is „an assessment of the quality of life as a whole.“ Levin and Chatters (1998) state that personal well-being is often seen as a component of

quality of life. According to these authors, quality of life consists of two dimensions – namely, subjective and objective personal well-being. Subjective personal well-being consists of psychological personal well-being (life satisfaction, happiness, mood, positive and negative affectivity, etc.), self-esteem, self-acceptance, and personal coping. The term objective personal well-being can be understood as, for example, the overall health of the individual, socioeconomic status, etc. (Hošek & Švamberk Šauerová, 2020).

Nowadays, certain constructs are seen as part of personal well-being, whereas in the past, they served to express it. The most common constructs used to express personal well-being are „long-term positive and negative emotional states, happiness, life satisfaction in important areas of life, as well as self-esteem and self-worth“ (Diener et al., 1999).

Kebza and Šolcová (2003) conclude that when experts talk about the concept of well-being, they agree that it is „a long-term emotional state in which an individual’s satisfaction with his or her life is reflected.“ At the same time, they agree that personal well-being should be measured through its cognitive components (life satisfaction, morale) and emotional components (positive, negative emotions) and that it is a construct consistent across different situations and stable over time.

Two basic theoretical approaches can be used to define personal well-being.

One approach is tied to the concept of subjective well-being (SWB), which is „defined in terms of life satisfaction and the balance of positive and negative emotional states,“ while the other approach is concerned with the concept of psychological well-being (PWB), which is „defined in terms of a person’s engagement with the existential challenges and issues of life.“ The key concepts here are satisfaction with oneself and one’s life, life purpose, personal growth, etc. (Hřebíčková, Blatný & Jelínek, 2010). Although the theoretical approaches mentioned above are based on different theoretical standpoints, they have the same goal of expressing the degree of experienced personal well-being (Baumgartner, 2009).

Dimensions of personal well-being

Carol Ryff presents the concept of psychological well-being. According to her, „a person achieves personal well-being when he or she is able to optimally fulfill a total of six domains of mental life“ (Ryff, Keyes, & Lee, 1995). In this concept, we speak of the so-called multidimensional model of well-being.

The six core dimensions of personal well-being in this multidimensional model include the following (Ryff, Keyes, & Lee, 1995):

- Self-acceptance
- Positive relations with others

- Autonomy
- Environmental mastery
- Purpose in life
- Personal growth

Levin and Chatters (1998) describe well-being in a similar manner but they distinguish only four components that comprise the subjective sense of personal wellbeing – they conceptualize them more broadly. They are:

1. Psychological well-being made up of various emotional and cognitive dimensions
2. Self-esteem
3. Self-efficacy
4. Personal control, mastery

Diener (2009) includes positive emotions, life satisfaction and happiness in the sense of personal well-being.

Relevant research discusses a number of variables that can be incorporated into several categories, which are: demographic factors, social relationships, personality dispositions and the discrepancy/conformity between personal expectations and reality (Blatný, 2010; Šolcová & Kebza, 2004; Hošek & Švamberk Šauerová, 2020).

Susceptibility to stress, i.e. the personality disposition of the individual, is also an essential factor affecting personal well-being (comp. Hosseini, Zaharakar, Davarnia & Shakarami, 2016). This factor is the primary focus of the project on promoting well-being among univer-

sity students, while other factors are also considered – see the text below on the causes of stress among university students.

Stress

Stress represents a burden or strain and, in the broadest sense of the word, includes the designation for challenging life situations. In 1950, H. Seley (1979) characterized stress as a physiological response of the body that manifests itself through the general adaptation syndrome. The human body maintains homeostasis (i.e., stability of the internal environment) and the body responds to changes in conditions through regulatory activity and adapts (cf. Švingalová, 2006). Simply put, stress can be described as a state of strain on the organism, where we feel tension in the body as well as various emotions. Stress protects our organism from danger by directly alerting us and causing our body to become alert (the fight-or-flight response) and keeps it in this state until the danger passes.

In connection with stress, we talk about the effect of stressful situations. Stressful or challenging situations occur in everyone's life and all individuals have to learn to cope with them. These distressing situations often affect the health of a person, however, they are a part of life itself – they are natural and indeed necessary for the formation of

personality. Each person develops coping strategies to deal with these situations – coping strategies that lead him or her to seek new courses of action and to perform better. Another possible term for the process of coping with stress or challenging life events is, for example, stress management.

The disproportionate escalation of the difficulty of a situation can become a source of undesirable states and reactions, and these situations become a frequent source of difficulty for university students. It is important to realize that stressful situations are all of a different nature and can be divided into the following groups: unreasonable tasks (the demand of the situation is higher than the capacity of the individual), problem situations (the individual is faced with a problem, for the solution of which he/she is only partially equipped in terms of ability and skill), conflicts (the essence is a dispute), frustration (progress towards a desired goal is blocked) and deprivation, when there is long-term dissatisfaction (Hošek & Švamberk Šauerová, 2000).

All of these groups can be summarized by the term „stressor.“ This refers to events to which an individual must adapt. Together with other adverse environmental conditions, they interfere with the mental and physical health of the individual. The difficulties a person ends up experiencing are primari-

ly related to his or her adaptability or flexibility.

Causes of stress in university students

There are numerous causes of stress. Some are entirely individual while others have more of an institutional or societal nature. With regard to the search for different ways of mental health prevention, it is useful to be specific about the different causes of stress in university students.

Psychological causes

From a psychological perspective, personalities with a reactive or proactive life attitude are distinguished in stress research.

People with a basic reactive attitude are much more prone to stress and are characterized by the following behaviours – they feel passively exposed to events in their lives, they feel like a driver who lacks the skills to drive a car, they shift their own responsibility to other people or institutions (e.g. students blame their failures on teachers, parents or the whole school system). Proactive people are characterized by their focus on the present and the future rather than on events already experienced (comp. Pirkkalainen, Salo, Tarafdar, & Makko-

nen, 2019; Musabiq & Karimah, 2020). They take responsibility for themselves, approach problems with commitment, see them as a challenge for their development and try to influence them or solve them¹.

Students who suffer from feelings of meaninglessness and futility from their studies, who find no satisfaction in them, end up in a vicious circle while often experiencing procrastination (putting off their duties). They find their studies meaningless and have to spend much more energy than others to manage their daily duties, which is very demotivating. The consequence of this is an increase in negative reactions from the social environment (disgruntled teachers testing an „unprepared“ student, parents, friends). All of these factors combined can lead to the student dropping out of university.

Physical causes

Physical causes are most often marked by unhealthy lifestyle choices and attempts to eliminate the effects of stressful situations by using inappropriate methods – for example, alcohol, excessive food consumption, drug use, smoking or other pathological behaviours.

Institutional causes

Stress is often not the result of individual or interpersonal problems but comes from deficiencies in the management and structure of social institutions and organizations. The negative impact of a university environment can be traced back to the characteristics of a specific workplace. Those most frequently mentioned are the ergonomic unsuitability of the premises, pressure to perform, insufficient connection between learning and practice as well as uninteresting teaching methods (Švamberk Šauerová, 2017).

Social causes

The school is not detached from society, so it is very intensely influenced by current social events and attitudes. Much emphasis has recently been placed on social responsibility (the so-called third mission of universities) – universities are involved in social events, university representatives participate in socially beneficial activities and there is also much importance placed on close cooperation between the tertiary sector and the commercial sector.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to consider the limits of higher

¹ To some extent, it might be interesting to analyze the prevalence of these proactive types of students at individual universities in the context of monitoring stress resilience and burnout syndrome. This investigation is something the students intend to address in their next semester project.

education in terms of flexible responses to societal needs. Accreditation procedures take an extremely long time, and programs are prepared not only according to the needs of the market but also according to the capabilities of the experts who will be involved in any given program. The content of instruction is thus not always in line with the students' ideas about learning (see above).

In relation to the increase in stress among university students, Reddy, Menon, and Thattill (2018) from India mention a lifestyle crisis and especially the influence of expectations of good student performance not only from society but also from the parents of already adult children. They draw on statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau, which show that students commit suicide due to failing exams and that in recent years, there has been up to an 80% increase in suicides in a single year (Saha, 2017). In the Czech milieu, student suicides due to pressure on performance are still rare, but even Czech universities have experienced such situations (e.g. the Faculty of Law, Charles University).

Project proposal to support the well-being of university students

The project is based on the analysis of the degree of stress susceptibility of students in the selected field of study as well as on individual searches for

students with high stress susceptibility (see the results of the research survey below).

It is implemented in the form of a peer project - i.e. it is prepared by students who specialize in wellness counseling and can be implemented in collaboration with counselling departments of other universities. The starting point is an analysis of the susceptibility to stress of a particular group of students, and, taking into account the resulting values, a program „tailored“ to the group and the individual is then prepared.

The results of the current survey are presented below, on the basis of which the presented well-being support program has been prepared.

Research methodology

In the introductory part of the paper, brief attention was paid to the definition of basic concepts with respect to the population of university students and the connections that can be captured between these phenomena.

The starting point of the project is the significant increase of psychosomatic and psychological problems in university students (statistics of individual counselling centres of universities, results of surveys focused on mapping psychosomatic problems in university students), high „mortality“ and turnover of students after the first year of study, as well as the frequently mentioned demotivati-

on of students at academic senates, in classes, in regular evaluations – e.g. the Eurostudent survey (Fišer & Vltavská et al, 2016), Statistical Data of the Council of Universities 2016–2019, annual reports of universities.

The second and not insignificant starting point is the academic orientation of the students of the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA, namely in the area of wellness, where the primary focus is on monitoring and promoting the healthy lifestyle of various target groups. If we want to prevent stress and promote the well-being and healthy lifestyle of university students, it is appropriate to consider peer tutors, who support others with similar social parameters to pursue a healthy lifestyle. Choosing appropriate strategies and learning how to use adequate tools to prevent stress are important both for the course of study itself and, subsequently, as a way to prevent stress and possible burnout syndrome in future professional life. According to international experience, it also appears that the impact of peer programs in health promotion is increasing (e.g. Bussu & Contini, 2020).

On the basis of the survey conducted, which focused on the analysis of stress susceptibility, a proposal has been prepared to expand the course Related Practice for Students in the Wellness Specialist Program, through which it would be possible to act as a tutor of healthy lifestyle support under the auspices of

the individual counselling centres of the given university.

Data acquisition and processing methods

The survey was conducted using the Burnout Syndrome Inventory (Tošnerová & Tošner, 2002), which is the most suitable method for the purposes of the survey – it provides information about a given person/group on four basic levels (see the description of the data collection method below).

Basic processing was carried out using percentages, while statistical processing of the data is not necessary for the purposes of this paper.

The same procedure would then be applied in the preparation of a specific project for a specific target group, where, based on the evaluation of the data obtained, it would be possible to determine which students (of which academic discipline) show the highest susceptibility to the development of burnout syndrome. This would be carried out both through a comprehensive assessment and on the individual levels monitored: intellectual, emotional, physical and social. Given a more detailed analysis of the problem areas (areas in which students experience more severe deficiencies), it is possible to offer prevention programs for specific fields of study that are as precise as possible, including individual follow-up

care according to the interests of specific students.

Aim of the research investigation

The aim of the already implemented research investigation within the work of the Counselling Centre of the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA was to analyze the degree of susceptibility to stress and the emergence of burnout syndrome among university students and subsequently to compare which field of study is associated with the highest level of risk.

The sub-objectives were also to analyze the individual levels in which stress is most strongly reflected and to assess the trend in the difference in responses between the groups.

These findings can be considered as a basic starting point for the planning of prevention projects for university students or can be used to guide the prevention and education activities of university counselling centres (e.g. Švamberg Šauerová, 2017).

Research questions

The main research questions of the survey were:

- Which students (in which field of study) are most prone to stress and burnout syndrome?
- At which level do students achieve the

highest susceptibility (highest values) in general?

- Is it possible to statistically demonstrate any kind of trend in the difference between the groups studied?

To answer the first two questions, relative frequency analysis and graphical representation are used to present the data.

To assess the trend in the difference in the transformed data, a one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) model was used, followed by multiple comparisons with Bonferroni correction for multiplicity at a statistical significance level of $P=0.05$. However, the assessment of a statistically significant difference between groups is not relevant for the purposes of this paper and these results are therefore not presented here.

Target group

The target group comprised university students in different academic programs, which were divided into five basic groups:

- Biomedical orientation
- Social sciences
- Technical
- Sports
- Arts

The academic areas include various fields of study and, from a methodological point of view, it is necessary to mention that this was a deliberate selection of

Table 1. No. of students

Field of study	No. of respondents
Social sciences	356
Sport disciplines	175
Art disciplines	140
Technical disciplines	261
Biomedical disciplines	284
Total	1216

specific disciplines. The research team's aim was to include more fields of study within each academic program in the survey, nevertheless, the results cannot be considered to be comprehensive as each field of study has its own specifics. Rather, the data obtained should be regarded as a way to diagnose the level of stress and susceptibility to burnout syndrome in a given group of students in individual fields of study and to then determine what preventive measures - preventive education programs - can be implemented in individual cases.

Research design - plan, research population, organization and research methods

The survey has been conducted in a similar manner several times (the intention is to monitor the long-term susceptibility of students to stress; partial results are used for specific contributions) and the

data presented here is from a survey conducted between October and December 2019, in specified target groups (fields of study), the selection of respondents was limited by the capabilities of the team that collected the data. Sample variability was ensured by assembling several research teams (five in total), each member of which was responsible for collecting data in the respective academic program - but in a different field of study and at a different university (the same academic program). This combination minimized the impact of deliberately selecting respondents from one particular university.

The data was then recorded in a spreadsheet and was graphically processed using MS Excel software.

Research population

The research population comprised a total of 1,216 respondents; Table 1 below shows the number of respondents in each academic program. The

Table 2. Summary of results

Field of study	Rational level	Emotional level	Physical level	Social level
Social sciences	7,841317365	8,305389222	8,398203593	7,140718563
Sport disciplines	7,405228758	7,261437908	7,633986928	6,45751634
Art disciplines	8,576271186	9,881355932	9,13559322	8,220338983
Technical disciplines	9,869747899	10,75210084	10,3907563	10,15966387
Biomedical disciplines	7,574144487	8,220532319	8,266159696	7,114068441
Total	8,232368897	8,835443038	8,768535262	7,804701627

different numbers of students are due to the capabilities of the team and the total number of students studying these fields of study; the evaluation of the results is not affected by the different numbers as it is based on an analysis of the relative frequencies of the evaluation of each personality level and the overall student status – or rather, the average value achieved by the students at each level and in total is shown.

Description of the data collection method

The standardized Tošner Burnout Syndrome Inventory (2002) was used to collect data.

Respondents rated 24 statements on a scale of 0–4, with 0-never, 1-rarely, 2-sometimes, 3-often, 4-always. As far as the individual statements are concerned, they include rational, emotional, physical and social levels. The sum of

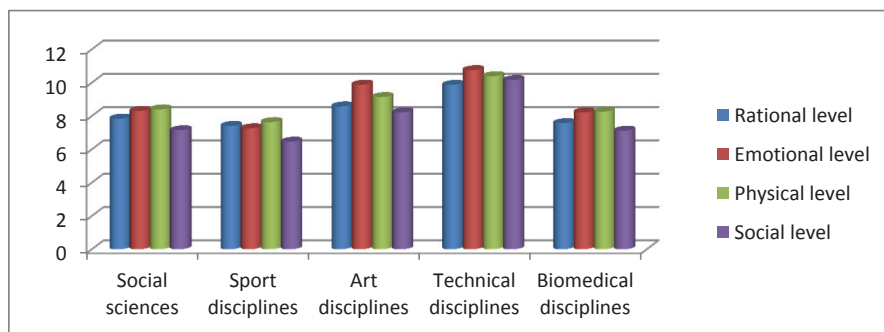
these four levels is used to determine the degree of susceptibility to stress and burnout syndrome. The maximum value of the total sum is 96, the minimum is 0. On each level, the highest value can be 24, the lowest 0.

Presentation of the survey results

The data obtained is compiled in a table for the sake of clarity – for each academic program, the average value from the evaluation of this level is listed for each level (Table 2). Subsequently, the data is also displayed graphically (Figure 1).

It is clear from the data in the table that, on average, students scored low on the individual levels, yet there is a trend that should be addressed, especially in the context of individual diagnosis, by designing and offering prevention programs.

As the data shows, students were

Figure 1. Summary of results by domain and field of study

most prone to stress in the emotional domain, while the students performed best in the social domain – this is similar to the 2017 survey.

Looking at the average values of the results by field of study, the highest values on all levels were reached by students in technical fields.

Assessment of the research questions

It can be concluded on the basis of the data obtained that overall, the respondents in the sample do not show any major pathological manifestations as a result of studying any particular field of study. If we look at which area reached higher values as compared to the others, then students in technical fields are the most prone to stress in the sample.

The group studying technology has

the highest number of students showing higher levels of stress in most personality dimensions, while in the group studying social sciences, students reach higher levels of stress in only one dimension.

Students are most prone to stress in the emotional domain and they performed best in the social domain.

In the context of the data obtained, it is appropriate to consider that peer programs to support well-being should be offered primarily to technical schools and then, in relation to the typology of technical students, to prepare a tailor-made program. As already mentioned, the well-being support program would be delivered by peers from a university that specializes in well-being support programs (the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA) in close collaboration with university counseling centres.

Design of a peer stress prevention program for university students

As is apparent from the results obtained, it is necessary to consider the development of a universal model of stress prevention in university students with respect to factors that can be influenced in the given program (i.e. it is not possible to influence, for example, social or institutional conditions).

A universal program must take into account the basic components of a healthy lifestyle, which include the following in particular (adapted from Žaloudíková, 2009):

- A regular daily routine
- A healthy diet
- Plenty of physical activity
- Commitment to psychological well-being
- Pursuit of well-being in interpersonal relationships
- Adequate stress management techniques

With regard to the academic discipline of the students who would implement the program as tutors, it is necessary to build the basis of the universal program on a component of physical activities and personal development techniques aimed at supporting self-efficacy, appropriate use of time management and stress management techniques (all these tools are intensively introduced to students

during their studies and it is a pity that they do not use them as often as other techniques that should actually only serve as a supplement to care – e.g. various wellness beauty techniques or spa treatments). Methods that support the personal development of the client and the development of their personality traits and character seem to be much more effective in stress prevention and counselling to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Exercise should be aerobic, based on the principle of flow, thus targeting the anxiolytic, antidepressant and abreactive effects of exercise (cf. Stackeová, 2013). Exercise should be supplemented with a variety of relaxation practices and activities based on exposure to the cold, which contributes to increasing complex resistance to discomfort per se.

The following techniques are especially considered to be personal development techniques: self-monitoring, SWOT analysis, a balance wheel, analysis of work and personal activities during the day, week, month, analysis of unnecessary and necessary activities, a self-reflective diary (for more details see e.g. Švamberg Šauerová, 2018), self-empowerment.

In the context of other data found in surveys focused on the preparation of specific well-being support programs for individual academic disciplines, it is therefore advisable to purposefully modify the universal program so that the project can support those areas that seem to be crucial for the given group of students in

terms of stress. For example, for a group of technology students, this may be the support of social factors – i.e. the use of physical activities in a group, while for other groups, it may be possible to use an individual exercise program.

Example of a specific project proposal for students studying a technical discipline (from our survey):

- Weekend team-building activities
- Short-term seminars with relaxation and regeneration activities
- Weekend Stress Prevention Program (a combination of nutrition, exercise, relaxation, other ways of working with stress through reflection on the meaning of experience)
- Separate options for physical activities (e.g. the extension of exercise programs as part of the study program – e.g. self-defense, going to the gym)
- Regular outreach to technical students with the offer of participating in activities implemented by students studying wellness at the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA (participation in athletics, e.g. the Gladiator Race, wellness projects, sports competitions, etc.)
- Seminars (weekend courses) on exposure to the cold
- Short-term massages
- Healthy Lifestyle (Nutrition and Move-

ment) seminar as an elective course with credits (not part of the graduate profile, can be incorporated into the study plan by agreement), led by students with the support of professors from the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA

Discussion and limits

When we evaluate the results of the survey, it must be emphasized that even though the results were obtained from more than a thousand respondents, it is necessary to continue with the survey, to reach out to other fields of study within the given academic disciplines. Similarly, it is necessary to monitor the degree of cooperation between university students and counselling centres and the degree of use of the prevention programs offered and implemented by the centres. It is also advisable to establish closer cooperation with counselling centres and to check their experience in using the prevention programs they prepare for students.

With regard to the results thus far, it is possible to wonder to what extent the observed results are influenced by the type of course of study only (e.g. stress susceptibility being high in technical fields and low in sports fields), or mainly by the type of students applying to these fields, the willingness of students to actively take care of their mental health and to participate in the programs offered.

red by university counselling centres, or finally, by a combination of all of these factors. Interesting results in this context are provided in the study by Fedorková (a dissertation focused on an analysis of the stress of students in a military school, 2022), or the study by Musabiq and Karimah (2020).

The scenario of a combination of all the factors seems to be the most probable for further research within the framework of health promotion. It is therefore advisable to consider, first of all, the preparation and implementation of specific educational and health-promoting programs for students of specific fields of study at universities with a technical focus. With regard to the type of student, technical students are generally more likely to be introverts compared to students in, for example, the humanities or sports, so it is appropriate to prepare these programs keeping in mind these personal characteristics of students, with the potential to modify them according to the needs of specific students. It may also be possible to use some of the ongoing programs of other universities aimed at preventing academic failure in the first years (e.g. the program implemented at the College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA; for more details see Švamberk Šauerová, 2017).

The proposed prevention project, which would be a part of the internship for students studying to be Wellness Specialists at the College of Physical Educa-

tion and Sport PALESTRA, can be considered as an essential option for stress prevention. It would not only support the connection between theory and practice but would also strengthen the prestige of the field and the social responsibility of the university itself.

The main benefits of the project include:

- Practical output from the study
- Effective use of theoretical study in practice
- Strengthening of the third mission – social responsibility of the university (College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA)
- Visibility of the study program and its social relevance
- Health effects for students of other universities
- Strengthening of the importance of Counselling Centres in general
- Prevention of academic failure and stress reduction for all students

The following can be considered to be among the project's limitations:

- The sampling of the survey (despite the high number of respondents, not all students were involved)
- Influence of the learning environment of a particular university
- Influence of each student's personal life situation and his/her external study conditions (general analysis, not related to the respondents)

- Classification of the study fields into the main groups of the survey
- Reluctance of students from other universities to participate in the project despite the motivating factors mentioned

A limitation of this research study may be the way in which students are divided into groups of study fields. The chosen technique can also be a limit; it is older, the advantage is stress analysis in different personality levels.

Conclusion

The findings need to be considered in the context of the type of study field, the type of personality of the student and the quality of mental health care for students at individual universities. At the same time, the data must be considered as an important resource for the design and implementation of preventive mental health/well-being support programs.

The advantage of the proposed projects is that they are prepared as peer pro-

grams, which can be considered a very important factor in the implementation of the program from a social and psychological point of view - especially in the involvement of university students in these programs, reducing the risk of generational distance and, at the same time, increasing the potential of the programs through peer interaction. The programs provide a broader framework for engaging students who want to enhance their existing mechanisms of healthy adaptation to stress, who do not feel fully comfortable, are looking for ways to improve their health, and want to develop competence in appropriate coping strategies.

The survey has yielded interesting data that has a clear overlap, not only with the practice of other universities but also with the content of the Wellness Specialist curriculum, and which should be followed up with further stages of the research project aimed at expanding the data base or supplementing the use of the services provided by university counselling centres.

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