THE IMPACT OF A SEMESTER-LONG POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY COURSE ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

by

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To my parents, Jim and Barbara, thank you for your unwavering love, endless support, and for instilling in me a deep appreciation for learning from an early age You have always inspired me.

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PREFACE

Over the past several years, I have witnessed a steady increase in the number of high school students struggling with mental health challenges. The pandemic intensified these concerns. When our school transitioned to virtual learning, I began checking in weekly with students about their well-being. The responses revealed a concerning number of students who could use mental health support, which reinforced my sense of responsibility to identify solutions.

My doctoral journey at Oakland University provided the opportunity to explore this challenge of how schools can better support student well-being. The process of designing and teaching a Positive Psychology course has reaffirmed my belief that schools must provide not only academic instruction but opportunities to strengthen students' social and emotional learning.

I would like to acknowledge my school district for supporting the implementation of the Positive Psychology course. I am also deeply appreciative of all of the students who have completed the class. Their engagement and feedback have been invaluable and continue to guide me in my commitment to advancing student learning and well-being.

ABSTRACT

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There is an increasing need to provide mental health support for adolescents as they struggle to manage high levels of stress and anxiety and often lack the coping skills to navigate the challenges of high school. Supporting and guiding students with their mental health challenges has become an ongoing concern, as many students reported being overwhelmed by academics, the highest ranked stressor in this study. The purpose of this mixed-methods case study was to examine the impact of a semester-long Positive Psychology course on high school students' mental health and well-being.

From 2022 to 2025, 490 students completed the Positive Psychology course and identified the interventions and strategies that most influenced their well-being during the semester and ones which made a lasting impact. Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered four times: at the beginning of the semester, the end of the quarter, the end of the semester, and through a follow-up survey in 2025 that was sent to prior students. Qualitative data included student reflections from final papers, a focus group, and individual interviews where students described the interventions that supported their

well-being and reduced anxiety. A control group of 100 students who did not take the course was compared to their peers who had enrolled in Positive Psychology.

Findings revealed that students who completed the Positive Psychology course reported decreases in anxiety and increased use of coping strategies compared to the control group. The course concepts demonstrating the most growth were mindfulness, gratitude, flow, PERMA, and learned optimism. The findings of this study suggest that integrating a Positive Psychology course into a high school curriculum may foster resilience, reduce anxiety, and enhance adolescents' well-being through evidence-based interventions.

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Overview

The purpose of school has evolved over time. Responsibilities placed on educators encompass more than just transmitting academic knowledge and information to students to prepare them for democratic citizenship in the future. Among other goals, schools today should provide educational equity, support diversity, offer social services, and provide a high-quality education (Center on Education Policy, 2020). Supporting and guiding students with their social and emotional learning through mental health education are additional responsibilities of schools–students struggle to learn if they are unable to manage stress and anxiety.

Mental health conditions were on the rise for children before the pandemic. Between 2016 and 2019, children experienced an increase in anxiety by 27% and an increase in depression by 24% from previous levels (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022) The CDC (2021) estimated that one in five children experienced a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, and disruptive behavior disorder. Yet only 20% received care from a specialized mental health provider (Weir, 2020). Based on a 2023 report from the CDC (2024) stated, “4 in 10 high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” and “2 in 10 students seriously considered attempting suicide and almost 1 in 10 students attempted suicide” (p. 55). As these figures show, there has been an increase in the need to provide mental

health support for adolescents because they are exhibiting signs of stress and anxiety, and many do not have the coping skills to manage the problem.

Adolescent mental health has also become a global concern. The World Health Organization (2020) reported the following facts on adolescent mental health:

- Half of all mental health conditions start by 14 years of age but most cases are undetected and untreated.
- Globally, depression is one of the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15-19-year-olds.
- The consequences of not addressing adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults. (Introduction, para 1)

In addition to global and national concerns, the mental health needs of children are extensive in Michigan. According to NAMI (2021) in Michigan,

- 1 in 6 U.S. youth experiences a mental health disorder each year.
- 119,000 Michiganders aged 12-17 have depression.
- High school students with depression are more likely to drop out.
- Almost 58% of Michiganders age 12-17 who have depression did not receive any care in the last year.

With so many students struggling with mental health issues and depression, there do not seem to be enough students receiving care. Madafferi (2024) stated, “Schools are often the first point of contact for students struggling with mental health issues like depression

and anxiety, and they can provide children with early intervention and a supportive environment." The challenges faced by adolescents in Michigan were also evident in my high school, which led me to research possible solutions to the student mental crisis.

Operational Definitions

Comprehensive school mental health system (CSMHS) supports a tired approach to offering support to students by creating a positive school environment, teaching students how to understand and manage their emotions, and support their mental health. These systems are built by teams of people who work together (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

School mental health (SMH) refers to how a school supports students in their mental health, which includes social-emotional learning, wellness programs, and encouraging staff and students to build connections (Albright et al., 2014; Stephen et al., 2014).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020, para. 1). There are evidence-based SEL programs that allow schools, parents, and the community to collaborate for the benefit of students.

Mental health literacy (MIL) refers to" knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention" (Jorm et al., 1997,

p.182). The term MIL was later expanded to include the understanding of positive mental health, mental health treatments, and mental health stigmas (Kutcher et al., 2016, p. 155).

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI) are scientifically proven and evidence-based strategies that can increase well-being, happiness, and positive thoughts and emotions (Seligman et al., 2005; Heintzelman et al., 2023).

Background

The Cost of Student Mental Health

With the rise of mental health conditions among the adolescent population, there is an issue over who will manage the problem, where support can be found, and who is going to pay for the therapy or services. Barriers to treatment for adolescents also include a lack of transportation, not knowing therapists who are available in the area, financial issues, cultural differences, and the stigma against mental health. Nevertheless, there are many school-based interventions, and individual districts must determine the best ways to support students through mental health treatments, social and emotional programming, mental health education programs, or a combination of different models. It is crucial to examine what we are doing now to help these children and why so many are not receiving the care they need.

School districts may adopt social and emotional learning into classrooms or as part of a health education curriculum to help support student mental health. The CDC (2023) recommends a comprehensive school mental health system (CSMHS) with strategies and approaches to support student mental health and well-being using a multitiered systems of support (MTSS) framework. Greenberg et al. (2017) examined

how social-emotional learning (SEL) could have a positive effect on students and the information students learn could continue to support them through adulthood: “Schools should help young people improve their general wellbeing, not just their academic skills” (p. 16). Greenberg et al. separated interventions into universal, selective, and indicated categories and found that SEL should involve the entire district, including parents and staff. Many schools use some SEL programming but do not have a vision or goals. Greenberg et al. recommended, “To advance the science and practice of school-based prevention, researchers, educators, and policy makers must work together to design evidence-based, comprehensive SEL programs that can substantially improve our communities' public health” (p. 27). A program needs vision, goals, and the support of staff members. It is important to determine whether high school students could benefit from a for-credit course that reduces the stigma surrounding mental health challenges and provides strategies to manage stress and anxiety.

Possible Solution: A High School Course

Programs cost money, and I did not want an already overburdened staff to take on additional responsibilities. While searching for tools and resources, I discovered information about a happiness course titled “Psychology and the Good Life” offered at Yale University (Ye, 2020). In 2018, more than 1,200 students enrolled in the course, and it became the most popular class in the history of the college. Similarly, faculty members at colleges and universities nationwide now teach Positive Psychology. This idea prompted me to develop a class for high school students. I created a one-semester elective course in Positive Psychology beginning in the fall of 2022 for students in grades

9-12. The course, which was developed to help high school students, aimed to teach positive interventions, resilience techniques, and cognitive strategies to manage anxiety and increase positive emotions. The information presented in the course included evidence-based research on happiness, well-being, grit, resilience, growth mindsets, character strengths, mindfulness, hope, and gratitude.

Research Questions

Through the lens of Positive Psychology, this study examined interventions designed to enhance well-being with a focus on adolescents. The purpose of the dissertation was to address the following research questions:

1. What is the impact reported by students of a semester-long (20 weeks) Positive Psychology course on their mental health?
2. Which Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) do students find most effective in increasing their social-emotional skills during the semester?
3. What Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) do students report continuing to use after completing the course?

In conducting this research, the study aimed to identify which Positive Psychology Interventions high school students found most effective in contributing to their well-being after completing the course.

Significance

Since Positive Psychology is a relatively new field, more research is needed in a variety of areas. Most research has been conducted on undergraduate students who already have an interest in the field of psychology. Some of the participants enrolled in a

course because they are psychology majors or minors (Goodmon et al., 2016; Hood et al., 2020; Maybury, 2013). A course in Positive Psychology also fits the recommended framework of the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (2013) to "Interpret behavior and mental processes at an appropriate level of complexity" (p. 18).

Limited studies are available on a 20-week course for high school students in Positive Psychology. Some schools have chosen PPIs to teach mini-lessons. Platt et al. (2020) researched two high schools in Manchester, England that led 8 weekly 1-hour sessions of PPI as a universal intervention for all students. Known as The Hummingbird Project, students could choose a PPI that they were interested in working on. Results showed significant improvement in well-being, resilience, and hope for the students who were part of the project.

Studies on Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) were needed to determine which strategies and interventions were most effective for high school students. Additional research was necessary to examine whether participation in the course reduced students' stress and anxiety during the semester and after its completion. Overall, this study was significant because limited research had been conducted on a semester-long Positive Psychology course specifically designed for high school students.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Historical Context

Positive Psychology is a field, a science, and a theory that came to fruition in the late 1990s by Martin E. P. Seligman. In 1998, Seligman served as elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA). One of the duties as APA president was organizing an initiative in the field of psychology, and Seligman decided on two areas of focus: studying ethnopolitical conflict and designing a new science, "positive psychology" (Seligman, 1998). Seligman (2019) contacted Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Raymond Fowler in January 1998. The three brainstormed how to "transform American psychology" and create a new field on "the good life–what it is to be healthy, and sane, and what humans choose to pursue when they are not suffering or oppressed" (p. 3). Fowler served as the chief executive officer of APA for 14 years and dedicated his career to personality assessment, criminal behavior, and substance abuse, while Csikszentmihalyi created flow theory, which supported the building of well-being and happiness. With the introduction of the emerging field of positive psychology, the three men decided to bring on non-tenured scientists as leaders, work on attracting funding sources, and hold foundational meetings to advance the development of the field (Seligman, 2019). Pawelski (2022) stated that a Positive Psychology Steering Committee was formed and made up of "Marty Seligman (optimism), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

(flow and creativity), Ed Diener (subjective well-being), George Vaillant (adult development), and Chris Peterson (character strengths)" (p. 144). The focus would be on determining ways to increase well-being through physical and mental health and not so much on depression, negativity, and disorders.

The University of Pennsylvania started offering a Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) in 2005. In 2007, the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) was founded and now has over 2,000 members from over 70 countries. The IPPA (2024) hosts an international congress, webinars with scholars and leaders, and special interest group divisions, including one for positive education. The formation of the International Positive Education Network (IPEN) followed in 2013:

> Positive Education is the application of the science of Positive Psychology and related fields within an educational setting to encourage students, faculty, schools, universities and communities to flourish. The focus is on enhancing the wellbeing and character development of students and faculty through the teaching and practise of specific skills within a learning ecosystem where the wellbeing of all is a priority. (IPEN, 2024)

Since 1998, Seligman and many others have expanded positive psychology into a branch of psychology that shifts its focus from the negative aspects of life and disease models to examining the good in the world. Upon learning about Positive Psychology, I became curious about the potential impact a course could have on the well-being of high school students and if adolescents would be receptive to trying Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) and subsequently using them after completing the class.

Principles of Positive Psychology

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote the introduction for the millennial issue of *American Psychologist,* which consisted of 15 articles containing a framework and developed predictions for the future of positive psychology. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi stated:

> The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 5)

As editors of the issue, they shared articles on the evolutionary perspective on individuals, communities, and experiences. The positive personal traits of subjective well-being, optimism, happiness, and self-determination were central concepts with important implications for mental and physical health. Additional definitions of positive psychology have developed over time:

- Positive psychology has a destination (the study of the good life). Positive psychology has a strategy for getting there (the scientific method). (Peterson & Park, 2003, p. 145)

- Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions. (Gabel et al., 2005, p. 104)
- Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning. (Linley et al., 2006, p. 8)
- Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal functioning. It seeks to identify the strengths and skills that enable individuals and communities to thrive. We view positive psychology not so much as a distinct field, but rather a distinct way of viewing the human condition. (Ciarrochi et al., 2013, p. 1)

The Potential of Positive Psychology

Ancient philosophers wondered what makes life worth living. Questions about the good life have pondered since Aristotle (384 B.C.E.-322 B.C.E.). Peterson and Park (2003) related that positive psychologists do not claim to have invented the scientific study of the good life and refer to it as an "umbrella term" for the different theories and research (p. 144). However, positive psychologists have brought the question of the good life and human potential to the forefront of scientific research. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000; 2014) stated, "Before World War II, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent" (p. 5; p. 280). The theory of Positive Psychology was brought into the mainstream by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) who highlighted the following points about psychology up to this point:

- "Psychologists have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living" (p. 5).

- "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (p. 5).
- "We well recognize that positive psychology is not a new idea. It has many distinguished ancestors, and we make no claim of originality. However, these ancestors somehow failed to attract a cumulative, empirical body of research to ground their ideas" (p. 13).
- "Why has psychology adopted the premise– without a shred of evidence– that negative motivations are authentic and positive emotions are derivative" (p. 13)?

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) acknowledged they were not the first pioneers in championing the merits of positive psychology. Still, they pointed to the lack of empirical research and suggested historical reasons for a focus on negativity in psychology were due to military threats, poverty, and instability. Linley et al. (2006) claimed positive psychology has existed as a knowledge base yet remained unrecognized as a field: "As such, the first part of defining an understanding of positive psychology is its meta-scientific value position: that the study of health, fulfilment and well-being is as meritorious as the study of illness, dysfunction, and distress" (p. 6). In conducting positive psychology research, Peterson and Park (2003) noted the following:

> When we think of good examples of positive psychology research, we find that they often share three features: (a) They are longitudinal; (b) they take seriously what research participants have to say by studying narratives, stories, accounts, or archived material that is inherently meaningful; and (c) at the same time, they

look at external variables-hard measures, so to speak, that are not redundant with self-report. (pp. 145-146)

Clonan et al. (2004) suggested that positive psychology be examined through positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. Researchers in positive psychology did not deny the negative aspects of life but sought to understand what was right in individuals, families, communities, and institutions. Considering that historically humans have long searched for ways to improve their lives, a course that centered on building well-being, while acknowledging that people still experienced negativity and sadness as a part of life, could have resonated with adolescents.

Well-Being and Personal Growth

Four themes emerged when examining the impact of a Positive Psychology course on high school students, which best supported the evaluation of the effectiveness of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs): Broaden-and-Build, Subjective Well-Being, Self-Determination, and Positive Youth Development. The theories focused on strengths, well-being, and flourishing in supporting individuals in their growth and development throughout life.

Broaden-and-Build Theory

As Seligman was touting the benefits of positive psychology in 1998, Fredrickson (1998) noticed positive emotions were being "marginalized" by the psychology field (p. 2). Psychology was focused more on managing negative emotions because they caused more problems for individuals and society, and emotion theorists had not developed a good prototype for analyzing the functions and adaptations of positive emotions

(Fredrickson, 1998). Fredrickson designed a model for positive emotions, noting that positive emotions do not always result in specific action tendencies (as negative emotions may) but cause more cognitive changes to "broaden the momentary thought-action repertoire rather than narrowing it" (p. 5).

The broaden-and-build model examined the four positive emotions of joy, interest, contentment, and love; these positive emotions broadened the scope of cognition and action and built physical, intellectual, and social resources (Fredrickson, 1998; 2000). Gratitude was added as a fifth emotion, as it was found to cultivate kindness and appreciation (Fredrickson, 2003). Empirical evidence showed that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action while building physical, intellectual, and social resources (Fredrickson, 1998). People developed skills to effectively cope with negativity or adversity because they had built resilience. Frederickson (2000, 2001, 2004) described how finding positive meaning in events broadened one's ability to discover even more positive meaning, creating an "upward spiral" that may alleviate symptoms of sadness when faced with a negative event because a person became more resilient (p. 16, p. 223, p. 155). Conway et al. (2013) refined the theory by finding that positive emotions broadened and expanded attention, cognition, and social cognition, thereby fostering growth in wellness and resilience.

Frederickson (2000) provided strategies and interventions to experience contentment such as imagery exercises, meditation, and relaxation therapies. Frederickson stated, "From the perspective of the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions are vehicles for individual growth and social connection: By building people's

personal and social resources, positive emotions transform people for the better, giving them better lives in the future" (p. 224). Conway et al. (2013) noted that more research was needed on adolescents because of increased activity of the prefrontal cortex, suggesting that positive interventions could result in long-term positive effects. The broaden-and-build theory was useful when examining the effects of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) specifically those involving mindfulness, meditation, and gratitude journals.

Subjective Well-Being Theory

Diener (1984) acknowledged that early philosophers and writers wondered about the causes of happiness in people, but he sought empirical evidence to measure what explained happiness. Diener also wondered, "What are the effects of happiness?" (p. 561). Historically, well-being was viewed in terms of virtue or holiness, life satisfaction, and pleasant emotional experience (Diener, 1984; Lambert et al. 2015). Diener and Seligman (2002) stated, "Investigations of happy people are rare, and investigations of very happy people do not exist. This imbalance probably stems from clinical psychology's historic emphasis on pathology, coupled with the belief that understanding abnormal processes can illuminate normal processes" (p. 81). With the blossoming of positive psychology, subjective well-being (SWB) became an area of interest in psychological research. SWB is defined as a person's self-report of experiencing pleasant emotions, engagement in activities, and satisfaction with physical and mental health (Diener, 2000). Tov et al. (2022) provided an overview of well-being research and summarized the following points:

1. Well-being involves more than happy feelings

2. Well-being can be validly measured

3. Income influences well-being up to a point

4. High-quality relationships are essential for well-being

5. Genes and personality influence well-being

6. People adapt to many circumstances, but it takes time

7. Culture and society influence well-being

8. There are benefits to experiencing well-being (beyond feeling good) (pp. 1453-1454).

Since people completed evaluations on their own, critiques were made on the validity of the measurements. Diener (1984) was initially concerned about the validity of self-reporting, but Sandvik et al. (1993) found self-reporting to be a valid form of measuring subjective well-being, while also noting that interviews would be helpful to generate a more complete story. Information gathered from measures of subjective well-being (SWB) allowed researchers to analyze individuals and their functioning in society as one form of measurement (Diener et al., 2003). Another concern was that mood could affect how a person responded to the questions on the scale (Diener, 1984; Sandvik et al., 1993). Diener et al. (2003) stated,

> The field of subjective well-being (SWB) comprises the scientific analysis of how people evaluate their lives—both at the moment and for longer periods such as for the past year. These evaluations include people's emotional reactions to events, their moods, and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfillment, and

> satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work. Thus, SWB concerns the study of what lay people might call happiness or satisfaction" (p. 404).

Through SWB studies, valuable information on well-being has been uncovered. Diener (2000) found that "temperament and personality" could also affect SWB because people may adjust to circumstances (p. 40). Diener et al. (2009) found that well-being may fluctuate for different reasons and does not always go back to the set point, as described by Brickman and Campbell's (1971) hedonic treadmill. Diener and Seligman (2002) concluded in a study on undergraduate college students and found happy people do feel unpleasant emotions, but they are happy most of the time; however, "the happiest people rarely feel euphoria or ecstasy. Instead, they feel medium to moderately strong pleasant emotions much of the time" (p. 84).

There are different categories of theories to further divide SWB, which have changed over time. Diener (1984) reviewed the following theories for SWB: telic theory, pleasure and pain theory, activity theory, top-down versus bottom-down theory, associationist theory, and judgment theory. Lambert et al. (2015) developed a roadmap of well-being orientations containing philosophical traditions (utilitarian, virtue, hedonic, and eudaimonic), and a psychological framework (telic theories, top-down versus bottom-up theories, cognitive theories, evolutionary theories, theories of temperament and personality, and relative standard theories). Heintzelman et al. (2023) relayed four models of well-being: the positive engagement model, the medical model, the strengths model, and the autonomy model.

Well-being represents the umbrella term covering many aspects of Positive Psychology. Tov et al. (2022) stated, “At its heart, well-being is a field that spans psychology. It includes the study of emotion, personality, cognition, development, social relationships, and virtually every other area of psychology” (p. 1453). Students who complete a Positive Psychology course may experience an increase in well-being during the semester, and these feelings of happiness and gratitude could extend beyond the course itself.

Self-Determination Theory

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) included self-determination theory (SDT) as one that’s important for the study of well-being and positive psychology. SDT focuses on the universal human needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, and when all three are supported, motivation, performance, and development improve (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence, relatedness, and autonomy are basic psychological needs for people in all cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). SDT is concerned not only with individuals but also with the social environment and the nature of motivation (Deci & Ryan 2000). Deci & Ryan (2008b) stated,

> As a macrotheory of human motivation, self-determination theory (SDT) addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation, affect, behavior, and well-being (p. 182).

SDT is concerned with the nature of motivation and how individuals behave based on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci stated of intrinsic motivation, “Perhaps no single phenomenon reflects the positive potential of human nature as much as intrinsic motivation, the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70). Keeping adolescents motivated in the classroom is a challenge in education, so research to “examine the conditions that elicit and sustain” intrinsic motivation would be of value (p. 70). Through a meta-analysis on autonomy in schools, Deci and Ryan (2008a) found, “In particular, practices and policies focused on motivating studies through sanctions, rewards, evaluations, and other external manipulations undermine quality engagement, whereas those that foster interest, value, and volition result in both greater persistence and better quality learning” (p. 19). SDT is also interested in how people generate motivation to persist with a task or behavior when they are not feeling intrinsically motivated. Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that motivation could be improved by internalizing or placing a value on the task or behavior and integrating it into one’s sense of self. Applying SDT provided a framework for understanding adolescents’ internal and external motivation to use strategies and interventions both during and after the Positive Psychology course.

Positive Youth Development

Much like Positive Psychology’s focus on well-being and happiness, Positive Youth Development (PYD) examines people's strengths, interests, and potential but with an emphasis on adolescents (Damon, 2004). Less attention is placed on what youth are

doing wrong and more on interventions to promote well-being (Bowers et al., 2010; Damon; Tolen et al., 2016). With a concentration on wellness, PYD mirrors Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) shift from researching learned helplessness, weaknesses, and psychological disorders to examining human strengths, virtues, and flourishing. Benson et al. (2006) stated, "The pendulum swing away from abnormal development began with the study of resilience—the amazing ability of some adolescents to succeed, even thrive, despite challenges, obstacles, and deficits that led many of their peers to make disastrous choices" (p. 1). Damon stated, "The positive youth development approach aims at understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than at correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies or so-called disabilities" (p. 15).

PYD suggests using developmentally appropriate activities for adolescents that are productive rather than maladaptive (Damon, 2004). Using activities in an educational setting is one area that allows adolescents to learn from each other and work together. Donlan et al. (2015) found relationships with peers in adolescence can be positive and negative because adolescents are developing at different rates in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement –challenges may arise due to these disparities. Within the school setting, finding ways to promote positive peer relationships within academics and school engagement can promote positive youth development. Donlan et al. stated, "...the school setting can foster a culture of peer relationships that provide the bases for competence, confidence, positive connections, character, and caring" (p. 127).

The school setting is not the only area of importance, as the adolescent should be motivated to examine strengths, virtues, and wellness. Larson (2000) noted the importance of initiative as a requirement on the part of adolescents which involves intrinsic motivation, engagement, and effort to experience positive development. Overall, PYD has helped curtail negative behaviors in adolescents (Catalano et al., 2002). Price-Mitchell & Clay (2024) suggested that schools add SEL programs and educate parents and stakeholders on positive development because their study concluded that "self-awareness, resilience, and resourcefulness are the most strongly correlated with life satisfaction. Moderately strong correlations exist for sociability, curiosity, and integrity. GPA and empathy are the lowest correlates of life satisfaction among measured constructs" (p. 75). Adolescents who participated in a Positive Psychology course may have had the opportunity to understand their strengths and become better prepared for the future. Taylor et al. (2017) stated, "The main purpose of PYD is to set young people on a positive developmental trajectory so that they are prepared to fully realize their potential and are resilient to the challenges they may face. This framework offered key elements that align with the goals of Positive Psychology interventions.

Research Review: Programs and Courses

To determine the impact of a Positive Psychology course on the mental health of high school students, an investigation into the history of programs and courses designed to enhance students' social-emotional skills was conducted as a starting point. Historically, programs designed to increase well-being were more available to college and university students through courses and later with online offerings. K-12 schools may

offer whole-school wellness initiatives or short programs, but a semester-long class for high school students is in its infancy; however, such programs should continue to grow if PPIs are shown to be effective in increasing social-emotional skills.

14 Fundamentals Program

Fordyce (1977) conducted three studies to determine if a two-week self-study program could increase happiness and well-being for 338 community college students enrolled in a psychology course. In the first study, Fordyce designed three programs: insight, fundamentals, and activities. The insight program educated students on happiness and asked them to complete three activities each week that the students believed happy people engaged in. In the fundamentals program, students also received information on happiness but were provided with a list of nine activities that could increase happiness. Students needed to complete three out of the nine activities each day. Students enrolled in the activities program did not receive information about happiness but were asked to think about activities that they enjoyed and which led to happiness. A control group was set up, and students did not receive information about happiness, but activities were suggested to them under the premise that they could improve their happiness. Using an 11-point happiness scale, Fordyce stated, “Sixty-four percent of students in the insight condition, 73% in the fundamentals condition, and 52% in the activities condition felt that the programs had noticeably improved their happiness” (p. 515). Students who did not increase their happiness levels shared that they did not complete all the assignments. A two-month follow-up report showed that students maintained their happiness levels, and some even increased their levels.

Fordyce (1977) completed a second study and expanded it from two weeks to six weeks. Students in the experimental group were required to implement at least one of 14 fundamentals from the happiness program every day and record a reflection in a diary:

> (a) spend more time socializing, (b) strengthen your closest relationships, (c) develop an outgoing, social personality, (d) be a better friend, (e) work on a healthy personality, (f) lower expectations and aspirations, (g) develop positive, optimistic thinking, (h) value happiness, (i) become more active, (j) become involved with meaningful work, (k) get better organized and plan things out, (1) develop your "present orientation," (m) reduce negative feelings, and (n) stop worrying. (p. 517)

Using pre- and post-analysis, Fordyce reported on the experimental group: “Ninety-seven percent of the subjects felt subjectively that the program had been highly successful for them” (p. 518). The addition of more activities and the additional four weeks increased the happiness levels of the experimental group.

In a third study, participation in the 6-week 14 fundamentals program was optional, as it was part of a personal and social adjustment course for community college students. Results indicated that students who completed the optional program increased their happiness levels compared to those who did not participate (Fordyce, 1977).

Data from the three studies by Fordyce (1977) demonstrated that the 14 fundamentals program increased happiness. There were limitations in the studies because the only measurement tool was a pretest and posttest, and Fordyce was the instructor of the community college courses. In debriefing with the students, Fordyce noted that

education on happiness benefited the students, and daily attention to the fundamental activities made the students more aware of their ability to increase their happiness. The study demonstrated that people could expand their happiness levels through training, development, and self-study.

Fordyce (1983) replicated the studies using the 14 Fundamentals Program and adapted the program through four additional studies to investigate increasing happiness among adult community college students. The investigations found through data and testimonies that the 14 Fundamentals Program was effective for short-term happiness throughout each of the seven studies. In the seventh study, questionnaires were mailed to people who had completed the course within the past 9-18 months to determine the long-term effectiveness. Fordyce stated, “Averaged together (over all seven investigations), 81% of the individuals receiving the program claimed happiness gains (38% reporting that the information had made them ‘much happier’ or ‘extremely happy’)” (p. 495).

There are critical findings from the research on the 14 Fundamentals Program that relate to my investigation into student mental health and the role of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs). The work of Fordyce (1977, 1983) offers important implications for researchers who also serve as an instructor within their courses. In my case, I served as both the presenter of course material and the researcher. Fordyce (1983) addressed this dual role as a potential source of bias: “Since all information was presented by the experimenter, there is the possibility that the presenter's enthusiasm and ability to motivate may account for the demonstrated increases more than the techniques themselves” (p. 496). A limitation in evaluating the impact of my Positive Psychology

course is that students may have inflated their responses due to a desire to please me. Through the studies, Fordyce (1977, 1983) demonstrated that happiness can be improved through training and development, which is a key point in well-being research.

Introduction to Well-Being and Positive Psychology

At Penn State University, Introduction to Well-Being and Positive Psychology is a popular course with psychology majors as well as for students from other disciplines who are interested in the topic (Bridges et al., 2012). The course, known as Mental Hygiene in 1937, has changed names four times, and the focus has shifted from addressing maladjustment to emphasizing positive interventions (Bridges et al.). In the fall of 2010 and 2011, the instructors asked students to post their assignments on a blog, which could be private or public for three interventions: Three Good Things, Signature Strengths, and a Gratitude Letter. Surveys to students were sent out six months after the course ended, and all of the students indicated that they were still using the Three Good Things (some wrote daily), and half of the students were still thinking about their character strengths (Bridges et al.). Bridges et al. found that teaching Positive Psychology by including interventions such as classroom exercises to undergraduate students and the addition of active learning through blogs increased students' well-being.

Students who enrolled in my Positive Psychology course also practiced the Three Good Things intervention used in the Penn State University class. Bridges et al. (2012) found that students continued to utilize the Three Good Things exercise in a follow-up survey administered six months after the class ended. I also wondered whether my students would continue to write gratitude letters, reflect on their signature strengths, and

contemplate the good things in their lives after completing the Positive Psychology course.

Positive Education Programs (PEPs)

Some K-12 schools are starting to incorporate Brief Positive Psychology Interventions (BPPI) in their curriculum (Platt et al., 2020; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). The American Psychology Association (2022) developed a seven-unit lesson plan for high school psychology teachers and recommends using the curriculum in a standalone unit with a psychology course, integrating the lessons throughout a psychology course, or teaching the unit after Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology students finish their exam in the spring. Courses in Positive Psychology for academic credit are also beginning to be offered at the high school level; however, research on adolescents is limited because dedicating an entire course to the subject is still in the early stages.

Csikszentmihalyi (2009) stated that positive psychology contributes to improving well-being for individuals, but the challenge was to enhance the social and cultural environment through three goals: "helping the planet, helping social justice and helping complexity of consciousness" (p. 210). Schools are one setting in which adolescents can be supported in pursuing these goals.

> There are two elements which predict a healthy, happy, involved young adulthood nine years later, when these adolescents are at the end of high school. These are two almost opposite traits: one is the amount of challenge that a 12 to 14 years old reports. And the second is the amount of skills he or she reports moment by moment in life. These were the best predictors of successful adaptation to college

> and work nine years later, better than almost anything else. Only one other thing predicts success as well, and that is "cooperation." (p. 209)

If schools can develop well-being in students, then the growth and success of these adolescents will have a positive effect on future relationships, community, resources, and advancements for all people. The school environment is an effective place to educate all students on well-being, encourage strength-building strategies, and provide information on PPIs. Seligman et al. (2009) noted that well-being should be taught in schools as a way to decrease depression, improve life satisfaction, and enrich the learning process. Clonan et al. (2004) suggested moving part of the focus away from a small percentage of struggling students to using positive psychology for all students. Schools have access to children and families in the community, so schools are in a position to help families, but a concern is determining in what capacity the information could be relayed (Clonan et al., 2004). Clonan et al. recommended using the consultation model, which involved developing the program internally using teachers in the school instead of bringing in an outside consultant or program.

Involving teachers in well-being programs was found to be effective in a systemic review of 20 school-based prevention programs and early intervention programs. Neil and Christianson (2009) examined programs on their effectiveness in reducing anxiety for children and adolescents. Programs that used a teacher from the classroom to guide instruction (instead of mental health professionals, researchers, or graduate students) were found to reduce anxiety by 88 percent (Neil & Christianson, 2009). Neil and Christianson stated, "Overall the current findings support the usefulness of anxiety

prevention and early intervention programs in schools. Both indicated and universal approaches produce positive results with small to moderate reductions in anxiety at post-test and follow-up" (p. 214). In St. Peter's School in Adelaide, Australia, the whole school (early years through grade 10) studies positive education as well-being is engrained in the culture. White and Murray (2015) stated of St. Peter's School, "Integrating the science of positive psychology *within* the context of your school's culture and strengths is an evolutionary process and takes time; however, it means you will create a well-being approach for your school" (p. 3). Implementing school-wide well-being positive education programs may be something to reserve for the future until more research is completed on the impact of PPIs.

Penn Resiliency Program (PRP)

For over 20 years, there have been 17 studies conducted on the Penn Resiliency Program. Over 2,000 children and adolescents (ages 8 to 15) have undergone studies with PRP (Seligman et al., 2009). Using diverse samples, a variety of group leaders, and independent evaluators, the research demonstrated an improvement in well-being.

> The major goal of the PRP curriculum is to increase students' ability to handle day-to-day stressors and problems that are common for most students during adolescence. PRP promotes optimism by teaching students to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter. PRP also teaches assertiveness, creative brainstorming, decision making, relaxation, and several other coping and problem-solving skills. (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 297)

Data were collected through student self-reports. Rickard et al. (2023) found that the attitudes of the instructors teaching the PRP may influence students' outcomes. The PRP also includes a parent information session designed to strengthen support for the program (Neil & Christenson, 2009).

The goals of the PRP align with the outcomes I anticipate for high school students who complete a Positive Psychology course. Similar to the PRP, students in my study also completed self-reports to reflect on their learning and well-being.

Positive Psychology Program

Seligman et al. (2009) studied the effect of a Positive Psychology high school curriculum for ninth-grade students and received a $2.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to conduct the "first empirical study of a Positive Psychology curriculum for adolescents" (Seligman et al., p. 300). There were 347 ninth-grade students in language arts classes involved in the year-long study; some received the Positive Psychology coursework (20-25 80-minute sessions), while the control group did not. Seligman et al. stated, "The major goals of the positive psychology programme are 1) to help students identify their signature character strengths and 2) to increase students' use of these strengths in day-to-day life" (pp. 300-301). Students, parents, and teachers completed questionnaires before the program began, after the conclusion of the program, and two years later. Results indicated that students enjoyed school more and felt more engaged; social skills also improved. However, depression and anxiety symptoms, character strengths, and involvement with extra-curricular activities did not show improvement.

In January 2008, the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania sent 15 trainers to teach Positive Psychology to 100 faculty members of the Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia. GGS is a co-educational boarding school with four campuses and over 1,600 students (Hanson-Peterson, 2024). Some trainers and researchers stayed for one year and other scholars (e.g., Barbara Fredrickson, Roy Baumeister, Stephen Post, Diane Tice, Christopher Peterson, Kate Hays, George Vaillant, Nansook Park, and Ray Fowler) visited to share their knowledge on Positive Psychology with the school community (Seligman et al., 2009). The GGS faculty were instructed in how to teach students and parents how to use signature strengths, build positive emotion, resilience, and active constructive responding; the principles were integrated into the courses throughout the school, athletics, and fine arts (Seligman et al., 2009).

The Institute of Positive Education (2024) is currently based on the site of the Geelong Grammar School. The Institute hosts professional learning workshops, webinars, podcasts, and resources to support the growth of well-being throughout school communities. All staff members of GGS complete a Positive Education course on well-being and positive education (Hanson-Peterson, 2024). Hanson-Peterson noted GGS worked with Seligman from 2006-2009, and the school developed a Positive Education model using "key domains of wellbeing: Positive Relationships, Positive Emotions, Positive Engagement, Positive Accomplishment, Positive Health, Positive Purpose" (p. 21). GGS expanded positive education from their campus to educate the community as well as other educators who are interested in learning from the Institute of Positive

Education. The school embraced the elements of well-being and is now spreading the ideas to anyone interested in benefiting from them.

Rickard et al. (2023) conducted a small-scale study of students in Year 10 at GGS to evaluate the mental health and well-being outcomes using a mixed-method design that included quantitative surveys and focus groups. The Year 10 students showed increased satisfaction with life and a stronger sense of relatedness by the end of the school year. Rickard et al. recommended the following:

> Involve students more directly in both the development and delivery of PEPs to ensure the programme is highly engaging. Inclusion of innovative teaching tools and technologies may also provide a more contemporary interface for students to engage with programme content and to embed positive education principles within their daily life. (p. 325)

The students who completed the Positive Psychology course for my study were in grades 9-12. The analysis identified the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) that were most effective in enhancing their well-being. Future research could explore whether there are differences across grade levels in the course's impact.

Positive Psychology Programs at Colleges, Universities, and Online

Positive Psychology programs have been examined by researchers in college and university settings and through online courses. Although the participants in these studies are older than the adolescents in my research, the interventions that were implemented are similar. Evaluating growth data from these studies provides insight about what is currently known in the field and highlights areas where further research is needed.

Seligman et al. (2005) conducted a randomized control trial (RCT) with 411 adult participants (between 35 and 54 years old) with baseline questionnaires and follow-up assessments over the Internet. The participants completed the PPIs for one week, and follow-up questionnaires were filled out after one month, three months, and six months. Participants completed five interventions: gratitude visit, three good things, you at your best, using signature strengths in a new way, and identifying signature strengths (Seligman et al., 2005). A placebo exercise was included, which asked participants to write about early memories each night. Seligman et al. (2005) found, "Two of the exercises—using signature strengths in a new way and three good things—increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months. Another exercise, the gratitude visit, caused large positive changes for one month" (p. 416). The other interventions and the placebo produced some short-term growth but did not result to lasting improvements. Seligman et al. noted that in future studies, encouraging participants to engage with interventions for extended periods could increase well-being and prolong feelings of happiness.

In my Positive Psychology course, I also incorporate the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) described by Seligman et al. (2005). Although their intervention period lasted only one week, the effects of the interventions lasted for an extended period.

Maybury (2013) examined the effects of a 14-week Positive Psychology course on 23 undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in the northeastern United States. Students completed pre- and post-course assessments measuring mindfulness, envy, meaning in life, life satisfaction, self-actualization, hope, and happiness. Assignments

included the VIA (Values In Action) Character Strength Assessment, keeping gratitude and beauty journals, writing one gratitude letter, and reading the letter aloud to the recipient. Additional components involved analyzing films through the lens of character strengths and analyzing four books. Maybury (2013) stated, "As hypothesized, students reported gains in hope, self-actualization, well-being, agency, and pathway hopefulness, purpose, and mission in life" (p. 62). Limitations of the study included the lack of a control group, a small sample size, self-selection bias among students who chose to enroll in the course, and students' potential awareness of the research hypothesis (Maybury, 2013).

In my Positive Psychology course, students complete the VIA Character Strengths Assessment, maintain a gratitude journal, and write two gratitude letters. Maybury (2013) suggested that the timing of the course in the spring of 2010 may have affected the well-being of the students since the post-assessment was taken at the end of the school year. Since my course is offered each semester, it will be valuable to compare the outcomes between students who complete the course in the first semester and those who take it in the second semester.

Baş (2016) studied the effects of including a Positive Psychology elective course on 56 senior undergraduate students enrolled in a guidance and counseling program in Turkey during the fall semester of 2014-2015. Using mixed methods design, Baş analyzed pre-test and post-test life satisfaction scores and conducted a course evaluation survey following completion of the class. Findings indicated that the 14-week course increased students' life satisfaction, and participants expressed that Positive Psychology

should become a permanent part of the program. Limitations of the study included the absence of a control group and following up with students three to six months after the course concluded. Baş also served as both the instructor of the course and the researcher for the study, which may have introduced potential bias.

Similarly, my study employs a mixed-method design but includes follow-up data from students who completed the Positive Psychology course beginning in the fall of 2022. Baş (2016) included an overview of course content with the study, and I also plan to include a breakdown of the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) incorporated throughout the semester.

Goodmon et al. (2016) explored the well-being and mental health of 38 undergraduate students who were enrolled in Positive Psychology (experimental group) or Social Psychology (control group) at a liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. Students were measured using pre- and post-assessments on the following: enduring happiness, life satisfaction, routes to happiness, depression, and stress. A variety of PPIs were used during the 16-week Positive Psychology course: VIA Character Strength inventory, maintaining a gratitude journal, writing a letter of forgiveness, a planned act of kindness, a random act of kindness, a savoring exercise, mindfulness, an evaluation of the Pixar film, *Up* (2009), and required readings. Goodmon et al. (2016) stated, "Consistent with the hypothesis, unlike the control, the post-psychology class exhibited higher levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, and positive approaches to life and lower levels of depression and stress postcourse" (p. 235). Goodmon et al. shared this study was one of the first to examine various dimensions of happiness within a

positive psychology course. The GPAs of students in both groups did not show a significant difference. Similar to Maybury (2013), the improvements could also be attributed to the expectancy effect of students knowing that the Positive Psychology course could enhance their well-being. Another limitation discussed by Goodmon et al, (2016) was that "we cannot pinpoint what specific course components (e.g., the topic of course, the course readings, the PPE's, or a combination of factors) were responsible for the benefits" (p. 236).

The research by Goodmon et al. (2016) closely aligns with the goals of my study involving high school students. Many students enroll in my Positive Psychology course with the intention of increasing their happiness and well-being, so the expectation of social and emotional growth is already established. The Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) I implement are similar to those used in Goodmon et al.'s study; however, my students view Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015) instead of *Up* (2009). Unlike Goodmon et al., my study does not differentiate between specific course components and PPIs in determining which most effectively support students throughout the semester. Instead, students provide survey feedback and write reflections regarding the activities and interventions they found most meaningful.

Froiland (2018) wondered if a class on Positive Psychology for 26 undergraduate students at a university in the West would improve students' gratitude and positive emotions about studying. Students participated in the following PPIs throughout the semester: gratitude journal, gratitude letter, mindfulness, goal setting, acts of kindness, hope, positive expectations, identifying and applying signature strengths, sharing positive

events, and active constructive responding. Pre and post-test questionnaires were administered on gratitude and homework. Froiland indicated that "the positive psychology course for undergraduate college students contributed to statistically significant improvement in gratitude and emotions toward studying" (p. 256). Froiland also noted that "those who attended the most regularly were likely to experience a greater benefit" (p. 256). A limitation of the study was the absence of a control group, and the long-term effects remained unknown because no follow-up questionnaires were administered to the participants.

In my Positive Psychology class, the curriculum incorporates the same (Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) that Froiland (2018) implemented throughout the semester. A notable aspect of Froiland's study was the relationship between attendance and outcomes, as consistent attendance contributed to greater understanding of course content. This finding is relevant because many high school students experience issues with tardiness or absenteeism, which may affect their understanding and engagement with the content compared to students who were present in class and on time. The pre- and post-assessment is another critical component of Froiland's research and my own study design.

Kotsoni et al. (2020) recruited adults online who were currently dealing with symptoms of anxiety, depression, or stress in Athens, Greece. Participants received PPIs through a six-week program, "Be Your Best You," with 26 people participating (13 were in the intervention group and 13 were in the control group). Kotsoni et al. shared PPIs with the participants: "The interventions were deriving from a wide range of topics such

as gratitude, kindness, character strengths, savoring, meaning of life and positive relationships" (p. 1027). Individuals completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of the program and three months after finishing the program. Kostoni et al. stated that the participants "reported statistically significant lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and negative emotions after the completion of the programme. There was also a significant increase in their levels of well-being, satisfaction with life and positive emotions" (p. 1029). Participants retained the same levels three months after the end of the program. Kotsoni et al. stated, "To our knowledge, this is the first multi-component study of PPIs delivered to the general population measuring both well-being and symptoms of psychopathology in Greece" (p. 1029). One limitation of the study was that the participants who signed up for the program already had a desire to improve their well-being and life satisfaction, which may have influenced their motivation and expectations for progress. Kotsoni et al. recommended that future research include adolescent participants to further explore the effects of PPIs within this age group.

Kotsoni et al. (2020) recruited individuals who were experiencing symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression and found that a six-week online program using PPIs improved participants' well-being. In comparison, students in my Positive Psychology course practiced these interventions over a 20-week period. PPIs could be considered universal interventions, so the adolescents in my class who may experience anxiety, stress, or depression, may benefit from the course in similar ways.

Smith et al. (2021) researched undergraduate students who were enrolled in a 16-week course at a medium-sized university in the southwestern U.S. There were 112

students who completed an in-person Positive Psychology course twice per week for 75 minutes, and 176 students who were enrolled in other psychology courses served as the control group. The students in Positive Psychology learned about the PERMA model, VIA character strengths, goal setting, and gratitude. Students in both groups completed measures of well-being during the first week and last week of the semester. In comparison to the students in other psychology courses, the students in Positive Psychology demonstrated improvements in happiness, well-being, PERMA, health, loneliness, and negative emotions (Smith et al., 2021). Smith et al. stated, "The most important implication of this study is that a positive psychology course may have a substantial impact on all aspects of happiness and well-being while reducing negative emotions and improving health" (p. 357). A limitation of the study was that the long-term effect was unknown because measures were not conducted again after the course ended.

In my Positive Psychology course, I teach many of the same concepts as Smith et al. (2021), but I have more instructional time with students each week. Surveys are administered during the first week of class, after the first quarter, and at the end of the semester. I also surveyed all of the students who completed the course to assess the long-term effects of the interventions.

Smith et al. (2023) investigated the effects of an 8-week online Positive Psychology course for undergraduate students at a medium-sized state university in the southwest. The online course was developed based on an in-person Positive Psychology class. In total, 128 undergraduate students participated in the study (65 students were in the experimental group, and 63 were in the control group). Students in the control group

were enrolled in other online psychology courses. Smith et al. included weekly practice exercises for the course: “What Makes You Happy, Identifying and Using Your Strengths, Seeing and Creating the Good, Savoring and Finding Flow, Strengths and Goals, Expressing Gratitude and Compliments, Creative Kindness, Best Possible Life” (pp. 1163-1164). At the end of the positive psychology course, positive mental health and general health increased while anxiety and depression decreased; the same changes did not occur for the control group. The results demonstrated that an online course could be as effective as a longer, in-person class. The study did not measure the long-term effects of the course.

The PPIs that Smith et al. (2023) implemented with the Positive Psychology students are the same interventions I utilize in my course. One limitation described in the study is also relevant to my research. Smith et al. stated, “The improvements in the positive psychology students may have been affected by expectations that they would improve” (p. 1161). Students may enroll in Positive Psychology with prior knowledge that the course is designed to enhance their well-being, which could influence their self-reported outcomes. Additionally, some students have already completed a general psychology course, and others are currently enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology. Smith et al. (2013) did not conduct a follow-up study, so the long-term effects of the class are unknown. In contrast, I examined the lasting impact of Positive Psychology by surveying all of the students who have completed the course.

Fält-Weckman et al. (2024) explored the immediate and long-term effects of 350 students (ages 15-19 years old) from eleven different secondary schools in Finland who

were enrolled in *Study with Strength*, a positive psychology course. The course consisted of 17 lessons, each lasting 75 minutes, covering topics such as positive psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and the PERMA theory. Staff at the Finnish schools received training on Study with Strength including the principals, teachers, school psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors. Participants completed self-report questionnaires to establish a baseline before the course and a post-intervention assessment. Fält-Weckman et al.'s study concluded the following:

> *Study with Strength* intervention course does enhance specific aspects of student well-being, including positive practices at school, positive emotions, and happiness. However, it does not have an impact on their general well- being or ill-being, including on symptoms of depression and study-related burnout. Nevertheless, the students reported a positive effect of the intervention on their personal lives and their studies. (p. 11)

Fält-Weckman et al. noted that they did not address the effect of the PPIs on stress or anxiety or the long-term effects of the course.

The PPIs from the study and the length of the course are similar to my Positive Psychology class. The study by Fält-Weckman et al. (2024) included 350 participants from ten different schools as well as different instructors. There is a possibility that instructors could have influenced students' experiences and outcomes with the content of the course. COVID-19 also could have influenced the results because the period was different from a normal school year.

Research Review: Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs)

There are Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) that have been proven to increase well-being and positive emotions. Depending on the length of a course or program, more PPIs may be explored by participants allowing for a greater amount of time to practice utilizing the strategy or activity. Duckworth et al. (2005) stated, "First, positive interventions, by definition, build pleasure, engagement, and meaning, and we believe they are therefore fully justifiable in their own right. Second, we believe that building positive emotion, engagement, and meaning may actually counter disorder itself" (p. 641). When Positive Psychology courses or programs use multiple PPIs, it becomes difficult to determine which PPIs are more effective and how many to teach other people. Seligman et al. (2005) stated,

> Given that the *use of signature strengths in a new way* exercise, the *three good things* exercise, and the *gratitude visit* exercise were all effective, does it make sense to assign them all to a person who wishes to be happier? And if so, is there an optimal sequence? Is there a personality type for whom some exercises "take" and others do not? (p. 420)

I grappled with these questions and wondered how many PPIs I should include in 20 weeks because some may work for one person but not for another. The sequence of presenting interventions is interesting because some students have suggested that I teach certain interventions earlier in the course than others. The four PPIs that I explored in my study are gratitude, character strengths, flow, and mindfulness because they are all elements that I used in my Positive Psychology class.

Gratitude

Klein (1975) examined the effects of envy and greed on the development of love, happiness, and gratitude beginning in infancy. The ability to trust others and be grateful helped to decrease the effects of negative emotions and impulses. Klein stated, “One major derivative of the capacity for love is the feeling of gratitude. Gratitude is essential in building up the relation to the good object and underlies also the appreciation of goodness in others and in oneself” (p. 187). Emmons and Shelton (2002) explained that gratitude is not an innate quality present in infancy but one that is learned and develops over time throughout childhood and adolescence. Froh and Bono (2008) described how gratitude is developed in children and adolescents by adults who encourage practicing and becoming aware of the good efforts of others. The benefits of expressing and feeling gratitude are abundant. Froh and Bono stated, “Gratitude has long been considered a critical component of health and well-being for individuals and social stability for society, and its practice” (pp. 62-63). The benefits extend to “relational benefits—strengthening families, peers, schools, and communities. It seems that gratitude may be a simple way to help children and adolescents actualize their social, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual potentialities” (p. 72). School is one environment where gratitude-based interventions can be taught to children and adolescents (Armenta et al., 2022; Bono et al., 2023).

For Emmons et al. (2000), “Gratitude is an emotional state and an attitude toward life that is a source of human strength in enhancing one's personal and relational well-being” (p. 56). Emmons and Shelton (2002) stated, “As a psychological state, gratitude is

a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life. It can be expressed toward others, as well as toward impersonal (nature) or nonhuman sources (God, animals)" (p. 460). Many of the world's religious traditions emphasize the importance of gratitude (Emmons et al., 2000; Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Bono et al., 2023). Emmons et al. (2000) developed questions for future gratitude research, and these three were most applicable to my research: "Can the practice of gratitude alleviate distress as well as enhance positive well-being? What are the most promising strategies for inculcating an attitude of gratitude? What is the link between gratitude and happiness?" (p. 66).

As an intervention, cultivating gratitude can lead to mental health benefits. Emmons and Shelton (2002) conducted a study where participants wrote for 21 days in a gratitude journal. Those who wrote daily gratitude logs scored higher on well-being measures and were more likely to help people. Cultivating a sense of gratitude, especially in times of stress or trauma, may also support well-being (Emmons & Shelton, 2002).

McCullough et al. (2002) designed four studies to examine gratitude as an "affective trait" or "grateful disposition" using self-report measures and informant ratings (p. 112). The facets of grateful disposition include the *intensity* of how grateful a person feels, the *frequency* of how often they feel grateful, the *span* of how many different aspects of life a person is grateful for at any given moment, and the *density* of recognizing and appreciating the contributions of multiple people for a single event (McCullough et al, 2002). Results from the study by McCullough et al. revealed the following characteristics of grateful people:

> Grateful people are higher in positive emotions and life satisfaction and also lower in negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and envy. They also appear to be more prosocially oriented in that they are more empathic, forgiving, helpful, and supportive than are their less grateful counterparts. Relatedly, grateful people are less focused on the pursuit of materialistic goals. Finally, people with stronger dispositions toward gratitude tend to be more spiritually and religiously minded. (p. 124)

With gratitude prompting a multitude of positive characteristics in people, studies have been conducted to determine how to elicit feelings of gratitude in people and how to practice gratitude.

Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted three studies to investigate how gratitude journals would affect physical and psychological well-being. In Study One, 192 undergraduate students in a large university who were part of a health psychology course were randomly assigned to write one of three weekly reports for ten weeks; one group wrote up to five things that they were grateful for each week, the second group wrote up to five things that bothered them during the week, and the third group described up to five events or circumstances that affected them throughout the week. Weekly well-being ratings were also completed by all of the participants in Study One. Results showed the participants who wrote about things they were grateful for, "felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic regarding their expectations for the upcoming week. They reported fewer physical complaints and reported spending significantly more time exercising" (p. 381).

In Study Two, 157 undergraduates in a health psychology class at a large university participated in the research. The participants completed 13 daily reports in which they were asked to rate their whole day specifically in the evening. The conditions were the same for the first two groups in Study Two; however, the third group was the "downward social comparison condition" and were asked to list ways that they were better off than others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, p. 381). Participants self-reported their health measures and pro-social behaviors. Study Two did not have differences in health outcomes, but the participants in the gratitude group indicated an increase in pro-social behavior because they were more likely to help someone or offer emotional support.

For Study Three, Emmons and McCullough (2003) extended the length from two weeks to three weeks. Participants replied to a mailing through the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic. The 65 people (mean age was 49) in the study had congenital or adult-onset neuromuscular disease. Participants were provided with 21 daily forms and were asked to fill them out at the end of the day and then place them in the mail. The adult participants received $21 in compensation for the study. Results from Study Three indicated that participants increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and improved the quantity and quality of sleep; there were no changes in physical health. Observer reports of well-being were also included in Study Three, and these indicated that the participants showed an improvement in well-being and life satisfaction.

The three studies on gratitude by Emmons and McCullough (2003) demonstrated that counting one's blessings and being grateful led to positive well-being. All three were self-reported, and the third one also included an observer reporting on the improvement in well-being. The lasting effects of the gratitude exercises are unknown because follow-up questionnaires were not administered to the participants.

Bono et al. (2023) noted that high school students should be supported with school-based gratitude interventions, so researchers conducted a study with 326 students from two urban high schools (mean age was 14.72). Over six weeks, seven teachers instructed the students in 21 different classrooms. Classrooms were randomly assigned a condition: 1) "Thanks! Curriculum", 2) "GiveThx web app," 3) Both the curriculum and the app, 4) Control group (Bono et al., 2023, p. 5). A pretest and post-test were administered at the beginning and end of the study which consisted of a gratitude questionnaire, a depression scale, and a measure was created to assess subjective well-being. Results indicated that combining the curriculum with the app led to the greatest improvement in well-being. Bono et al. stated, "Importantly, the findings suggest that teaching the science and reasoning behind gratitude's benefits makes the practice of thanking others more meaningful to students" (p. 11). Teachers and staff should support the gratitude practices for the benefits to continue past the six-week program (Bono et al., 2023).

Armenta et al. (2022) conducted a 4-week online study with 1,000 ninth and tenth-grade students from four high schools in the United States (three were located in Los Angeles and one was located in New York City). The students completed one

gratitude letter each week, read testimonials about expressing gratitude, and completed acts of kindness. The study also contained a control group where the students organized their daily activities and reflected on them. A three-month follow-up was conducted with the participants on their activities, experiences, and emotions. Armenta et al. stated, "Our findings suggest that routine expressions and reflections of gratitude may ultimately lead high schoolers to do better in school and thus become well-adjusted, productive members of society" (p. 1014). The results also revealed that the interventions did not have an effect academically. Based on the study by Armenta et al., I included a follow-up questionnaire to see how students were doing after completing the course. From surveying my Positive Psychology classes, I have also found that participation in the course does not necessarily lead to higher overall academic achievement.

Froh et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between gratitude, well-being, and materialism for 1,035 high school students (mean age was 15.67 years old) from a wealthy district in Long Island, New York. Students were assessed in the spring of 2007 on the following measures: materialism, gratitude, academic achievement, life satisfaction, envy, depression, absorption and social integration, and socioeconomic status. Froh et al. found that "grateful adolescents attained a higher GPA, were more socially integrated, were higher in absorption and life satisfaction, and were less envious and depressed than their less grateful counterparts" (p. 298). These findings are relevant to my Positive Psychology course, as the data suggest that sustaining gratitude may contribute to greater well-being and academic success in high school. However, since I did not notice a correlation between gratitude and academic success from student self-

report surveys, I may consider using an alternative measure to further examine the relationship between gratitude and grade point average.

In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) recommended two gratitude exercises that have been used in Positive Psychology courses and programs. Seligman et al. (2005) described the two interventions:

- *Gratitude visit*. Participants were given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.
- *Three good things in life*. Participants were asked to write down three things that went well each day and their causes every night for one week. In addition, they were asked to provide a causal explanation for each good thing. (p. 416)

Seligman et al. (2005) found that "*the gratitude visit* caused large positive changes for one month, and *three good things in life* "increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months" (p. 416). Emmons (2007) noted the importance of taking time to think about gratitude: "We cannot be grateful without being thoughtful. We cannot shift our mental gears into neutral and maintain a grateful lifestyle. That is why gratitude requires contemplation and reflection" (p. 6). The intervention of counting blessings is also effective for adolescents: "inducing gratitude in students via counting blessings may be a viable intervention for mitigating negative academic appraisals and simultaneously promoting a positive school climate—one that nurtures both academic and social competence" (Froh & Bono, 2008, p. 70). While "three good things" is effective in increasing well-being, there is a question of the best frequency because students could be

bored if they are expected to write too often (Froh & Bono, 2008). In a five-year longitudinal study on adolescents' social and moral reasoning skills, Bosacki et al. (2018) recommended that teachers utilize gratitude journals and gratitude letters with students because the youths experienced the most happiness when they experienced gratitude.

Character Strengths

Understanding and using a person's character strengths are another PPI that can increase well-being (Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2005). Park and Peterson (2008) stated, "*Character* refers to those aspects of personality that are morally valued. Good character is at the core of positive youth development" (p. 86). Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a Values in Action (VIA) classification system to measure 24-character strengths and six broad categories of virtues. The 96-question assessment may be completed online in a single session through self-reporting. Peterson and Seligman (2004) stated, "The VIA-IS uses 5-point Likert-style items to measure the degree to which respondents endorse items reflecting the 24 strengths in the VIA classification. Scores are formed by averaging responses within scales, with higher numbers reflecting more of the strength" (p. 627). The top strengths are referred to as signature strengths. Park et al. (2006) found that among 54 nations, people have "similar profiles of character strengths" (p. 125). According to the VIA Institute of Character (2024), over 30 million people have completed the free online survey.

Park (2004) examined character strengths as a way to support positive youth development. Park defined character strengths as:

> A family of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Character strengths are important in their own right, but they additionally promote well-being and buffer against psychological disorders among youth. Good parenting, close relationships with peer and family, positive role models, positive institutions, and various youth development programs play important roles in the development of character strengths. (p. 40)

The connection between character strengths and life satisfaction was explored in my Positive Psychology course, and students were surveyed about the use of their character strengths. Park and Peterson (2009) stated, "Finding *novel* ways to use strengths every day is critical and reflects the importance of ongoing personal effort in producing a flourishing life" (p. 5). Future activities in the course could include reflective writing in which students describe how they apply their strengths in new ways and monitor their progress over time.

Character strengths should be viewed as qualities that vary in degree among individuals and developmental stages, while also being influenced by cultural context (Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2005; Park & Peterson, 2009). The ways character strengths are expressed may shift and transform across different stages of life (Park & Peterson, 2005). In a longitudinal study, Gander et al. (2020) found that character strengths in adults remained stable for up to three and a half years, and strengths can change with improvements in well-being and life satisfaction.

Character strengths are also considered "trait-like" because although these strengths are stable, they may still evolve or develop in meaningful ways throughout a

person's life. (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 6). While self-reporting is considered reliable, other observations, informant reports, and structured interviews by family, friends, and teachers were also recommended (Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2005). Park (2004) pointed out that there was "a strong association between various strengths of character and life satisfaction" (p. 48). In an online study with 577 adult participants, Seligman et al. (2005) found that when people used their signature strengths every day in a new way for one week, happiness increased, and depressive symptoms decreased for six months.

The VIA classification system is valuable when combined with finding ways to use or improve signature strengths or work on less developed strengths (Park & Peterson, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2009). Park and Peterson (2008) found that young people had high character strengths in gratitude, humor, and love. Park and Peterson (2009) stated, "Growing evidence shows that specific strengths of character—for example, hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-control, and perspective—buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma, preventing or limiting problems in their wake" (pp. 1-2). At the Geelong Grammar School, students completed the VIA classification test, and teachers have designed lessons where students delve more into their signature strengths by writing narratives and interviewing family members about their strengths (Seligman et al., 2009).

Proctor et al. (2011) conducted a study on character strengths with 319 adolescent students from two secondary schools in Great Britain. Students completed character strengths-based exercises with their classroom teachers with the Strengths Gym program, which consisted of 24 lessons. A control group of 101 adolescents did not complete the

program. Proctor et al. (2011) stated, “The aim of the program is to encourage students to build their strengths, learn new strengths, and to recognize strengths in others” (p. 382). The results from pre- and post-measures indicated that students who participated in the program had higher life satisfaction scores compared to the control group. Researchers felt the program should extend through the entire school year to ensure that all students received the 24 lessons. Proctor et al. (2011) identified several limitations in their study, including that classroom teachers administered the pre- and post-surveys rather than an outside individual, all measures were self-reported by the students, and grade point average should have been included as a variable, In my research, I did not ask another teacher to administer the surveys, and I chose to focus on self-reported data by students instead of branching out and asking teachers and parents to also complete surveys.

Toner et al. (2012) conducted a study on the relationship between character strengths and well-being with 501 high school students who were enrolled in a Positive Education program in Australia. Students in Year 10 completed the questionnaires as a requirement of the course, whereas students in Years 11 and 12 could participate voluntarily. Toner et al. stated,

> The present study supports the previous research suggesting that hope, optimism, and future-mindedness is a consistent predictor of SWB in young people. As such, the explicit teaching of this strength should be considered a pivotal element in any intervention aimed at enhancing happiness and life satisfaction in youth. (p. 641)

There was a gender difference in ratings, with female students scored high in “kindness, appreciation of beauty, fairness, bravery, perspective, humour, and love” (p. 641). Toner

et al. (2012) noted a limitation of the study was generalizability because the students attended private school and were enrolled in a course on positivity. In my class, I could later compare the character strengths to measures of well-being to examine potential differences between gender and grade levels.

White and Waters (2015) completed a case study of St Peter's College (a K-12 school) in Adelaide, Australia. In 2011, the whole school adopted initiatives in Positive Education with a specific focus on a character strength-based approach in sports, student leadership, counseling, and the curriculum. The school has developed a "strengths-based culture," so there are not just individuals working on strengths but the whole institution of the school (White & Waters, 2015, p. 75). The focus on character strength development throughout school classrooms and across grade levels was beyond the scope of my research. However, the strategies of incorporating character strengths throughout the school environment demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering the well-being and personal growth of both students and staff.

Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (2008) defined flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (p. 4). Flow is an "optimal experience" which may be challenging because it involves participating; flow is not a passive activity (p. 3). Researchers have found that when people are in a state of flow, they can achieve higher levels of well-being (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Shernoff et al., 2003; Stavrou, 2007;

Ullén, 2012). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) shared, “The happiness that follows flow is of our own making, and it leads to increasing complexity and growth in consciousness” (p. 47). Whalen (1998) noted that flow can be taught both at home and in school by creating opportunities and activities with clear goals, challenges, and skills. Adolescents who experience flow may also be more comfortable at times when they are alone because they can find passion and strength in individual activities (Whalen, 1998). Shernoff et al. (2003) stated, “Flow theory is based on a symbiotic relationship between challenges and skills needed to meet those challenges. The flow experience is believed to occur when one’s skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized to meet a given challenge” (p. 160). In my Positive Psychology course, students learned about the concept of flow while studying engagement as one of the components of the PERMA model. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) stated, “It is necessary to transform the typical tasks of life into flow activities and, at the same time, to teach people how to reach flow even when what they have to do is not inherently conducive to the experience” (p. 161). In the course, students reflected on their experiences with flow as they set and worked toward their four-week goals.

Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) conducted a two-year longitudinal study on flow with 281 adolescents (grades 6th, 8th, and 10th) in 12 locations across the United States. The students completed self-report forms describing their current activity and emotional state each time a watch beeped randomly within a two-hour block. The findings indicated that when students were at school, the measure of flow was high, but mood and motivation levels were low in comparison to a weekly average (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi stated, “Although overall mood

was correlated with flow in each year, increasing in flow did not appear to affect mood appreciably" (p. 18). In my Positive Psychology course, students learned about the concept of flow and reflected on their own optimal experiences. They identified activities that could help them increase flow and engagement in their daily lives. While the study revealed that an increase in flow did not improve mood, Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi found, "Adolescents who increase in flow do more school work, build stronger links between their current activities and their career goals, and feel more strongly that their daily activities are important to their future goal" (p. 19). Adolescents should be supported in identifying activities that increase flow, as the benefits extend beyond improving mood.

Shernoff et al. (2003) completed a longitudinal study of 526 adolescents from 13 U.S. high schools during the 1990s utilizing three separate cohorts to determine how engaged students were in school. Data were self-reported by participants using an experience sampling form for 7 days which consisted of questions about their thoughts, current activity, level of engagement, attention, and quality of the experience. Independent measures were conducted on the challenge, skill, instruction, classroom activities, and the subject. Results indicated that when students were at school, most of the time was spent doing passive activities and engagement was highest in nonacademic courses. High engagement also led to more positive emotions. Shernoff et al. stated, "Students reported being more engaged during individual and group work than while listening to a lecture, watching TV/video, or taking a test" (p. 172). The work by Shernoff et al. is relevant not only to Positive Psychology but also to my other courses, as

it demonstrates that interaction with peers and opportunities for active participation enhance student engagement, which can increase positive emotions and overall well-being.

Stavrou et al. (2007) examined the orthogonal model (apathy, anxiety, relaxation, and flow) of flow theory among 220 athletes (median age was 19.95) in seven individual sports. The athletes used a self-report scale, which measured their flow characteristics during their sport and other scales were utilized to gauge the challenge and their skill level. The participants who demonstrated higher scores in the flow state were more relaxed and reported more positive experiences than athletes who were anxious or indifferent (Stavrou et al., 2007). Stavrou et al. stated, "Psychological-preparation programs could include positive thinking, self-talk, and goal-setting interventions to increase the level of athletes' perceived skills" (p. 450). The study demonstrated the importance of achieving flow through the balance of challenge and skill but also the value of relaxation, which can enhance overall performance. This concept is important to teach students, as some may possess the skills for success but experience anxiety or nervousness that interferes with their performance in academic, social, or athletic settings.

Marszalek (2022) examined flow theory with 159 middle school students who were completing standardized math and reading achievement tests. Through mixed methods research, state and trait flow, state and trait anxiety, test anxiety, test performance were evaluated, and interviews were conducted on flow experiences. Results indicated that participants who experienced flow performed better on the assessments,

and they also had lower anxiety levels. Marszalek recommended that "Educators can promote flow by helping test-takers increase concentration, lose self-consciousness, and merge action and awareness" (p. 268). The study reinforces the importance of teaching students strategies to reduce anxiety, as experiencing flow may lead to improved outcomes during testing. Encouraging students to achieve flow and relaxation in school settings is also a component of my Positive Psychology course, as the flow state provides benefits beyond high-stakes testing.

A study by Mao et al. (2024) measured flow, well-being, and psychological resilience with 474 undergraduate students in Southwest China during COVID-19. The student volunteers completed questionnaires three times during the fall semester of 2022, which was close to the end of the pandemic in China. Researchers found that students who were more involved in flow activities increased their well-being and psychological resilience. Mao et al. stated, "Particularly, this study underscores the role of psychological resilience as a potential outcome of flow experience and a critical bridge to multidimensional well-being" (p. 532). The connection between resilience and grit is an important concept for high school students, and these are both components of my Positive Psychology course.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a form of meditation for the mind, body, and spirit. Kabat-Zinn (2013) stated, "All of us have the capacity to be mindful. All it involves is cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment as we suspend our judging, or at least, as we become aware of how much judging is usually going on within us" (p. 49). With

mindfulness, people pay attention to things around them, develop compassion, and focus their energy, which can lead to well-being and relaxation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Kabat-Zinn (2021) stated, "For mindfulness is not mindfulness if it is not lived. And that means embodied. Those of us who undertake it in this way do so as best we can—not as an ideal, but as an ongoing and continually unfolding way of being" (p. 1557). Brown and Ryan (2003) researched the connection between mindfulness and well-being in adults and college students and found the practice led to "positive well-being and less cognitive and emotional disturbance" (p. 843). In cancer patients, mindfulness practice helped to improve mood and lower stress levels (Brown & Ryan, 2003). After research demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness in adult populations, the education field also began to recognize its benefits for students. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) reviewed studies and training programs on mindfulness for K-12 educational settings.

> The typical foundation of mindfulness-based curricula for K-12 students includes age-appropriate mind–body practices that aim to increase focused attention, social competencies, and emotional self-regulation. Curricula lessons that target awareness of inner/outer experiences include: focused attention on breath and sensory experiences; awareness of thoughts and emotions; movement practices; and caring or kindness practices. Skills are learned over time, and the intention is that, through sustained practice, mindful awareness becomes a positive way of being in the world for students—whether learning and interacting at school, at home, or in the community. (p. 298)

Teachers should obtain training in mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) before introducing the practice to students in order to fully understand the framework. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) noted that teachers who receive mindfulness-based training are more confident in their ability to support students in developing mindfulness practices. Crane et al. (2017) described mindfulness-based programs (MBPs):

> MBPs typically include mindfulness training via three formal mindfulness meditation practices – the body scan, mindful movement and sitting meditation. Practices are assigned as daily home practice with the support of recorded guidance. Throughout the program participants are also encouraged to generalize through informal practice by bringing awareness in particular ways to everyday activities. (p. 994)

This definition helps establish a standard for mindfulness programs and contributes to a clearer, more cohesive understanding of mindfulness practice.

Beauchemin et al. (2008) conducted a study on mindfulness meditation (MM) with 34 high school students (mean age was 16.61 years) who were diagnosed with a learning disability. The students attended a private high school in Vermont, and their classroom teachers received two hours of MM training from an instructor. Students completed MM for up to 10 minutes per day for five weeks. Students were measured before and after the MM intervention on social skills, anxiety, and academic performance. Results indicated that social skills and academic performance improved, and state and trait anxiety decreased. Beauchemin et al. shared that one of the open-ended questions asked students about the mindfulness training: “Of the 88.24% of students who

responded to this question, 100% reported positive feelings about the meditation and expressed that the meditation led to feelings of calm, quiet, relaxation, peacefulness, or better overall feelings" (p. 41). Limitations of the study were that there was no control group, and students may have expected positive outcomes and therefore provided favorable ratings. Beauchemin et al. recommended that future research should include qualitative data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and I incorporated participant interviews in my research. In my Positive Psychology class, students spend the beginning of each class period practicing breathing exercises, meditation, or mindfulness for varying lengths of time throughout the 20-week semester.

Biegel et al. (2009) examined the effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) on 104 adolescents who were enrolled in an outpatient child and adolescent (average age was 15.35 years old) psychiatric facility. A control group received the standard outpatient treatment without MBSR. Participants were given a pretest, a posttest after 8 weeks of the program, and another follow-up was completed after three months. Instructors who were trained in MBSR taught the participants mindfulness for two hours per week for eight weeks. In addition to their psychiatric treatment as usual (TAU), the participants were taught "formal mindfulness practices: body scan meditation, sitting meditation, Hatha yoga, and walking meditation" and the informal lessons included "presentations, group sharing of practice-related and other experiences, and instruction in at-home mindfulness practice assignments" (Biegel et al., 2009, p. 858). The MBSR participants received a workbook, weekly practice diaries, and a CD with meditation. Using clinical measures of mental health and self-reporting, results indicated that

participants in the MBSR program demonstrated "significantly reduced self-reported anxiety, depressive, and somatization symptoms, and improved self-esteem and sleep quality compared with TAU-only control participants" (Biegel et al., 2009, p. 864). Biegel et al. acknowledged that a limitation of the study was that the adolescent participants were psychiatric outpatients, and many of them were diagnosed with mood and anxiety disorders.

In my Positive Psychology course, several students also worked to manage anxiety, and some had a medical diagnosis with an individualized education plan. Since mindfulness was beneficial for the adolescents in Biegel et al.'s study, I felt encouraged to continue implementing mindfulness practices with my students.

Broderick and Metz (2009) piloted Learning to BREATHE, a mindfulness curriculum, with 120 senior girls (average age was 17.4 years old) in a private Catholic high school in Pennsylvania. Seventeen junior girls from the high school served as a control group. A researcher and an assistant instructor taught the curriculum to students twice a week (32 to 43 minutes per session) as part of a health class for five weeks. Broderick and Metz stated that the "Goals of the program include helping students understand their thoughts and feelings and learn mindfulness tools for managing negative emotions, and providing opportunities to practice these skills in a group setting" (p. 38). Pre-test and post-test measures were administered to the participants and the control group by the students' health teacher. Results indicated that participants felt the in-class meditation, body scans, a music activity, and an activity about emotions were the most effective. Through self-reports, participants indicated feeling calmer and more relaxed,

with increased self-acceptance, improved emotional regulation, and greater awareness of their emotions compared to the control group. Since the program duration was five weeks, Broderick and Metz wondered if the program was too short to produce long-term effects for the adolescents. They also noted that the skill level of teachers should be considered before training them to implement mindfulness programs.

In my Positive Psychology course, I teach a unit on mindfulness that includes practices such as body scans, listening to music mindfully, mindful eating, mindful visualization, mindful seeing, and mindful movement. Music is often one of the students' favorite practices and used as a coping strategy during times of stress. Broderick and Metz (2009) stated, "Approximately half of all participants reported that the most important skill they had learned from the program was how to deal better with stressful thoughts and feelings" (p. 41). Students in my class have shared that practicing mindfulness helps them feel more equipped to manage stressful emotions.

Galla et al. (2016) examined two field studies of meditation training programs that asked participants to practice meditation outside of class sessions. In the first study, 132 adolescents (mean age was 16.76) completed a five-day meditation retreat, and over half of them had tried meditation before. The adolescents completed self-report questionnaires on personal goal commitment, action plans, meditation frequency, and emotional well-being before and after the retreat and three months after the program ended. Galla et al. found that adolescents who developed specific meditation action plans along with a personal commitment to practice had positive results with "enhanced mindfulness, self-compassion, and emotional well-being, including decreased depressive

symptoms and increased life satisfaction" (p. 226). In the second field study, 123 adults (mean age was 47.25) completed an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Management (MBSM) course, and they were placed in an action plan condition or a control group. The adult participants completed self-report measures assessing personal goal commitment and the frequency of out-of-class meditation practice once a week for eight weeks. Emotional well-being, mindfulness, perceived stress, positive and negative affect, and gratitude were measured through self-reports at the beginning and end of the program. The participants who developed action plans displayed "enhanced well-being, including increased gratitude and positive affect, and decreased negative affect and perceived stress" (Galla et al., 2016, p. 232). Galla et al. concluded, "The introduction of self-regulation strategies into mindfulness training programs may be a useful tool for boosting out-of-class meditation practice and improving training outcomes" (p. 234).

In my Positive Psychology class, I encouraged students to continue practicing mindfulness at home, but I did not help them set specific goals. Galla et al. (2006) recommended that participants in mindfulness programs receive feedback on their goals. Goal setting and feedback on mindfulness could be incorporated in the future, as engaging in out-of-class meditation practice led to improvements across multiple measures.

Mrazek et al. (2019) examined the effectiveness of a 22-day digital mindfulness course with 214 public high school students on the West Coast of the United States. Students completed the 2.25 hours of lessons individually during class through a "custom digital learning platform that provides content tailored to the interests of individual users"

(Mrazek et al., 2019, p. 3). Participants were instructed to complete four-minute daily mindfulness exercises for the course, but the teachers could decide whether to dedicate class time to these exercises or ask students to do them outside of class. Pre- and post-quantitative measures assessed emotional regulation, life satisfaction, mind-wandering, mindsets, life demands, stress, and classroom distraction. A qualitative analysis was also conducted during the post-test on students' initial reactions to the course and their perceived benefits after completing it. Students reported improvements in emotional regulation, more understanding of how to develop and practice a growth mindset and better ability to control their responses to stressful situations. Mrazek et al. did not include a control group, which was described as one of the limitations of the study. In my research, I included a control group of students who were enrolled in psychology courses but had not completed Positive Psychology. Another limitation identified in their study was that the researchers developed their own questions instead of using validated self-report instruments. I also developed my own survey questions along with including open-ended questions.

Lassander et al. (2022) examined the effectiveness of a 9-week mindfulness intervention program compared to a control group that practiced relaxation techniques among 110 adolescent students (6th and 9th grade) in Finland. As stated by Lassander et al. (2022), the mindfulness intervention group used the Stop & Breathe curriculum (Huppert & Johnson, 2010), and the control group was taught a relaxation program on Chilla by Folkhälsan Förbundet. The participants completed questionnaires as a baseline measure, after 9 weeks, and again at a 26-week post-intervention follow-up. Students

were provided with different stress-inducing tasks and psychophysiological stress reactivity measurements were taken by testing their heart rate, high-frequency heart rate variability, skin conductance level, and skin conductance responses using electrocardiography and electrodermal activity. Facilitators outside of the school served as instructors of the mindfulness group and the control group. Instructors taught 45-minute sessions once a week and asked students to practice at home for up to 15 minutes per day. Lassander et al. stated, "Our results indicate that a mindfulness intervention is not significantly different from a relaxation-based control program in terms of psychophysiological measures" (p. 312). However, in highly stressful situations the group that received mindfulness instruction demonstrated lower stress responses than the relaxation control group. Lassander et al. concluded that if mindfulness training can provide some emotional regulation and lower stress levels for adolescents, then it should be considered as a form of support for students.

While I did not use electrocardiograms or stress-inducing tasks in my study, the research by Lassander et al. (2022) showed that mindfulness-based interventions can help adolescents improve emotional regulation. With a short intervention period of 9 weeks, there were no large differences between the breathing training for the mindfulness participants and the relaxation control group (Lassander et al., 2022). I implemented my intervention over the course of the semester, so there could be larger differences when compared to the control group, who did not receive instruction in mindfulness or relaxation techniques.

Kennes et al. (2023) investigated the effects of "Think Happy-Be Happy" (THBH), a program that uses mindfulness and character strengths with adolescents in a Dutch school. The intervention group of 120 adolescents (ages 13-15 years old) is from one school with eight classes participating in THBH. The students completed 45-minute sessions once a week for 8 weeks during the school day, which were not guided by the classroom teacher but instead led by a trainer who understood the THBH program. The control group consisted of 236 adolescents from three different schools, and this group did not participate in any programming. All students completed a mental health form and a strengths and difficulties questionnaire three times (at the baseline, one week after the intervention, and six months after the intervention). Kennes et al. stated, "In line with expectations, at post-intervention, adolescents who participated in all sessions of the intervention experienced significantly increased well-being (i.e., emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being) compared to adolescents who did not participate in the intervention" (p. 689). Participants also showed "significantly decreased symptoms of hyperactivity and inattention compared to adolescents who did not participate in the intervention" (Kennes et al., 2023, p. 690). At the six-month post-assessment, the THBH participants did not maintain their well-being levels. Kennes et al. wondered if a longer intervention program would help maintain well-being, but there was also concern that students were often skipping the exercises that were supposed to be completed outside of school. Recommendations included training classroom teachers in the THBH program to reinforce the concepts and implementing the program schoolwide to ensure consistent support.

In my Positive Psychology class, students had more time to practice mindfulness and apply their character strengths since we met three times a week over a 20-week semester. In contrast, the THBH intervention group met once a week for 8 weeks. As the classroom teacher, I could reinforce concepts throughout the semester and discuss them with students in my other courses. Kennes et al. (2023) stated that many students in the intervention group were not motivated to participate in THBH, and this may be the reason the students did not complete the exercises outside of the classroom. My class is an elective course, which students choose to take, and most are motivated to participate in the interventions. Since mindfulness is embedded in the curriculum, I emphasize to students that while formal meditation is practiced in the classroom, mindfulness is a lifelong skill that continues beyond the classroom. Kabat-Zinn (2021) stated of the practice:

> And what we call *informal meditation practice,* which when all is said and done is the real meditation practice, involves letting life itself become coextensive with your meditation practice and recognizing that everything that unfolds within it, the wanted and the unwanted and the unnoticed, is the real curriculum. (p. 785)

Determining the effectiveness of having a classroom teacher lead mindfulness practice compared to an outside trainer could be the focus of a separate study. Throughout the semester, I shared personal experiences related to character strengths and mindfulness with my students to help them understand that well-being is an ongoing journey.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Overview

The purpose of school has evolved over time. Responsibilities placed on educators encompass more than just transmitting academic knowledge and information to students to prepare them for democratic citizenship in the future. Among other goals, schools today should provide educational equity, support diversity, offer social services, and provide a high-quality education (Center on Education Policy, 2020). Supporting and guiding students with their social and emotional learning through mental health education are additional responsibilities of schools, as students struggle to learn if they are unable to manage stress and anxiety.

Research Design

Case studies provide a methodological framework for research that can include qualitative and quantitative data in the evaluation (Yin, 1981; Tellis, 1997). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) offered a perspective on the description of case studies: "Researchers must understand the concepts of the case, case study methods (and how they differ from other qualitative methods) and the case narrative" (p. 152). Case studies can be classified by purpose, disciplinary norm, and research approach (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Yin (2003) stated the following of case study inquiry:

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result

- relies on multiple courses of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (pp. 13-14)

Gerring (2004) proposed that the case study is "intensive" and "bounded" while occurring in one period of time or a specific time frame (p. 342). A case study may also involve a small number of people in a limited area, which allows data to be studied at a micro-level (Zainal, 2007). After identifying the focus of the case study, it is important to ensure the questions are not too broad and the topic has a limited number of objectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study provided a framework for my research, which allowed for multiple sources of evidence with the clear objective of determining what Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI's) benefited high school students.

Based on these defining qualities of a case study, the explanatory approach provided a way to determine the answers to my research questions. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) stated, "An explanatory research design is a correlational design in which the researcher is interested in the extent to which two variables (or more) covary, that is, where changes in one variable are reflected in changes in the other" (p. 345). Snyder (2012) stated,

> My research questions remained the focus throughout the study. I allowed those questions to drive my decision-making in terms of which methods might offer the most clarity in the interpretation of my participants' words. This organic flexibility allowed me to identify and implement methods that I would not have

otherwise used in combination. (p. 19)

The explanatory case study design provided an approach to investigate and analyze the data from my research questions using multiple data collection methods.

I conducted a mixed methods study using high school students who had completed my Positive Psychology course during the 2022-2025 school years. Tellis (1997) outlined six sources of evidence that were identified by Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) for research in case studies: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. In collecting a variety of data for case study research, Yin (2003) noted that "no single source has a complete advantage over all the others" (p. 85). Triangulation enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings by using surveys, student documents, interviews, and a focus group. In support of mixed methods, Creswell and Guetterman (2019) stated, "This design also captures the best of both quantitative and qualitative data—to obtain quantitative results from a population in the first phase and then refine or elaborate these findings through an in-depth qualitative exploration in the second phase" (p. 554). This mixed methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Positive Psychology interventions on high school students by utilizing multiple forms of evidence to strengthen the credibility of the study.

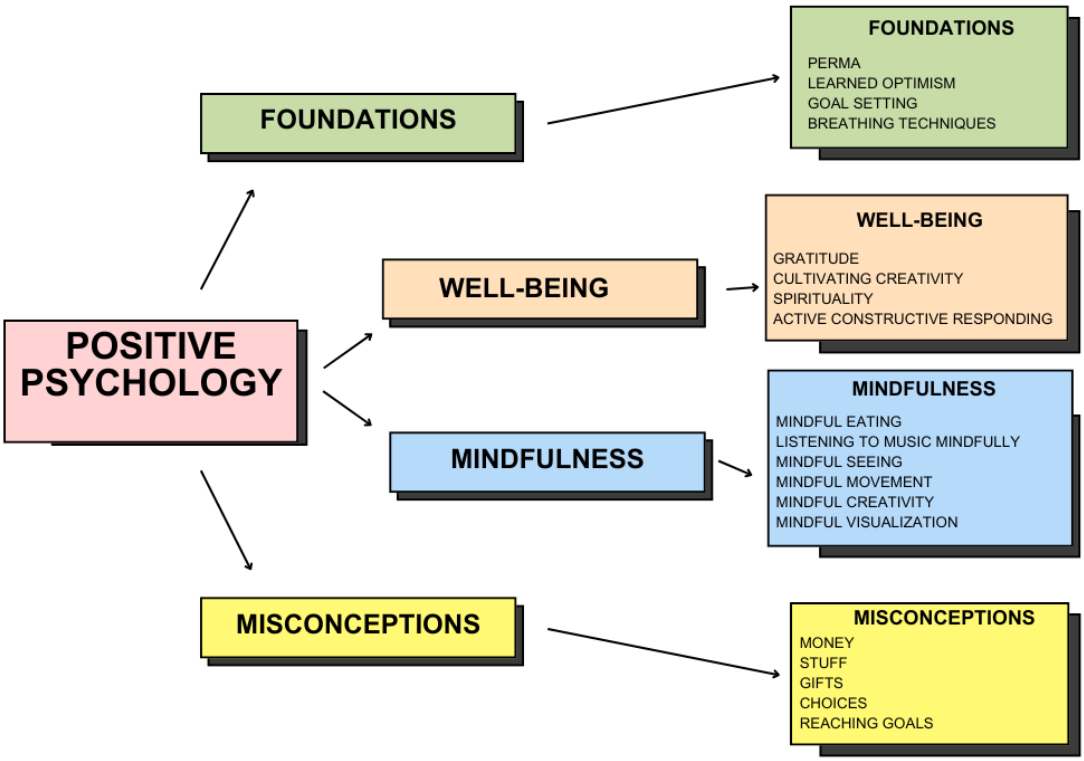
Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through surveys that were delivered at the beginning of the quarter (Appendix B) and end of each quarter (Appendix C). After the course, a final survey (Appendix D) was administered to students. Open-ended questions on these surveys provided insight to generate questions for a final essay

(Appendix E), individual interviews (Appendix F), and a focus group (Appendix G). Data collected through quantitative research were later explored using detailed qualitative methods (Zainal, 2007). The research design allowed for exploration of the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) that were most effective for students. Data were also collected longitudinally in a follow-up survey (Appendix H) from students who completed the Positive Psychology course between 2022 and 2024, allowing for an examination of which PPIs students continued to use over time.

The conceptual model illustrates the course concepts in the one-semester (20-week) Positive Psychology class. The major units of study include the foundations of Positive Psychology, areas of well-being, mindfulness practices, and common misconceptions about happiness.

Figure 3.1

Conceptual Model Guiding the Research



Researcher Role

My role as the teacher of the Positive Psychology course was an important consideration because I was a major participant in the study. When the school transitioned to virtual learning due to COVID-19, I informally surveyed my students weekly via Google Forms to assess how they felt physically and emotionally. I was concerned about how many students were suffering in silence and felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility to help them. As I began my coursework at Oakland University, I

focused my research on student mental health. In May 2022, I surveyed the students and staff at my school.

- 75% of students indicated academic stress “often” impacts their mental health.
- 55% of students indicated anxiety “often” impacts their mental health.
- 36% of students indicated depression “often” impacts their mental health.
- 34% of students indicated family stress “often” impacts their mental health.

Armed with these results, I wondered what the community, the school, staff, parents, and students could do to promote wellness. The programs I researched required funding, and I did not want an already overburdened staff to take on additional responsibilities.

In searching for tools and resources, I came across information about a happiness course entitled “Psychology and the Good Life” at Yale University (Ye, 2020). In 2018, more than 1,200 students enrolled in the course, and it became the most popular class in the history of the college. Faculty members at colleges and universities across the country began teaching courses in Positive Psychology. This information prompted the idea to develop a similar course for high school students. I created a one-semester elective course in Positive Psychology beginning in the fall of 2022 for students in grades 9-12. I wanted all students to have the opportunity to enroll as a first-year student or as a student with one semester left of high school.

Bias

As a teacher-researcher, I was aware that my dual roles could have introduced bias when evaluating the impact of the course on student mental health. I remained aware of potential confirmation bias, as some Positive Psychology Interventions that worked

well for me might not have been of interest to students. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated, “Discussions of critical research tend to highlight three interrelated issues in considering the relationship the researcher has with participants: insider/outsider issues; positionality issues; and, as a result of both of these intersecting factors, the importance of researcher reflexivity” (p. 63). Selection bias was another concern when conducting individual interviews and choosing students for focus groups. Social desirability bias also may have influenced students to indicate through their surveys and papers that the course had a positive impact. Some students also had me as a teacher in multiple courses, so they may have felt pressured to respond favorably in the surveys due to the power dynamic.

In my study, students may have written essays or discussed interventions they felt were effective, potentially influenced by a bias toward their teacher, which could have reflected social desirability bias. Another challenge with the approach was the influence of the school environment. Yin and Davis (2007) noted of Supovitz and Taylor:

> Using the term environment rather than context, Supovitz and Taylor (2005, p. 208) succinctly note that “social causation theory suggests that the relationship between cause and effect is moderated by the environment. The program is not the causal mechanism. Rather, the program interacts with elements of the environment to produce different effects. (p. 78)

The school environment may have influenced the results of the study, as students were earning a grade for the class. Many students may have been motivated to try the interventions or write in a gratitude journal because they received credit for completing the assignments.

Setting

The school district was located in a suburban, Midwestern community that was established in the mid-1900's. It served over 5,500 students, although enrollment had been decreasing over the previous five years. In 2017, the district's average household income was above the state's average. The district was involved in a three- to five- year strategic plan focused on academics, culture, and the learning environment.

The study was conducted at a high school within the district, which had an enrollment of almost 2,000 students in grades 9-12 during the 2024-2025 school year. The high school offered more than 25 Advanced Placement courses, internship-based classes, and a STEAM pathway. Over 60 different languages were spoken by the school's diverse student population. The high school was selected as the setting for this case study because the researcher taught the Positive Psychology course at this location.

Participants

The participants in the study were high school students in grades 9-12. The Positive Psychology course was first offered during the 2022-2023 school year, and by January 2025, over 400 students had finished it. Participants in the case study were students in grades 9-12 who had completed the 20-week Positive Psychology course, an elective in the social studies department.

A comparison group of students consisted of those enrolled in Psychology (grades 10-12) and Advanced Placement Psychology (grade 12) during the second semester of the 2025 school year. These students completed a pre-course mental health survey in January 2025 and a post-course mental health survey at the end of the semester.

Data Sources

Surveys

In January 2025, a control group of high school students enrolled in Psychology (grades 10–12) and Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology (grade 12) completed an anonymous mental health survey (Appendix I). A follow-up survey was administered in May 2025 to assess the students' use of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) and the potential development of social-emotional skills.

Participants completed an initial survey (Appendix B) during the first week of class to assess their levels of stress and anxiety. The survey included questions about students' current support systems in the event they were struggling with depression or anxiety, the coping strategies they used when feeling stressed or anxious, and the factors that were currently affecting their mental health. The benefit of this survey was that it could be analyzed at multiple points and revisited at the end of the quarter and semester to track changes and trends over time. A second survey (Appendix C) was administered at the end of the first quarter (10 weeks), followed by a final survey (Appendix D) at the end of the semester (20 weeks). These follow-up surveys asked students how frequently they had experienced certain challenges over the past two weeks and to identify factors that may have affected their mental health. Students were also asked whether they practiced breathing and mindfulness techniques outside of class. In addition, the surveys listed coping strategies and course concepts and students were prompted to rate their level of interest and perceptions of effectiveness. All surveys used in the study were self-reported by students. Although participant surveys in the Positive Psychology courses

were not anonymous during data collection, all identifying information was removed to protect student confidentiality.

Essays

At the end of the 20-week course, students in Positive Psychology wrote a reflective essay (Appendix E) about the course concepts and interventions that may have supported their social-emotional growth. They were also asked whether they planned to continue practicing any of the strategies after the course ended. Data from the essays was used to corroborate findings from the final survey administered at the end of the Positive Psychology course. Yin (2003) stated, "Documents can provide other specific details to corroborate information from other sources. If the documentary evidence is contradictory rather than corroboratory, you need to pursue the problem by inquiring further into the topic" (p. 83). The essays served as an important source of qualitative data, which helped contribute to a better understanding of the potential impact of the course on students' well-being and social-emotional development.

Interviews and Focus Group

Using case study methodology, I used a phenomenological approach because I was interested in interviewing students to collect data about their experience with the course concepts and specific interventions they identified as supporting their mental health. Individual interviews and a focus group were conducted with students who were selected based on patterns identified in the end-of-semester survey data (Appendix D). The interviews were held before school, after school, or during the Advisory period, depending on students' availability. Yin (2003) stated that interviews are insightful and

"provide perceived causal inferences" (p. 86). Interviews offered students an opportunity to share additional information that may not have been captured in the survey data. I developed a structured interview protocol consisting of ten questions for the individual interviews (Appendix F). During these interviews, students were asked about their mental health prior to taking the course and the strategies they had previously used to support their well-being. They were also asked whether the mindfulness and breathing practices, as well as other interventions, were helpful in managing stress and anxiety, and whether they continued to use any of the strategies introduced in the course. Lastly, students were presented with a list of course terms, concepts, and breathing techniques and were asked if any had an impact on them and why.

A separate set of questions was designed for the focus group to encourage dialogue and discussion among the participants (Appendix G). Students were asked not to disclose sensitive information about their mental health prior to taking the course to protect their privacy. However, they were invited to reflect on whether they felt their happiness and well-being had changed throughout the semester. The focus group discussion also explored mindfulness practices, breathing techniques, interventions, and course concepts that participants felt had the greatest impact on them. The focus group provided additional insight into students' shared experiences and helped identify which course concepts and interventions were perceived as most meaningful and effective in supporting their well-being.

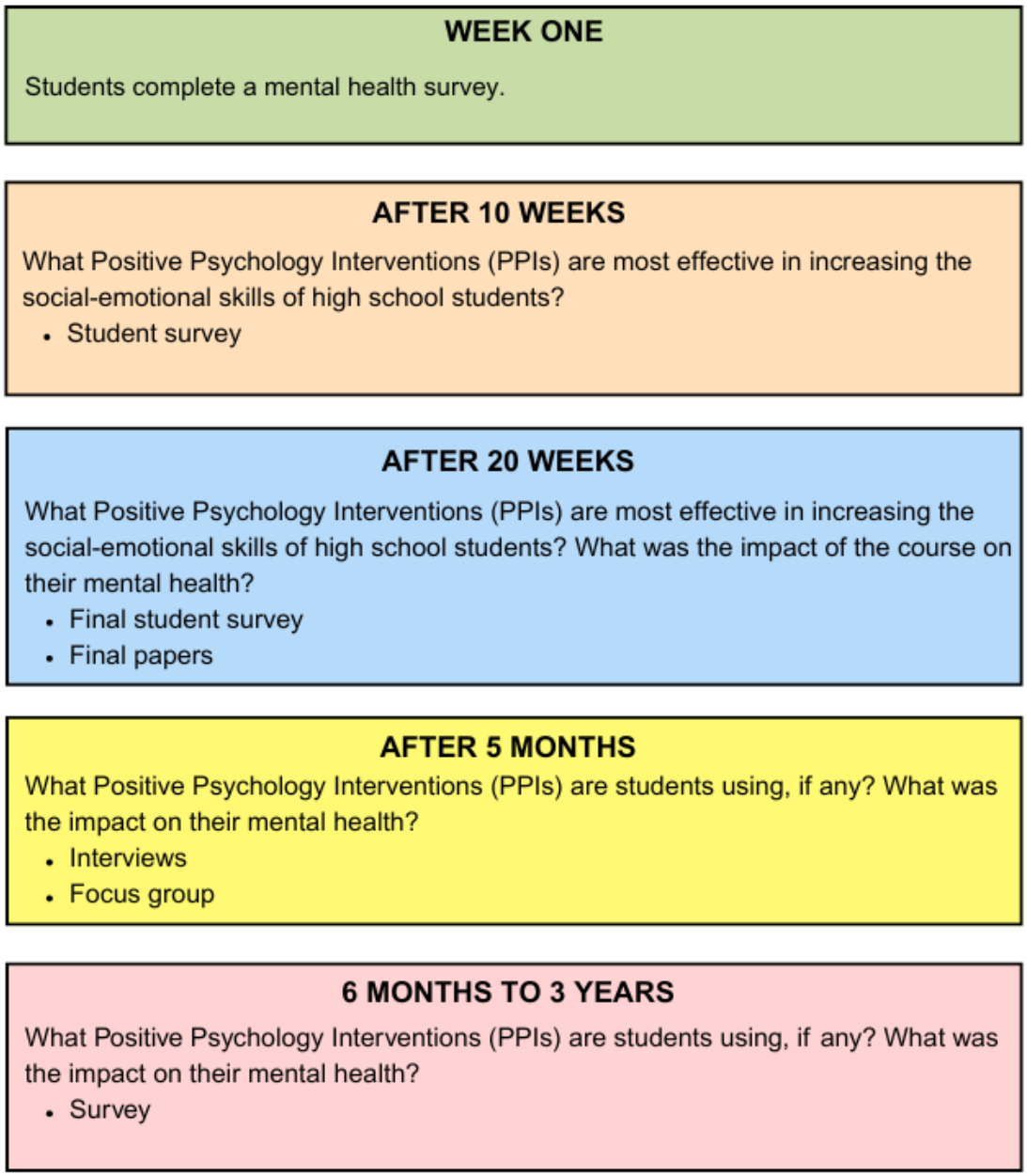
Data Collection Procedures

As the Positive Psychology teacher at the school, I collected data throughout the semester as part of the course. Students completed surveys using Google Forms and submitted their reflective essays through Canvas, the school's learning management system. Permission to use the data for this dissertation was granted by the principal and the International Review Board (see Appendix A). To maintain anonymity, all names and identifying information were removed.

The conceptual model (Figure 3.2) illustrates the timing of data collection in relation to the course schedule. It highlights when each survey was administered, when students completed their final essay, and when the individual interviews and focus group were conducted. This representation provides an overview of how both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and integrated across the 20-week semester.

Figure 3.2

Data Collection Sequence



Data Analysis Strategies

Surveys

To allow for pattern matching, I surveyed the students enrolled in my Positive Psychology classes as well as those taking regular Psychology and Advanced Placement Psychology (Appendix I). The dependent variable in this study was the improvement in well-being from the beginning to the end of the 20-week courses. The independent variables were the specific Positive Psychology interventions that influence the dependent variable. Through pattern matching, I examined whether changes in the dependent variable aligned with my hypothesis of improved well-being as a result of interventions such as gratitude journaling, mindfulness, character strengths, and other course exercises.

In the first, second, and third surveys, I compared students' responses about how they had been feeling over the previous two weeks to identify any changes in well-being throughout the 20-week course. Responses about coping strategies provided data on the interventions students were actively using throughout the semester. A specific question on breathing techniques and mindfulness helped determine whether students continued to engage in these practices after the first 10 weeks and throughout the remainder of the course. The third survey (Appendix D) is a reflection completed at the end of the semester, which helped evaluate the effectiveness of writing in a gratitude journal and identifying the course concepts that supported students' social-emotional development. The open-ended responses were coded to identify interventions, categorize personal experiences, and capture applications of the strategies that may not have been addressed

in the structured survey. Additionally, I created a follow-up survey that was sent to all students who had completed the Positive Psychology course since 2022. This survey assessed their current mental health, identified which interventions they continued to use, and explored any long-term effect the course may have had on their overall well-being.

Surveys completed by the control group were analyzed to assess possible changes in their mental health from the beginning to the end of the semester and to identify any interventions they may have been using independently. Data from students who had previously completed the Positive Psychology course were excluded from this part of the analysis.

Essays

Students completed a final reflection essay (Appendix E) at the end of the course in response to the prompt: What have you learned in Positive Psychology that will help you lead a flourishing life? The essays were submitted through Canvas, the school's learning management system. I analyzed and coded the papers to identify which aspects of the course appeared to have the greatest impact on students, the interventions they perceived as most effective in increasing their well-being, and the strategies they intended to continue using in the future.

Interviews and Focus Group

Interviews (Appendix F) were conducted with students who completed the course in 2022 in my classroom both before and after school. For the focus group (Appendix G) in 2023, I met with a group of four students during Advisory in my classroom. There

were three female and one male student. Two students completed the course during the first semester, and two completed it in the second semester.

During the interviews, the information was coded and compared with the final survey results to identify patterns and associations. I coded the data from the interviews and the focus group by copying and pasting quotations or phrases related to the research questions into Google Sheets, organized according to the individual speakers. An additional column was created based on my original questions to help categorize the data in multiple ways: academics, breathing techniques, important course concepts, improvements to happiness and well-being, mental health before the course, mindfulness, techniques shared with others, and current use of interventions.

Conclusion

Using students enrolled in Positive Psychology and participants from Psychology courses as a control group, within a mixed methods research design, provided an in-depth understanding into the research questions. The explanatory approach offered an effective means of examining high school students' stress and anxiety levels and the impact of Positive Psychology on their overall well-being. Triangulation strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings by incorporating surveys, student documents, interviews, and a focus group. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained, “This design also captures the best of both quantitative and qualitative data—to obtain quantitative results from a population in the first phase and then refine or elaborate these findings through an in-depth qualitative exploration in the second phase” (p. 554). As a teacher-researcher, I recognized that my dual role and the associated power dynamics could introduce

potential biases, which may have influenced how students reported their experiences in the Positive Psychology course and their perceptions of the interventions' effects.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of high school students enrolled in a semester-long (20-week) Positive Psychology course. Using a mixed methods approach, I set out to determine the answers to three research questions.

1. What is the impact reported by students of a semester-long (20 weeks) Positive Psychology course on their mental health?
2. Which Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) do students find most effective in increasing their social-emotional skills during the semester?
3. What Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) do students report continuing to use after completing the course?

Data was collected through surveys, students' final papers, individual interviews, and a focus group. The results of the study are organized in the chapter by quantitative and qualitative data.

Results from the Quantitative Data

Students completed surveys at the beginning of the course, at the end of the quarter, at the end of the semester, and a follow-up survey was administered to all students who had completed the course over the past four years. The following results highlight students' self-reported anxiety levels, their use of coping strategies, factors that

impacted their mental health, and course concepts they felt supported their well-being and mental health.

Change for Students Taking the Course

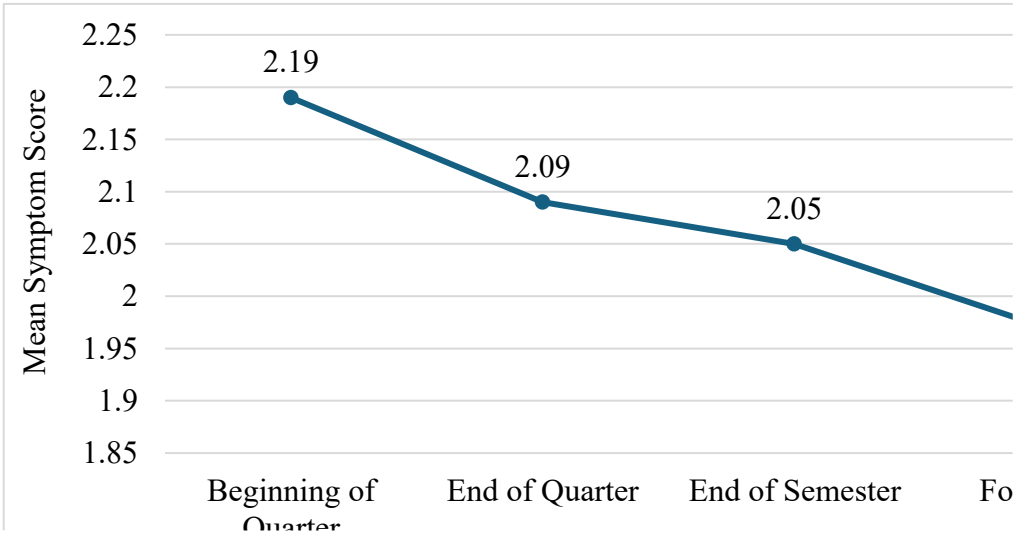
Anxiety

Questions were adapted from *Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7* scale, which prompted students to think about their anxiety symptoms (Spitzer et al., 2006). Students were asked to consider how they had felt over the past two weeks. At the beginning of the course, the highest reported responses were for "being easily annoyed or irritable" (M = 2.41) and "worrying too much about different things" (M = 2.41). Both of these statements demonstrated the most improvement in the follow-up survey. In each of the seven figures, there is a downward trend in the reported symptoms at each administration of the survey. Overall, the students experienced fewer symptoms from the beginning of the course through the follow-up period. For further details, refer to Appendix J.

In Figure 4.1, the self-reported mean of students feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge was M = 2.19. There was a gradual downward trend over time with the lowest means recorded on the follow-up survey. The reduction was not statistically significant (p = .068).

Figure 4.1

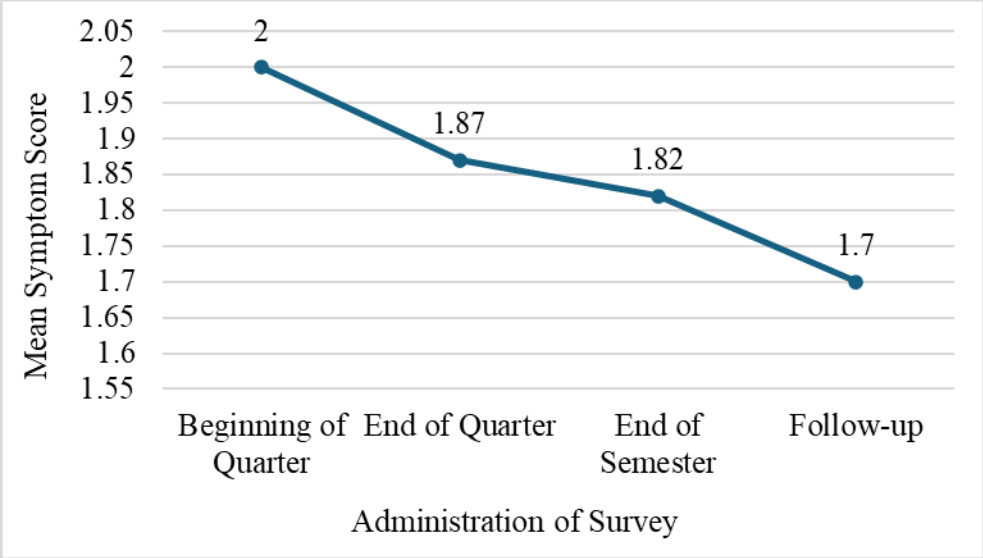
Feeling Nervous, Anxious, or on Edge



In Figure 4.2, the self-reported mean of students who felt that were not able to stop or control worrying was $M = 2.0$, which gradually decreased over time at the follow-up survey. The reduction in not being able to stop or control worrying was significant ($p = .007$).

Figure 4.2

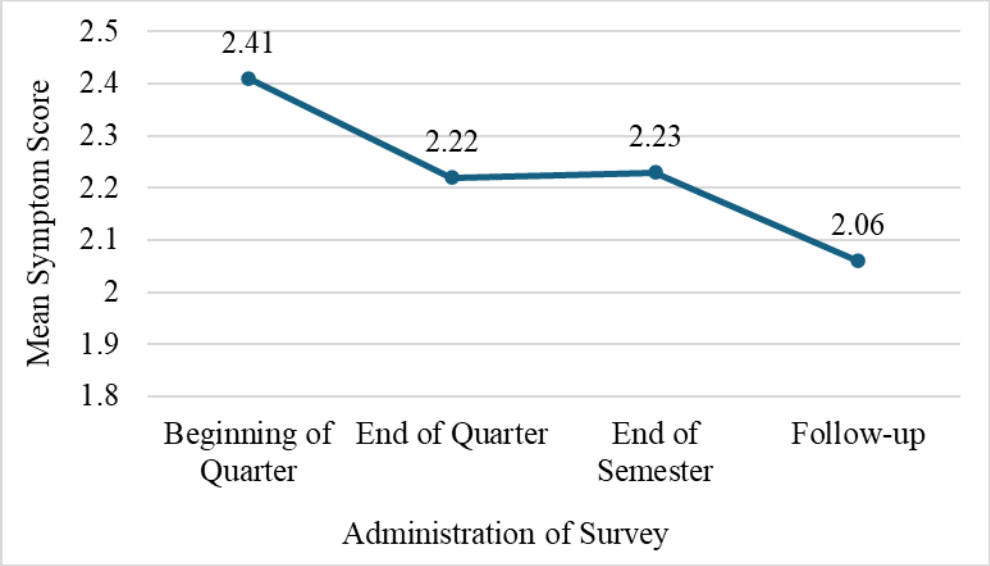
Not Being Able to Stop or Control Worrying



In Figure 4.3, the self-reported mean of students worrying too much about different things was $M = 2.41$. There was a drop at the end of the quarter, but there was not much change at the end of the semester. At the follow-up survey, there was a drop which indicated a significant change over time ($p = .001$).

Figure 4.3

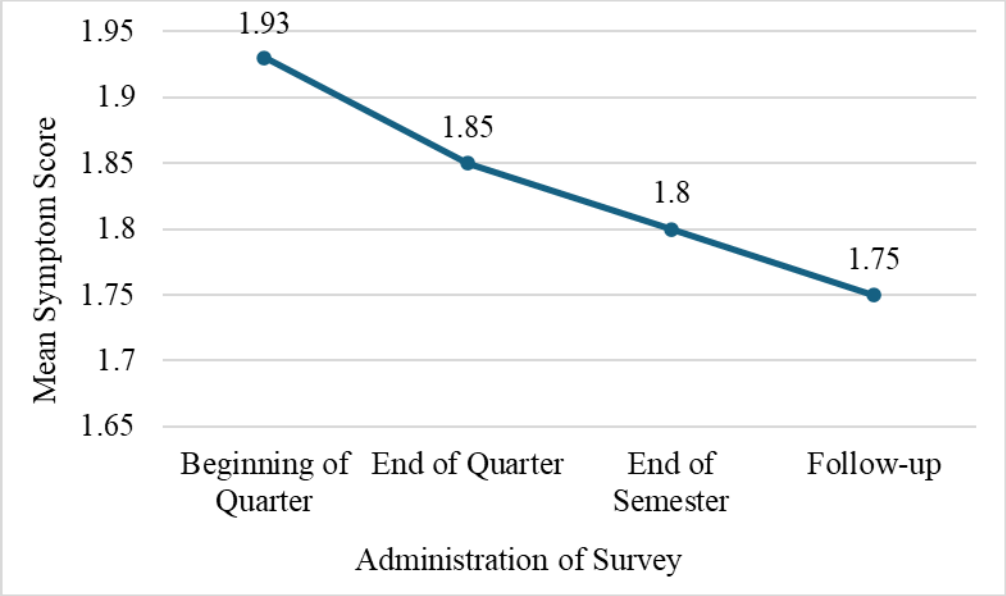
Worrying Too Much About Different Things



In Figure 4.4, students reported having trouble relaxing at the beginning of the quarter (M = 1.93) and the mean scores decreased each time the survey was administered with the lowest reported score at the follow-up. The results do not demonstrate a significant change over time (p = .124).

Figure 4.4

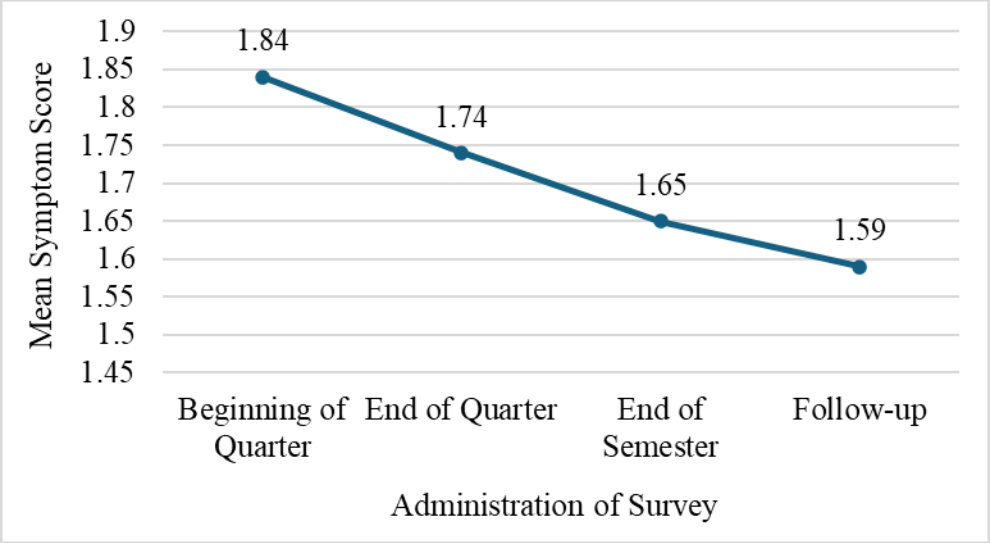
Trouble Relaxing



In Figure 4.5, students reported that they were so restless that it was hard to sit still at the beginning of the quarter (M = 1.84). Students became more focused over time based on the downward trend and by the follow-up survey, they were less restless than at any other timepoint. There was a significant change over time (p = .011).

Figure 4.5

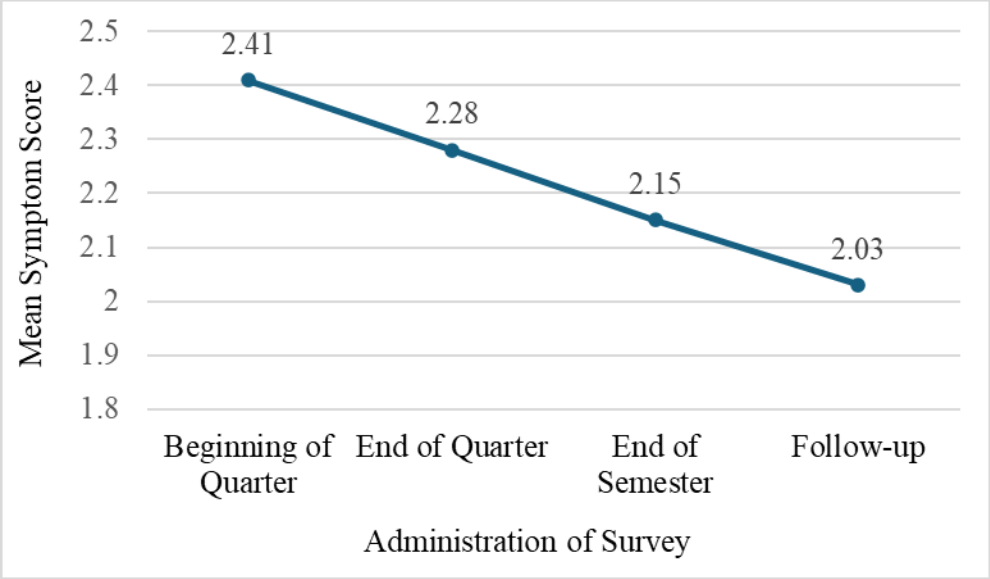
Being So Restless That It's Hard to Sit Still



In Figure 4.6, students began the quarter reporting that they were easily annoyed or irritable ($M = 2.41$) and then these frustrations gradually declined over the semester and at the follow-up survey. The results show a significant change over time ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.6

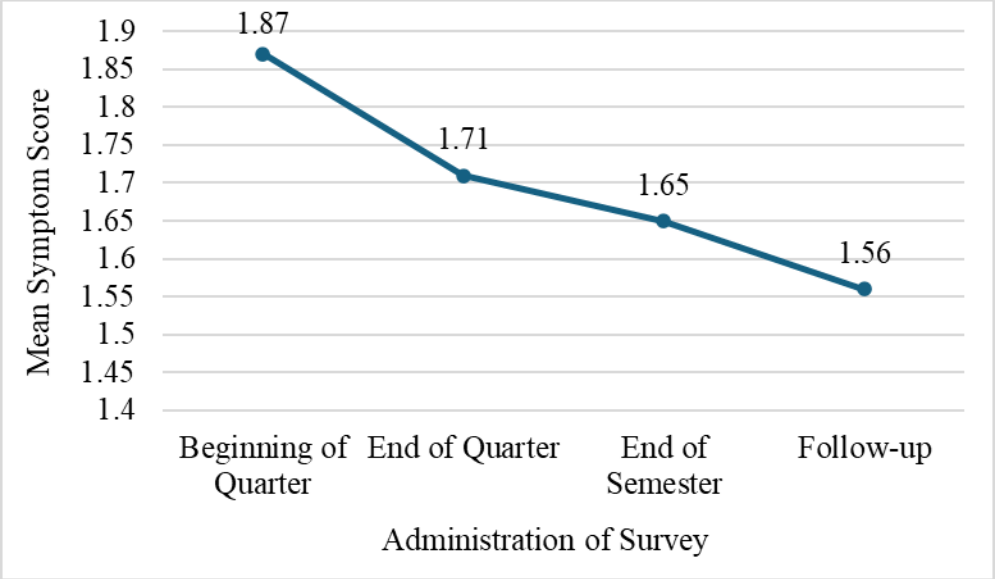
Becoming Easily Annoyed or Irritable



As shown in Figure 4.7, students reported feeling afraid as if something awful might happen at the beginning of the quarter (M = 1.87). Data showed a small but downward trend continuing with the follow-up. There was a significant change over time (p = .002) with students feeling much less afraid as if something awful might happen.

Figure 4.7

Feeling Afraid as if Something Awful Might Happen



Negative Factors Impacting Wellness

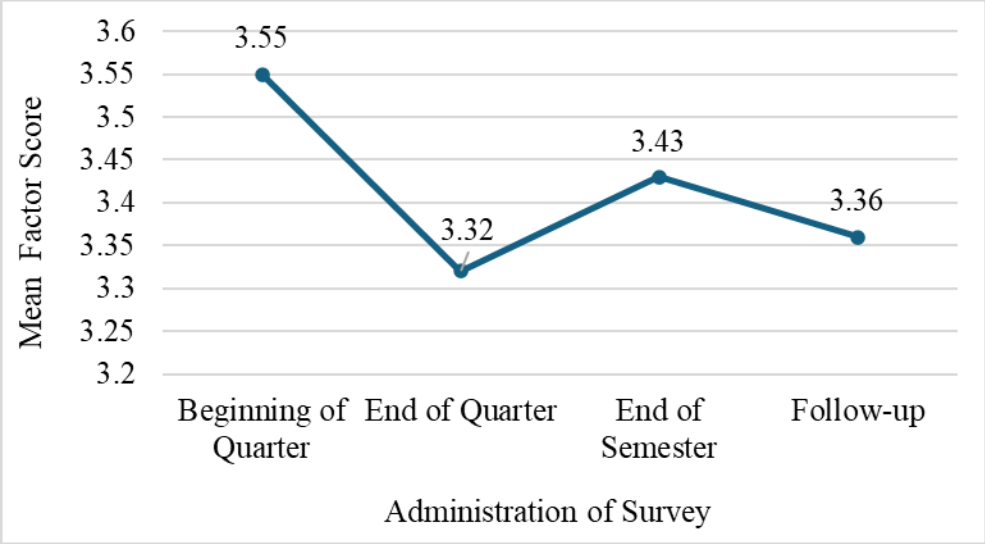
An additional seven questions asked students about the factors which they believed could be impacting their mental health and wellness. The questions were posed to students four times. All seven factors were statistically significant, while social pressure showed the greatest change compared to the other factors impacting students (Appendix K).

As shown in Figure 4.8, students reported that academic stress was impacting their mental health at the beginning of the quarter ($M = 3.55$), which dropped at the end of the quarter and those rose up at the end of the semester. Final exams are at the end of the semester, so it is possible students were feeling academic pressure. At the follow up, students reported less academic stress ($M = 3.36$) compared to the beginning and ending

survey, but the level was not as low as at the end of the quarter ($M = 3.32$), yet there was a significant change over time ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.8

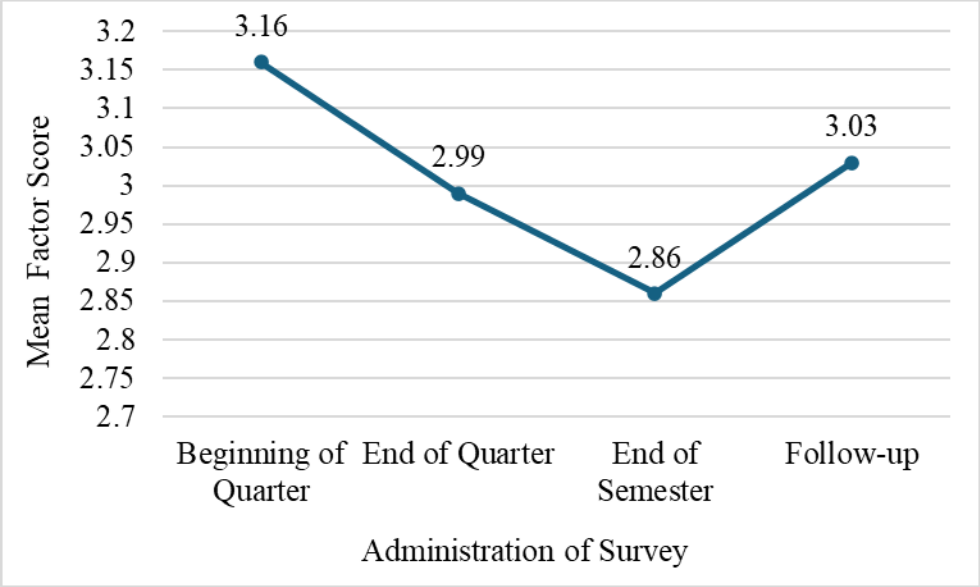
Academic Stress



As shown in Figure 4.9, students reported that their anxiety declined throughout the semester, from the end of the quarter until the end of the semester. The anxiety levels returned slightly on the follow-up survey to a level that was just above the end of the quarter. The results are statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.9

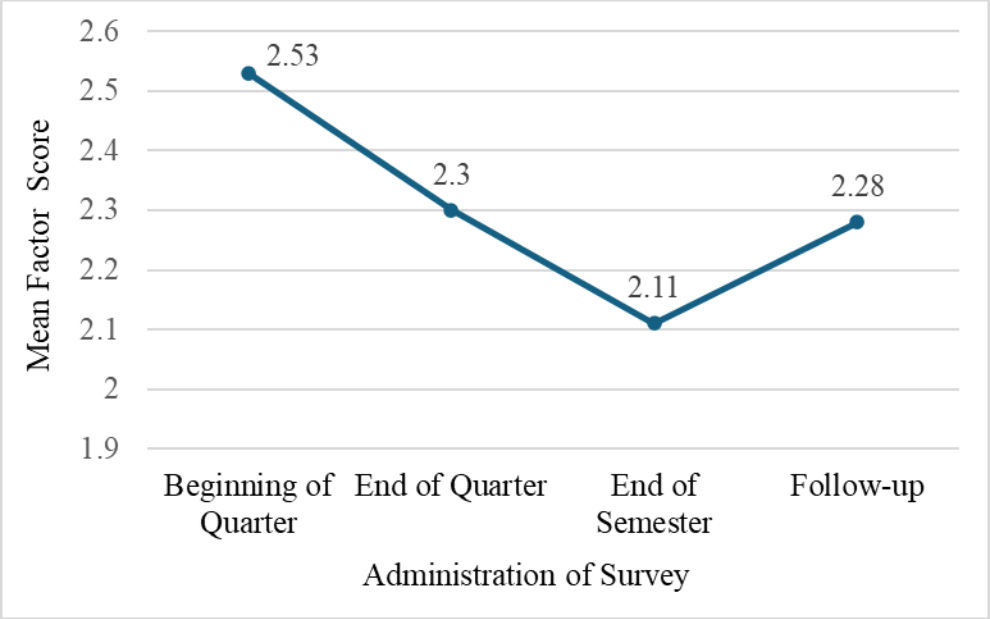
Anxiety



As shown in Figure 4.10, students reported a decline in depression from the beginning of the quarter through the quarter and continued until the end of the course. At the follow-up survey, students' depression scores increased slightly but remained below the levels reported at the end of the quarter. The results are statistically significant ($p <$ .000).

Figure 4.10

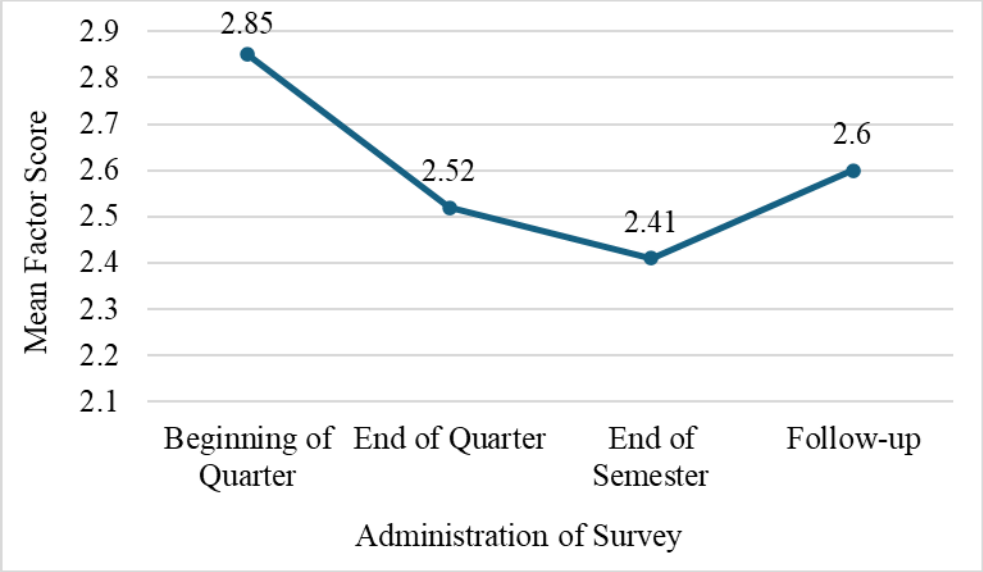
Depression



As shown in Figure 4.11, there was a large decrease in family stress through the end of semester, but the level of family stress then rebounded during the follow-up survey to a level just above the end of the quarter. The results are statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.11

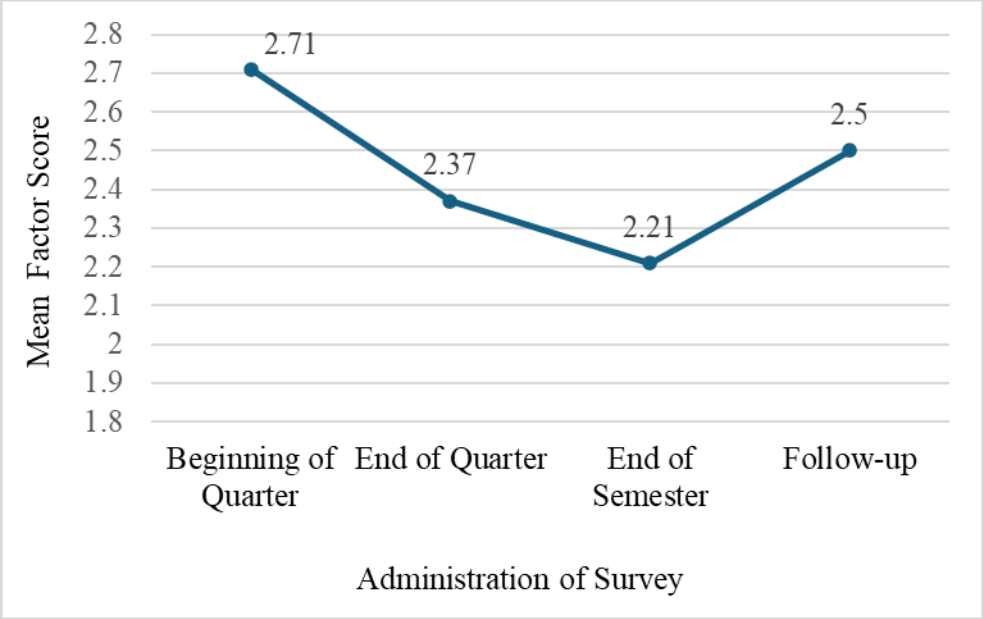
Family Stress



As shown in Figure 4.12, there was a decline in social pressure through the end of the semester, but the follow-up indicated that social pressure rose back to a level above the end of the quarter. The reduction of the impact of social pressure is statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.12

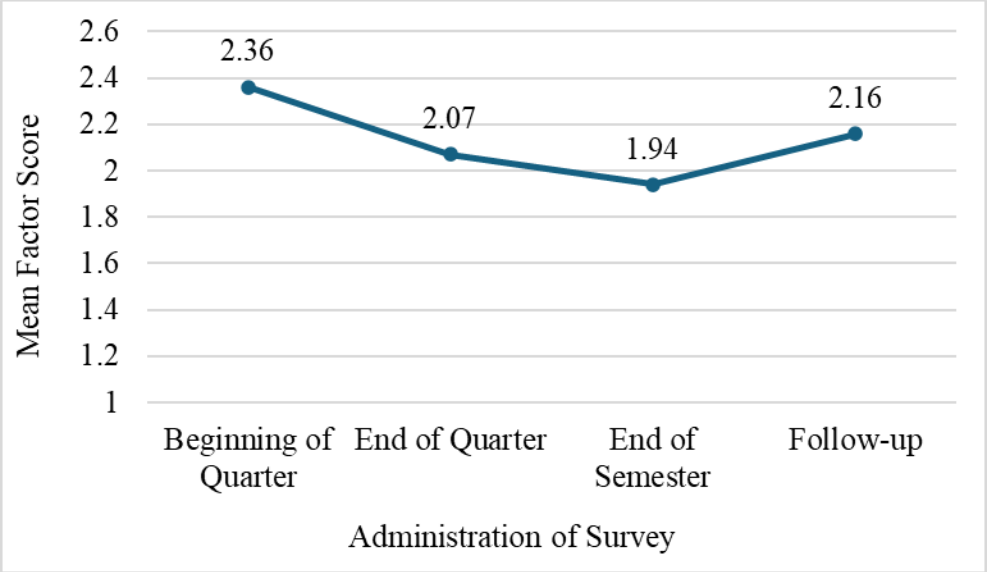
Social Pressure



As shown in Figure 4.13, the impact of trauma decreased over time through the end of the semester, but students reported trauma again at the follow-up survey (M =2.16) which was slightly higher than at the end of the quarter. The impact of a reduction of trauma is statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.13

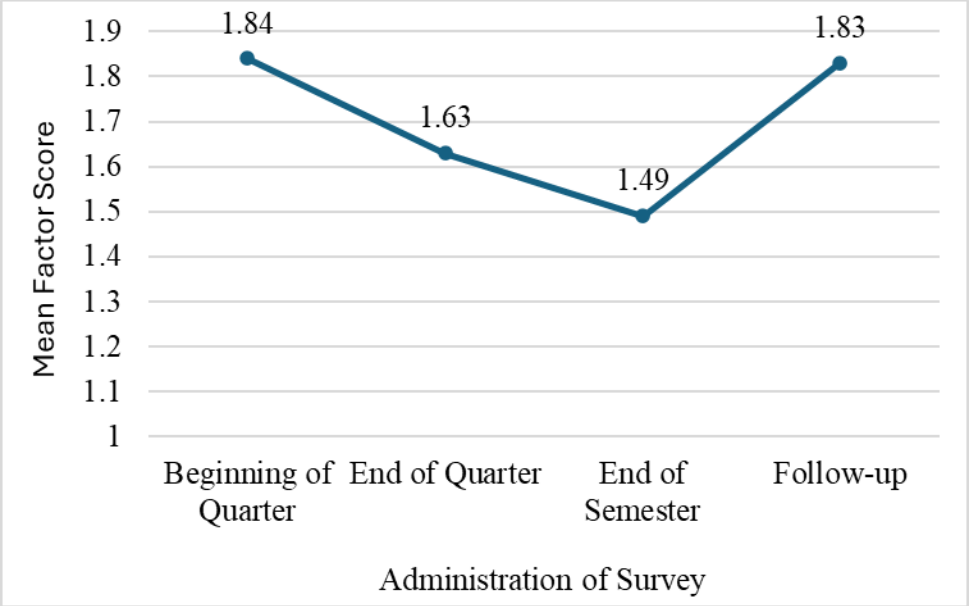
Trauma



As shown in Figure 4.14, there was a decrease reported in racism/discrimination affecting students' mental health through the end of the semester. At the follow-up, students reported racism/discrimination was a factor and it returned to almost the initial level. The variation is statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.14

Racism/Discrimination



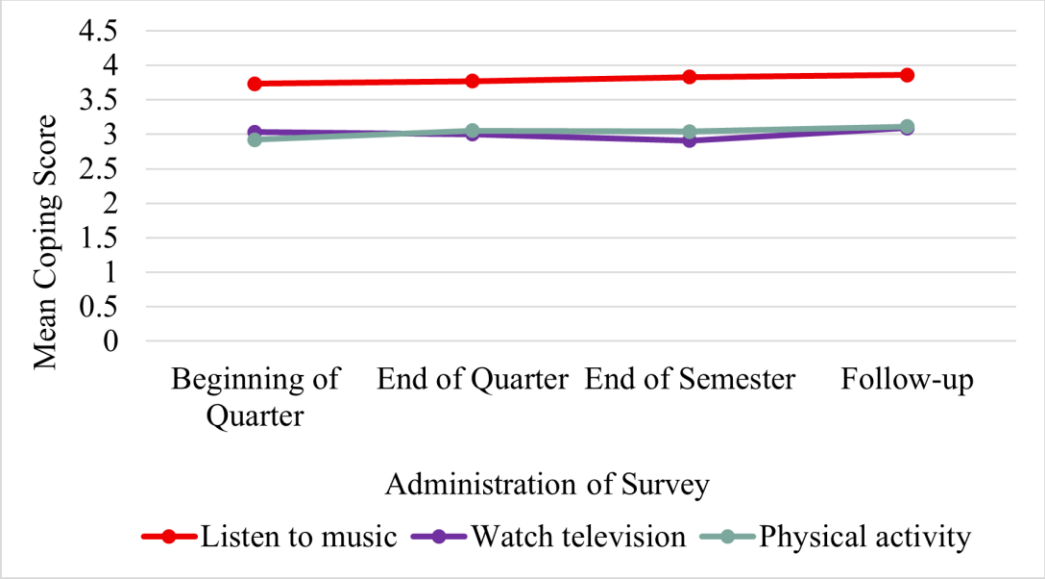
Coping Strategies

Students responded to 12 questions in a survey about how often they used different coping strategies when they were feeling stressed or anxious across four time points. For additional information, refer to Appendix L.

As shown in Figure 4.15, students showed an increase across all points in listening to music as a coping strategy, which was statistically significant (p = .034). Watching television remained stable with a small drop at the end of the semester and an increase at the follow-up. As a coping strategy, watching television was not statistically significant (p = .236). For physical activity, there was a gradual rise, a small drop, and then an increase in the follow-up survey. There was not a significant change over time (p = .088).

Figure 4.15

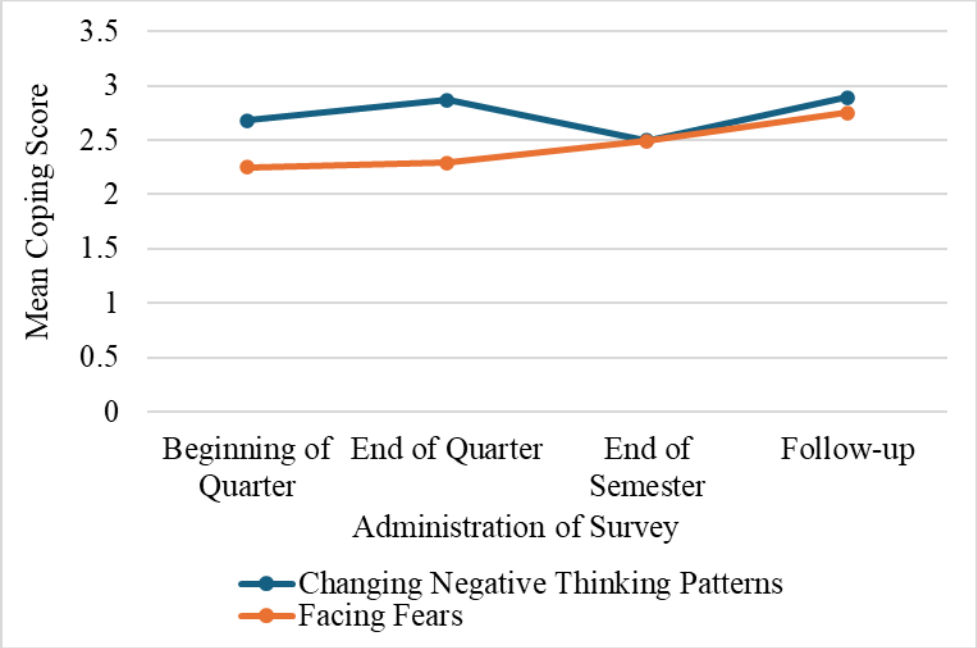
Listen to Music, Watch Television, and Physical Activity



As shown in Figure 4.16, students reported a slight increase in their use of cognitive restructuring at the end of the quarter. At the end of the semester, cognitive restructuring declined ($M = 2.50$) but increased at the follow-up ($M = 2.89$). Students used strategies to face fears at each point. Both coping strategies were statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.16

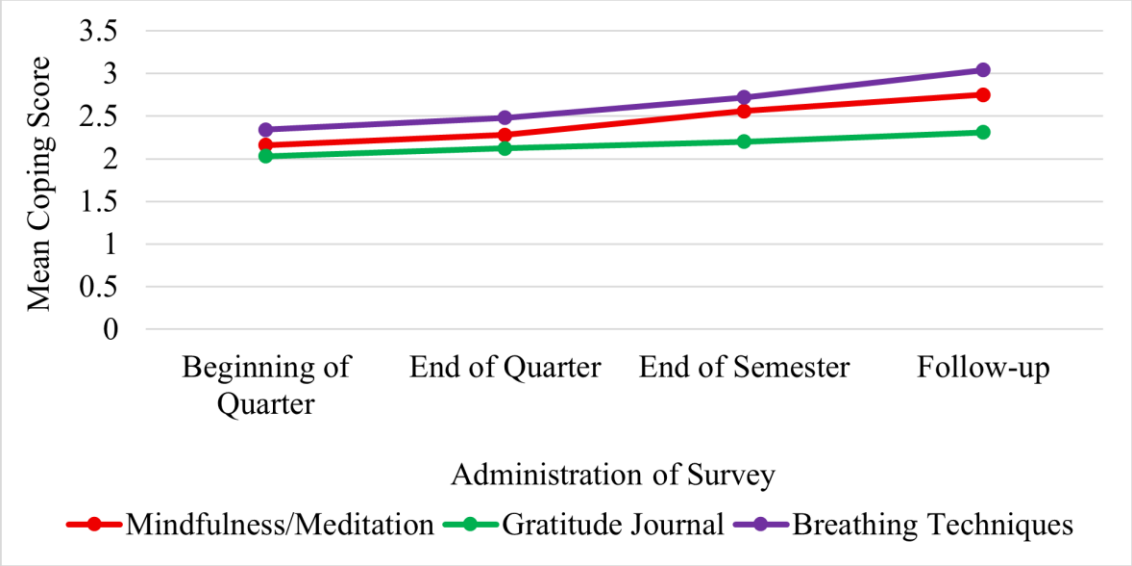
Cognitive Restructuring: Changing Negative Thinking Patterns and Facing Fears



As shown in Figure 4.17, the coping strategies of mindfulness/meditation, journaling, and breathing techniques showed an upward trend over time. These three strategies were statistically significant: mindfulness/meditation ($p < .000$), journaling ($p = .035$), and breathing techniques ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.17

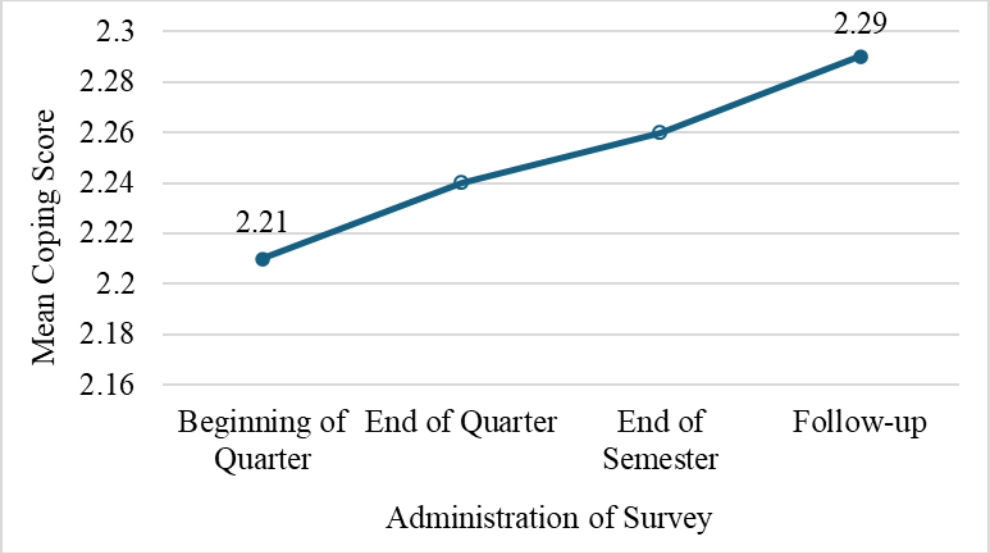
Mindfulness/Meditation, Gratitude Journal, and Breathing Techniques



As shown in Figure 4.18, using fidgets as a coping strategy was not statistically significant (p = .555). Students were not asked about using fidgets as a coping strategy on the surveys at the end of the quarter or at the end of the semester.

Figure 4.18

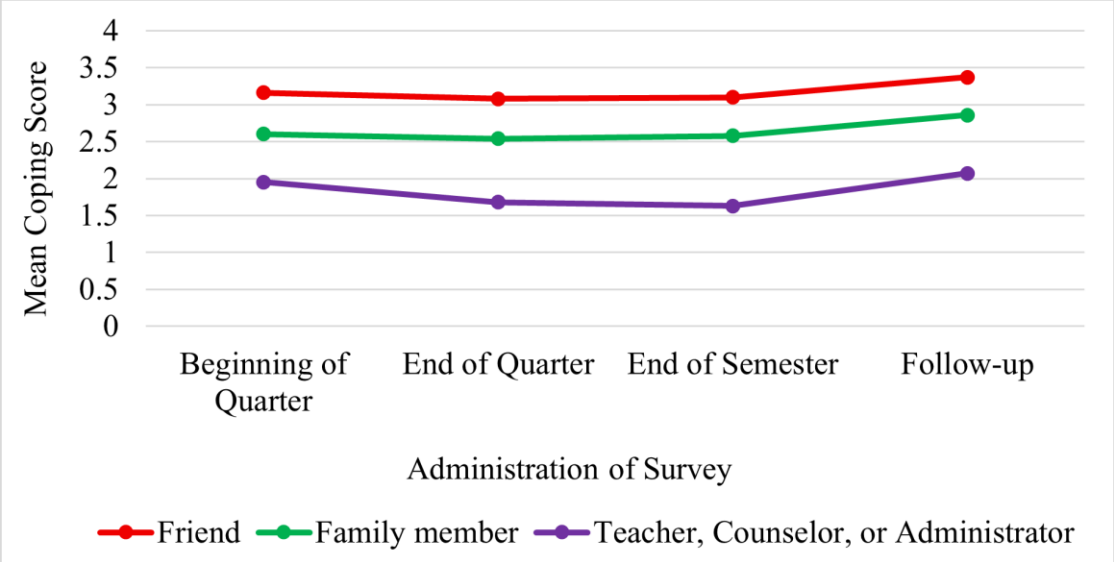
Using Fidgets



As shown in Figure 4.19, students talked to friends and family members at a stable pace through the end of the semester with a slight increase at the follow-up. As a coping strategy, talking to a friend (p = .081) or a family member (p = .109) was not statistically significant. Talking to a teacher, counselor, or administrator was the least used strategy at each time point but it was statistically significant (p = .001).

Figure 4.19

Talk to a Friend, Family Member, Teacher, Counselor, or Administrator



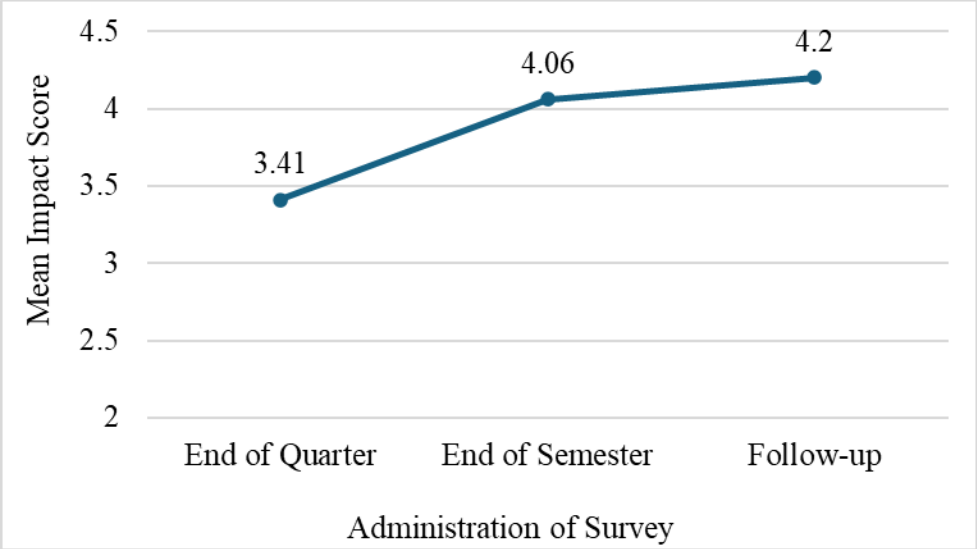
Impact of Material Learned in Class

Students completed surveys at the end of the quarter, at the end of the semester and in a follow-up to the course to assess their interest in and the impact of specific concepts that were taught in the class. The question was asked to students who were enrolled between 2023 and 2025; students who were enrolled from 2022 to 2023 responded to the question in the follow up survey. The course concepts exhibiting the most growth were mindfulness, gratitude, flow, PERMA, and learned optimism. For additional information, refer to Appendix M.

As shown in Figure 4.20, students reported mindfulness as having a strong impact at the end of the semester and on the follow-up survey with a significant increase ($p <$ .000).

Figure 4.20

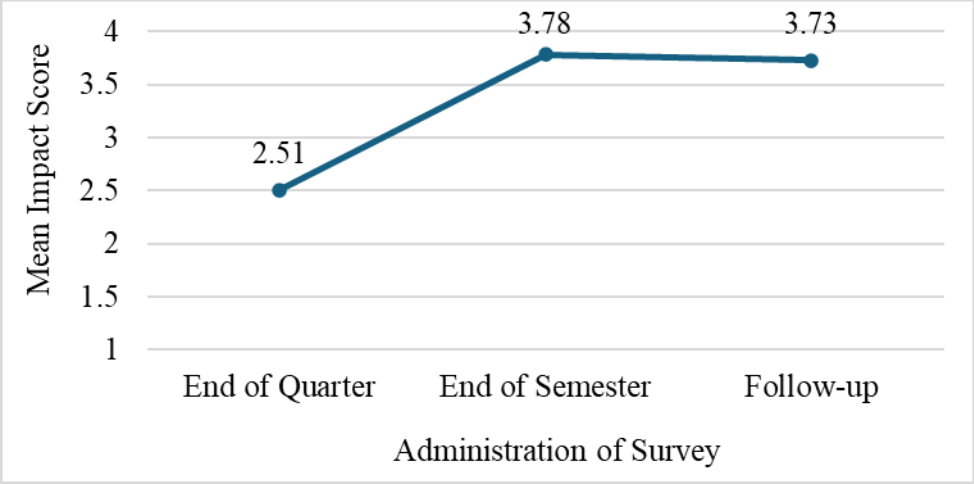
Mindfulness



As shown in Figure 4.21, students reported the concept of PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments) as highly impactful at the end of the semester with a small drop at the follow-up. The framework was statistically significant ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.21

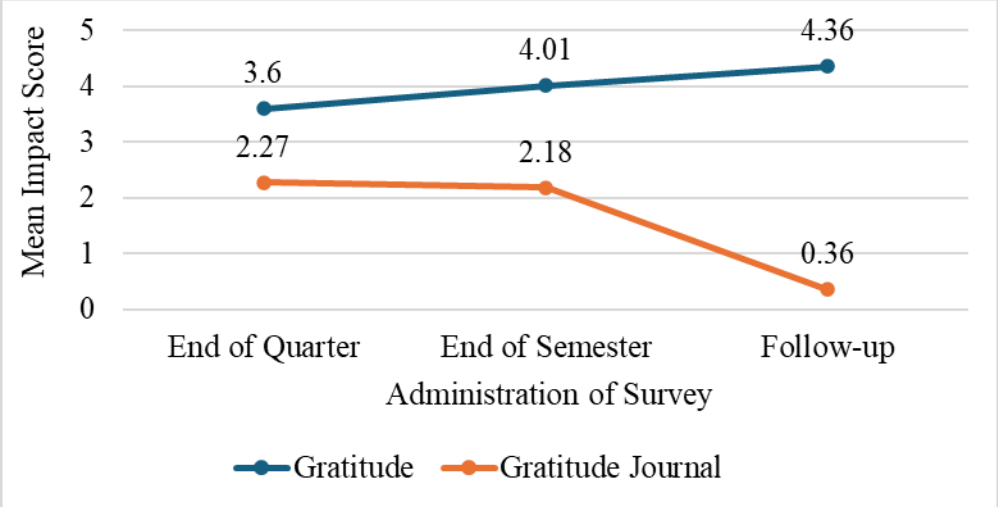
PERMA



As shown in Figure 4.22, the concept of gratitude was highly impactful and increased significantly after the course ($p < .000$). Keeping a gratitude journal was not a practice that students reported as impactful because it dropped significantly on the follow up survey ($p < .000$).

Figure 4.22

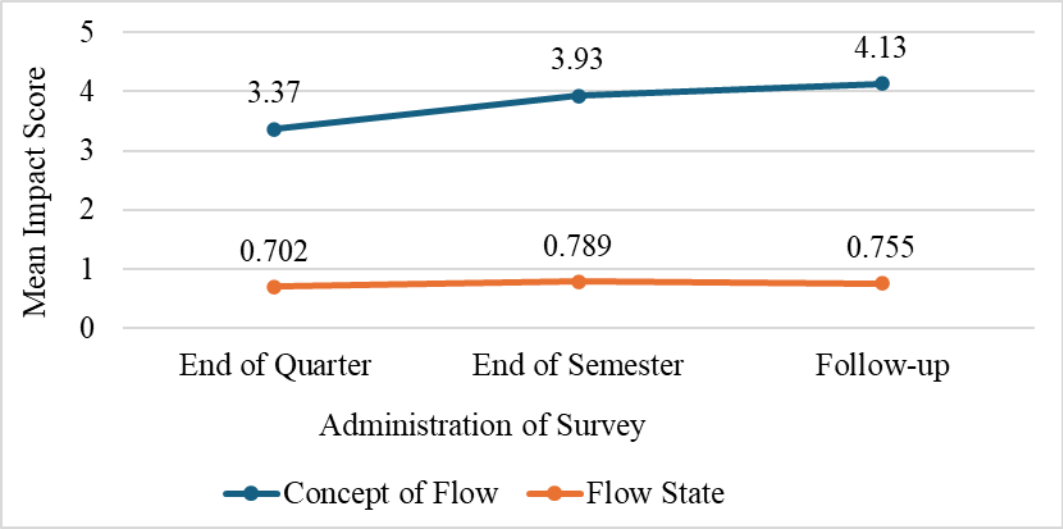
Gratitude and Gratitude Journals



As shown in Figure 4.23, the concept of flow resonated with students at the end of the semester and increased on the follow-up survey with statistically significant changes ($p < .000$). However, students who reported experiencing flow within the two-week period were the highest at the end of the semester and dropped slightly on the follow-up survey, though this change was statistically significant ($p = .002$).

Figure 4.23

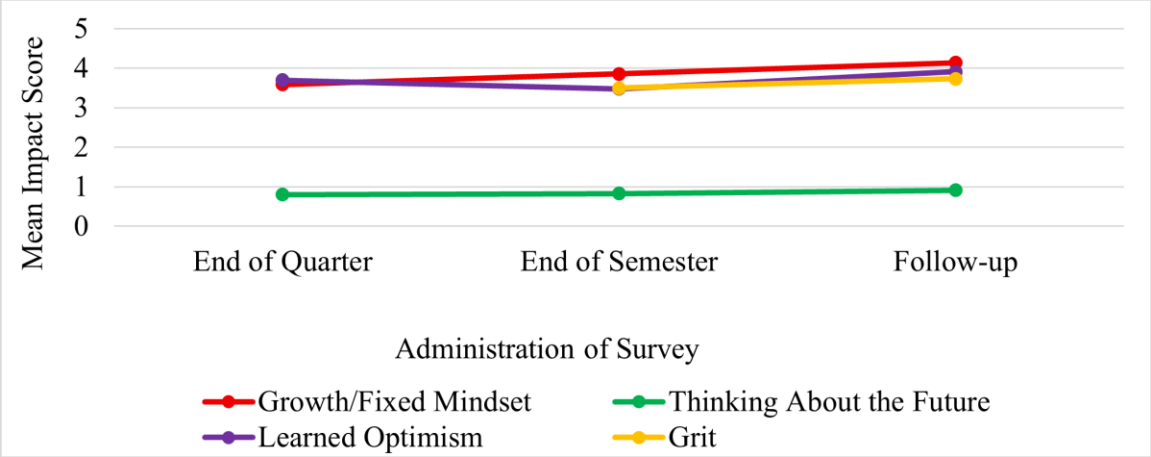
Flow



As shown in Figure 4.24, the impact on students of recognizing the importance of long-term effort leading to growth increased at the end of the semester ($M = 3.59$) and on the follow-up ($M = 3.86$), which was statistically significant ($p = .002$). Prospection, thinking about the future, also increased across each time period, which was statistically significant ($p = .029$). Students reported that the concept of learned optimism was important, and understanding how it supported a growth mindset decreased at the semester ($M = 3.478$) but increased to a high point ($M = 3.910$). Learned optimism was statistically significant ($p = .005$).

Figure 4.24

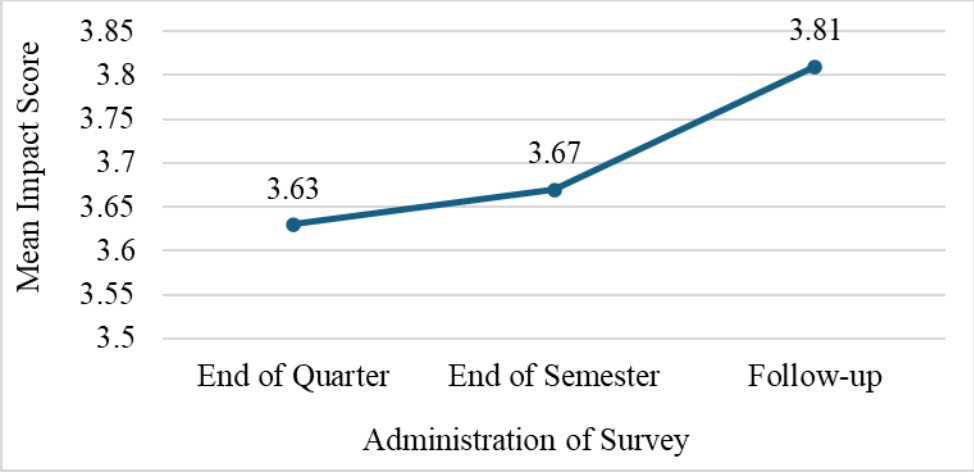
Growth Mindset, Prospection, Learned Optimism, and Grit



As shown in Figure 4.25, students rated goal setting highly and the impact increased at the semester and follow-up ($M = 3.81$). The growth was not statistically significant over time ($p = .466$).

Figure 4.25

Goal Setting

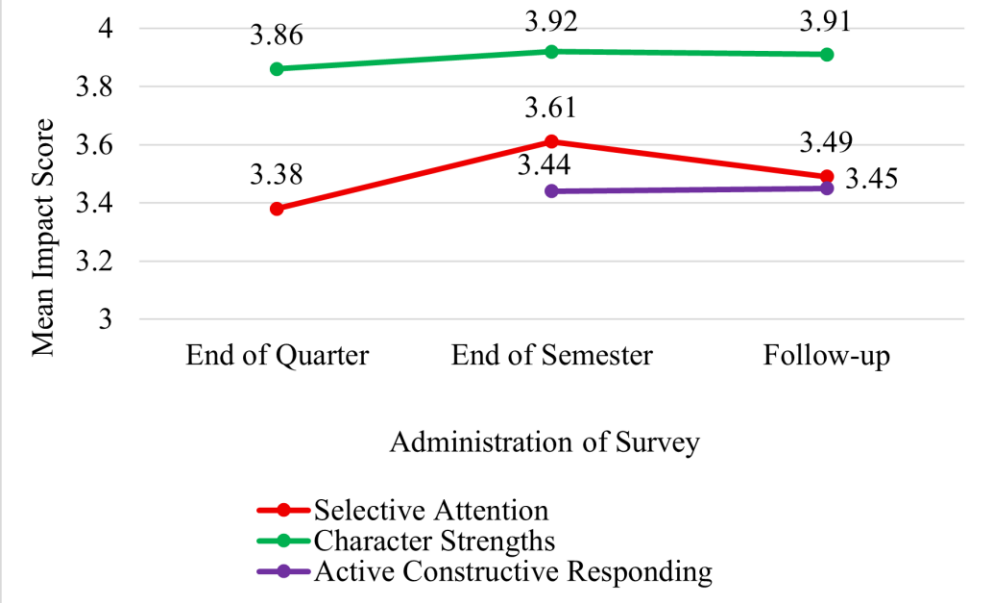


As shown in Figure 4.26, the impact of selective attention increased at the semester with a drop at the follow-up, indicating the interest of the concept was not

statistically significant *(p* = .303). Students' interest in character strengths was relatively high at the semester with little change at the follow-up, so the impact of the concept was not statistically significant (*p* = .900). Students rated Active Constructive Responding, a communication strategy, as moderately impactful, but the ratings did not change significantly over time (*p* = .930).

Figure 4.26

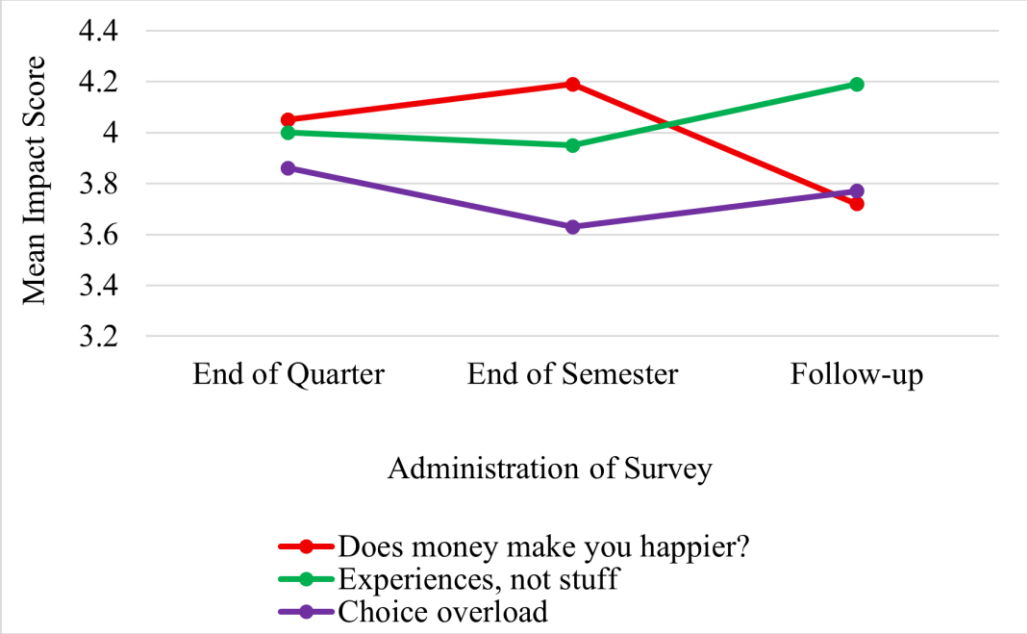
Selective Attention, Character Strengths, and Active Constructive Responding



As shown in Figure 4.27, students rated "Does money make you happier?" highly at the semester (*M* = 4.19) but dropped at the follow-up (*M* = 3.72) which resulted in significant change over time (*p* < .000). The course concept on "Experiences, not stuff" dropped slightly at the end of the semester (*M* = 3.95) and rose at the follow-up (*M* = 4.19) which was not statistically significant (*p* = .154). Choice overload was a concept students reported moderate interest in at the end of the semester (*M* = 3.63) with a slight increase at the follow-up (*M*= 3.77), which was not statistically significant (*p* = .268).

Figure 4.27

Does Money Make You Happier? Experiences, Not Stuff, and Choice Overload



Comparing Change Between Students who Did and Did Not Take Course

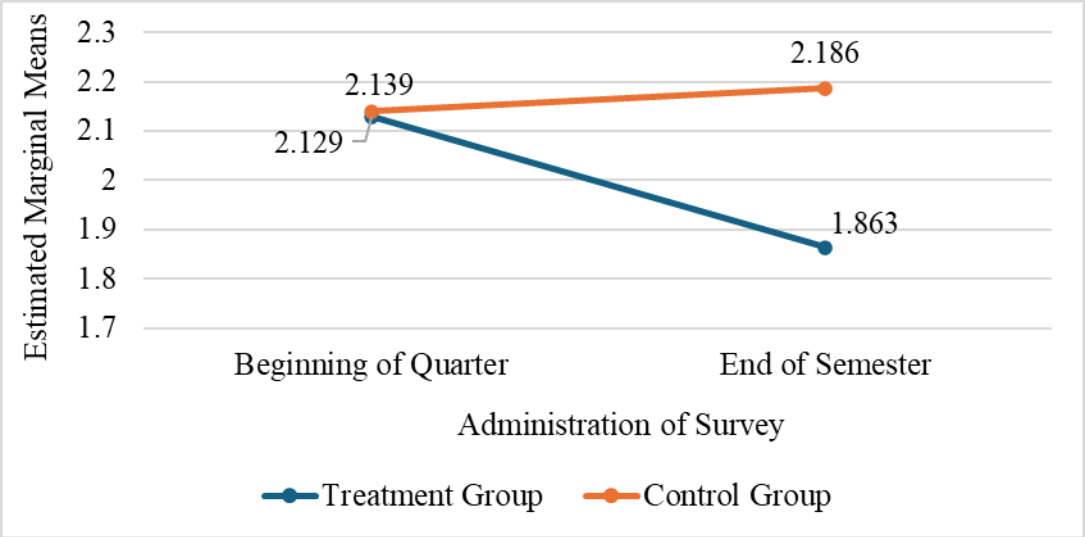
The data contains survey responses from a control group of high school students in 2025 who were enrolled in Advanced Placement psychology or a general psychology course. At the beginning of the semester, 105 students completed the survey, and 43 students completed the survey at the end of the semester. The responses from the control group were compared to the treatment group, the students who completed the Positive Psychology course.

As shown in Figure 4.28, students were surveyed about how often they were bothered by certain experiences over the past two weeks based on *Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7* questions that were developed by Spitzer et al. (2006). At the beginning of the quarter, the treatment group ($M = 2.129$) and the control group ($M = 2.139$) were almost

the same. By the end of the semester, anxiety for the control group increased while the treatment group showed a reduction in anxiety which was statistically significant (p = .047).

Figure 4.28

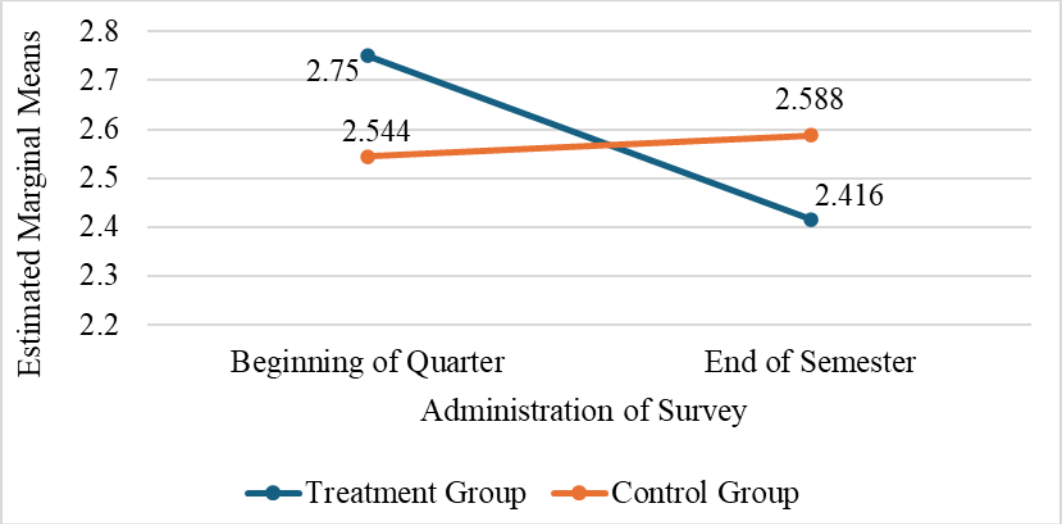
Treatment by Time Interaction for Anxiety



As shown in Figure 4.29, students were surveyed on negative factors which impacted their well-being. At the beginning of the quarter, the treatment group and the control group started with similar means. By the end of the semester, the control group reported a slight increase on the impact of negative factors on well-being while the treatment group's negative factors decreased. The variance of the impact between the treatment group and the control group was statistically significant (p = . 019).

Figure 4.29

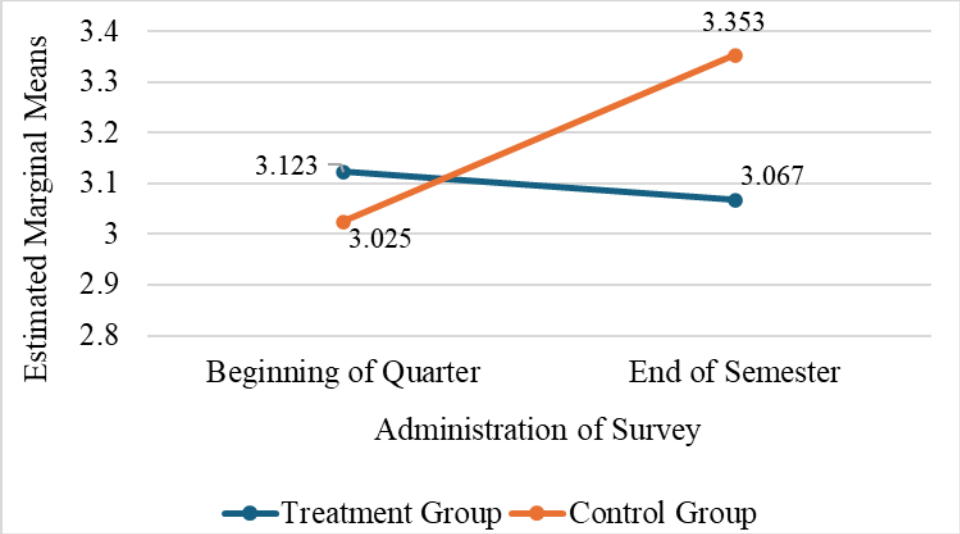
Negative Factors Impacting Well-Being



As shown in Figure 4.30, the treatment group started the quarter with a slightly higher mean than the control group for watching television as a coping strategy. There are better alternatives than television as the treatment group learned because they used television less often than the control group as a coping skill at the end of the semester. The difference was not statistically significant (p = .077).

Figure 4.30

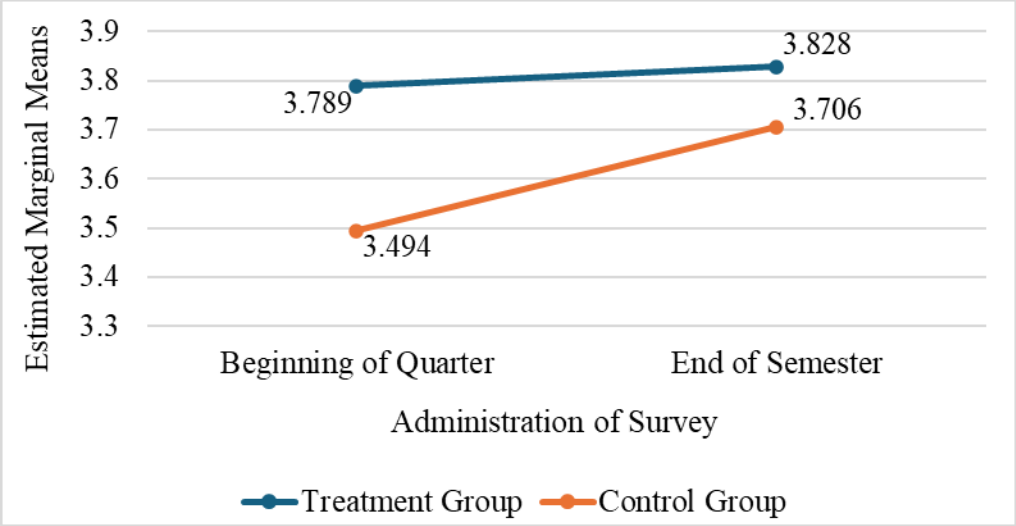
Coping Through Media (Watching Television)



As shown in Figure 4.31, the treatment group started the course with a higher mean than the control group for using listening to music as a coping skill. Both groups continued to use listening to music by the end of the course and the change over time was similar. There was not a statistically significant difference (p = .194) in using music as coping strategy.

Figure 4.31

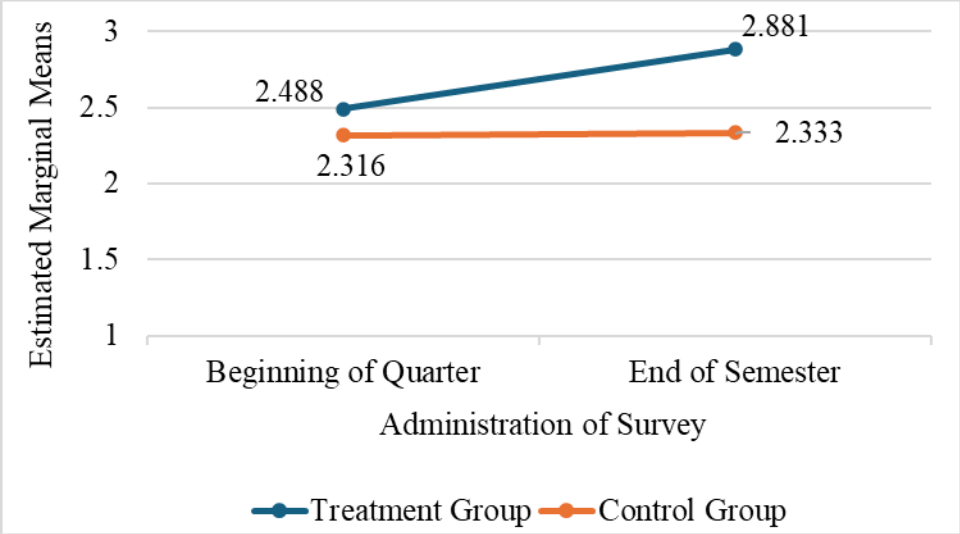
Coping Through Listening to Music



As shown in Figure 4.32, the treatment group started the quarter with a slightly higher mean than the control group for using behavioral strategies such as physical activity, breathing techniques, and fidgets as a means of coping. At the end of the semester, the treatment group increased coping through behavior while the control group remained stable, which was statistically significant (p = .023)

Figure 4.32

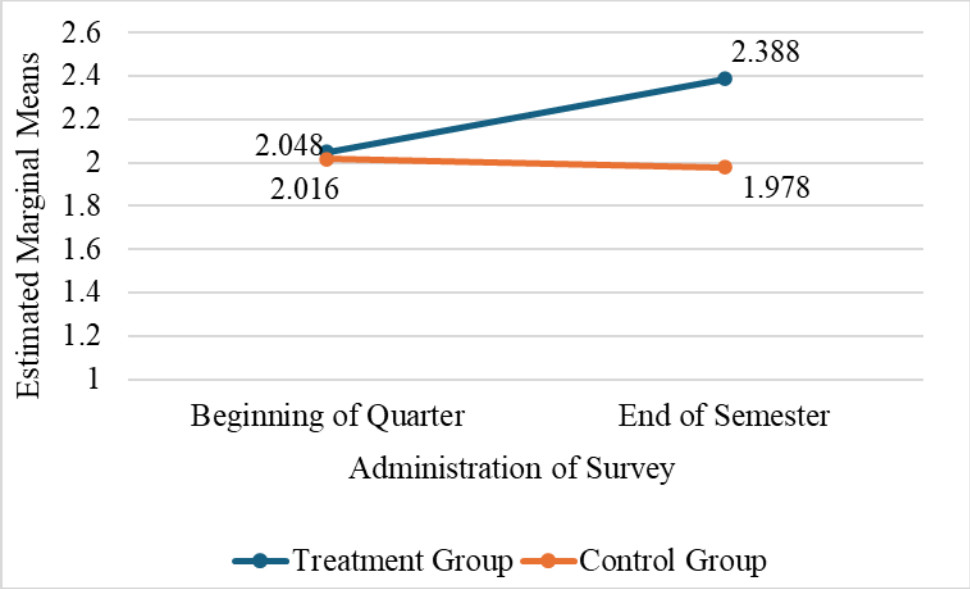
Coping Through Behavior



As shown in Figure 4.33, at the beginning of the quarter, the treatment group and the control group started with similar means for using coping skills such as cognitive restructuring, facing fears, mindfulness, and writing in a gratitude journal. At the end of the semester, the treatment group increased cognitive processing while the control group declined slightly. The variance of the impact between the treatment group and the control group was statistically significant (p = . 046).

Figure 4.33

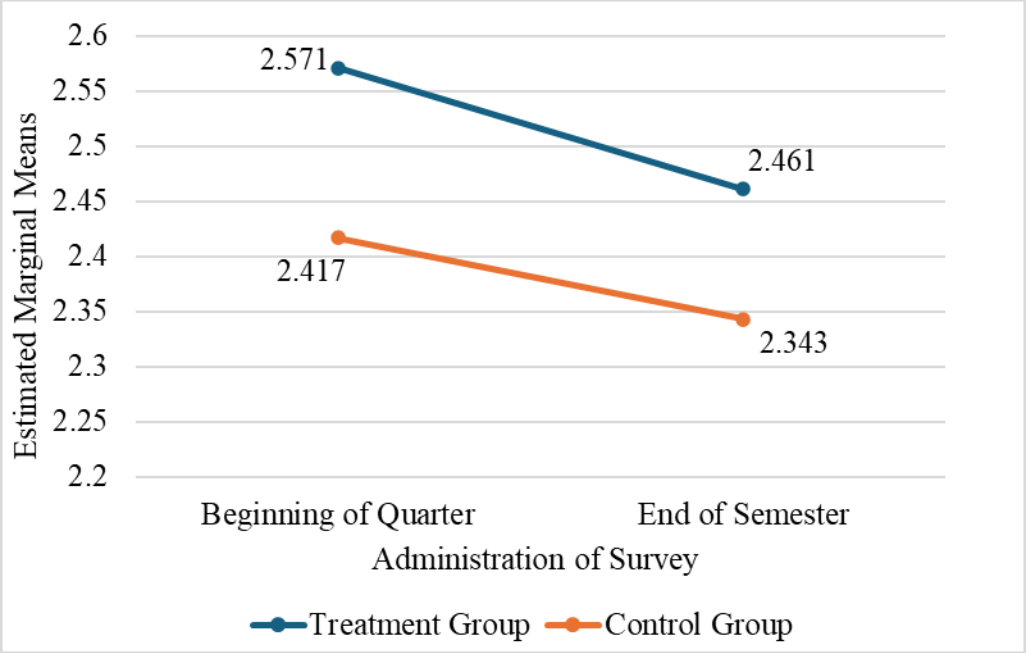
Coping Through Cognitive Processing



As shown in Figure 4.34, the treatment group started the quarter with a higher mean than the control group for talking with friends, family, and/or the school staff as a coping strategy. At the end of the semester using talking as a strategy deceased for both the groups indicating there was not a significant effect (p = .855).

Figure 4.34

Coping Through Talking



Results from the Qualitative Data

The qualitative data provided details about the experiences of high school students in Positive Psychology. Information was collected using student papers, a focus group, and interviews.

The table summarizes the frequency with which different coping strategies and interventions were mentioned by students in a sample of 337 final reflection papers. “Topic" refers to specific strategies or themes introduced during the semester (e.g., mindfulness, breathing techniques, goal setting). "Number of Mentions" indicates how often each topic was cited by students in their final reflection paper at the end of the semester. For additional topics that were mentioned in student final papers, see Appendix N.

Table 4.1

Common Positive Psychology Topics Mentioned in Student Final Papers

Topic	Number of Mentions
Mindfulness	430
Breathing	340
Goal setting	264
Gratitude	235
PERMA/Well-Being	114
Does money make you happier?	103
Flow	86
Experiences, not stuff	83
Growth/Fixed Mindset/Grit	81
Meditation	71

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs)

Mindfulness. The most frequently mentioned topic in students' final papers was Mindfulness. The general topic of mindfulness was mentioned 440 times, but more specifically, students wrote about listening to music mindfully (76 mentions) and mindful eating (65 mentions). They also described practicing mindful visualization (46 mentions), coloring (26 mentions), movement (24 mentions), seeing (23 mentions), and listening (17 times). The focus group discussed specific mindfulness techniques for moving, eating, and seeing, while students also shared their favorite mindfulness practices during

individual interviews. The following quote showcases one student's thoughts about using mindfulness.

> *My mental health has been very low recently. Mindful eating, breathing, and my favorite walking, have helped me so much. I learned to pay attention to the present instead of being in the past or the future, adding to my stressors. I also learned how much I didn't pay attention to my surroundings before and missed out on so much beautiful life. I always get stuck at home, thinking I have nothing to do, hating the day and my friends. I realized I was just missing out, life was happening right in front of my eyes, but I was too blind to see it! (Student 1 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

The student described how they are using three mindfulness strategies that focus on observations about the present moment. Mindfulness has helped redirect attention from worrying about things in the past and the future. During an interview, Participant C also shared that they enjoy walking mindfully through their neighborhood now and notice more details in nature, which has helped their mental health. After coming home from school, Participant D described how practicing mindfulness helped relieve some of the day's stressors.

Another student wrote about the benefit of listening to music mindfully.

> *For mindful music, when many people listen to music, the lyrics are really not heard. Sure we are listening but are we hearing? It is good to listen to music with an open, non-judgmental mind to really get the full experience. I love music with my whole heart, but I have been guilty of not always hearing the words and*

> *feeling the music. Because of this course, I have incorporated more mindfulness into my music. And it has been a much better experience. (Student 2 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

The student developed a deeper experience with music by turning attention away from the outside world and concentrating on the instruments and lyrics. Listening in this way connected the mind and the body, so the music could be truly felt. During an interview, Participant A also noted that listening to music mindfully was a favorite strategy and one they practiced regularly at home.

Practicing mindful eating was a lesson from class that resonated with 65 students who wrote about the topic in their papers. A student athlete recounted his experience:

> *Being a wrestler, I have a very poor relationship with food. For most of the year, I am overeating to put on weight and strength, then for four months, I starve myself to make weight for competitions and tournaments. However, through practicing mindful eating, I was able to improve my relationship with food and develop a deep feeling of presence and mindfulness when I eat. Overall, I look forward to continuing to practice mindful eating to live a healthier, more fulfilled life. (Student 3 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

High school wrestlers sometimes struggle to gain or cut weight, which can lead to negative emotions associated with food. Practicing strategies for mindful eating at home helped, as Participant E noted that it was difficult to get relaxed in the classroom (Participant E, Interview). Mindful eating helped the student bring nonjudgmental

awareness to the experience, leading to greater well-being and a better relationship with food.

For some students, the opportunity to focus on coloring while tuning out the rest of the world brought them into the flow state and increased well-being. One student wrote about their experience:

> *Before this class I haven't colored since I was around 10 years old. When we did the lesson though I was reminded of when I used to love coloring and doing art. During the lesson I started to experience flow which I didn't think was going to happen, mostly because I didn't think I enjoyed it anymore. Not only was coloring fun for me but it was something that could calm me down when my anxiety was getting really high. (Student 10 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

Coloring provided a sense of relaxation and allowed students to tap into their creativity. Participant A shared how coloring was helpful, and Participant B identified coloring mandalas as a memorable in-class activity (Interviews). The coloring activity allowed students to focus on the present moment, which fostered a sense of calm.

Breathing. Students wrote about the importance of breathing in decreasing stress and anxiety 340 times. Twenty different practices were presented to students over the semester. Box breathing, "Take Five," and triangle breathing were the most often shared in the student papers. One student reflected on their experience using breathing techniques under different situations:

> *Breathing techniques were pretty new to me, I never really tried them other than just breathing deeply. They help me in so many ways like falling asleep, calming*

> *down, catching my breath, coming back into the moment and many more. I always have lots of trouble falling asleep because I am thinking about so much so the body scan really helps there. It takes my mind off everything else that I would regularly be thinking about and makes me focus on relaxing. (Student 7 Paper, 2023, Sem 1)*

The student had trouble falling asleep in the evening, so focusing on breathing while completing a body scan proved an effective method. Breathing also provided an outlet for stress at home, school, and work.

> *Breathing techniques ended up being a nice, quick way to restart when I'm feeling stressed at school and can't walk in the halls, or when I'm upset and home and don't want to cause a scene, or when I'm overwhelmed at work and can't take a break. (Student 8 Paper, 2024, Sem 1)*

The focus group discussed breathing exercises, describing them as simple yet highly effective tools for managing stress. Participant G stated, "Breathing techniques helped because you don't realize you need a minute sometimes, and you just need to breathe and calm yourself down through everything" (Focus Group).

As an added reminder to breathe, students were provided with their choice of stickers with different breathing techniques, and many attached them to their cell phones and laptops. Participant H stated, "And the coping mechanisms that she gave us with the like the meditations on the little stickers, where it's just like inhale, hold, exhale, hold. It was really helpful with like calming" (Focus Group). The focus group discussed one of

their favorite breathing techniques as the 5-4-3-2-1 method; the method was mentioned 27 in student papers.

Breathing techniques were often shared with friends, family, and partners. Participant H stated, “My boyfriend has a lot of anxiety issues...The breathing I do like, say, focus on your breathing and like, tell him a lot of the stuff that I like from the course” (Focus Group). Stress and anxiety were ongoing challenges for the students in the focus group.

> *I think like being a teenager, there's a lot of stress from like your social life. And then your school life. And then maybe like your home life. So I feel like if you just if somebody's like, in the moment, they're just stressed out about it and you just, like, tell them to like breathe and, like, do some of the practices. It like helps. When you're under stress and you actually like, take time to breathe it, like, helps and, like, makes you calm. (Participant I, Focus Group)*

Students shared that it was sometimes difficult to remember to use the breathing techniques in the immediate moment of stress; however, when they could remember, the techniques provided them with some relief and helped control anger.

> *I get mad lot and positive psychology has taught me about breathing exercises you can use to control your anger like the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, where there's 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel physically,3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste, and sometimes i just do this technique subconsciously without even thinking about how itś from positive*

psychology, but it really does help me control my anger. (Student 9 Paper, 2023, Sem 1)

As a mindfulness, breathing, and grounding technique, 5-4-3-2-1 shifted the thought process for the student from one of anger to calmness.

Gratitude. The topic of gratitude was discussed in 235 student papers. Students wrote about the significance of keeping a gratitude journal (98 mentions), the general topic of gratitude (56 mentions), the impact of writing gratitude letters (44 mentions), and strategies for building gratitude (37 mentions). The following student explained how keeping a gratitude journal affected their well-being.

Journaling with a gratitude journal had a noticeable effect on my own happiness, and it has not only improved but I can understand what makes me happier. For the days which I reflected on what made me happy, I noticed I was going to sleep a bit easier and that I could wake up feeling a little more rested. It has also helped me notice smaller things that bring me joy, like finding cool insects. Just sitting and watching them run around is very enthralling to me. There really aren't any drawbacks or effort you have to put into gratitude journaling, so it's more or less a happiness cheat code. (Student 4 Paper, 2022, Sem 1)

The student recognized that writing in the gratitude journal improved sleep and enhanced well-being, even referring to the process as a "happiness cheat code." By writing in a gratitude journal at least three times a week for the semester, another student learned how consistently reflecting on positive experiences could be beneficial.

> *Gratitude has been an activity we have done the entire semester through our weekly gratitude journals. This has been one of the most beneficial activities towards my wellness, as I became more aware of the things that I should be more grateful for in my daily life. Sometimes it is easily to feel like an entire day sucks but with our gratitude journals I was able to notice there are pockets of happiness in the mundane. (Student 5 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

The gratitude journal increased awareness of the good things about the day, even in the small details. Participant D also shared the benefit of writing in the gratitude journal: " It's really helped me because I was I was trying to find something good happen. So it's like opened a door for me. There's always good in every day life" (Interview). Writing in the gratitude journal caused them to consciously reflect on the positive moments, as each day offers new possibilities.

In addition to gratitude journals, students described the impact of writing a letter of gratitude to someone and reading it aloud to the recipient. One student shared the experience of sharing a letter with a sibling.

> *When I first wrote to my brother, just the writing process made me realize how grateful I was for him and how I had never expressed these feelings. Then when I got to read it to him, and he started crying I finally understood the impact words can have on people. Sometimes I get so stressed or just distracted by life that I forget to appreciate the ones around me, I always just assume they know I love them. (Student 6 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

The student experienced a strong emotional response while writing the letter, and the positive effect of seeing their brother react to the loving words. Some students felt encouraged to write more letters after feeling a happiness boost from the first letter. Participant F reflected on writing the gratitude letters: “You put a lot of thought into them and then just thinking about it in that way really opens up your mind to like, the different things you should feel gratitude for” (Focus Group). There are many areas in life where gratitude can be expressed, and the focus group reflected on the people who had supported them in small and significant ways.

Goal Setting. Students reflected on the importance of setting goals 141 times in their papers. An additional 91 students specifically wrote about their WOOP goal (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan), which was set in class and discussed over four consecutive weeks. The following student shared their experience with goal setting:

> *Setting goals for myself can make me feel more accomplished and satisfied when I reach them. I really only used to set big goals on New Year's as tradition but after this class I have learned I can make and meet any goal, any time! (Student 11 Paper, 2023, Sem 2)*

Learning how to create and manage goals shifted the student’s perspective from thinking that goals are set once a year to recognizing the importance of setting goals as an ongoing practice. They reported feeling a sense of accomplishment and well-being, which they now understand can be cultivated throughout the year.

Another student had struggled with goal setting because they set goals that were too large, causing a drop in motivation and boredom.

> *Every now and then I'd have goals for myself, but sometimes those goals are too overwhelming and I tend to get bored of it and not have any motivation to do the goal anymore. However, this class helped me see it another way and made me realize that the reason I haven't been reaching any of them was because I was trying to take big steps at a time, but the real key is those small steps, and that we can go a long way without even realizing it. So that's why I've been setting goals for myself but taking it day by day. (Student 12 Paper, 2023, Sem 1)*

The student understands how to set smaller, incremental goals and to celebrate the small steps in the journey. Goals require persistence, so the approach in the class helped the student sustain a growth mindset.

Students on sports teams reflected on the importance of setting goals. One basketball player shared their perspective on how goals affect well-being.

> *For me as an athlete, especially playing high-level basketball, goal setting isn't just helpful, it is definitely essential. Setting meaningful goals on and off the court gives me a sense of direction in my journey. From things like increasing my shooting percentage, decreasing turnovers, and just working to become a better overall leader, having goals helps me stay committed to the process of working and getting better. (Student 13 Paper, 2025, Sem 2)*

Goal setting provided the student-athlete with motivation and direction by focusing on measurable targets and leadership growth. The student reflected on how setting goals served as an asset not only on the basketball court but also in their personal growth.

Flow. Students explored the concept of flow and the psychological conditions that support entering a flow state. There were 86 students who reflected on flow and described its impact on their lives. One student athlete described the feeling of flow:

> *I often experience a flow state while I'm swimming, especially at meets while swimming the 500 which is a longer event. Flow helps me not feel as fatigued and sore while I'm swimming which allows me to get the best times. (Student 14 Paper, 2023, Sem 1)*

The student reflects how entering a flow state during an event that requires endurance can reduce tiredness and aches. Flow allowed the student to achieve peak performance in the 500-meter swim. Another student became absorbed in flow while running, even with an ADD diagnosis.

> *I don't listen to music or anything while running and this absence of distractions has me falling into the deepest state of flow I've even felt. It is an odd feeling being so focused on a task while having ADD, since I usually can never focus on a single thing so much. It's a very cleansing feeling being in a deep state of flow that I absolutely love. (Student 15 Paper, 2024, Sem 2)*

The flow state enabled the student to remain laser-focused on running, when typically paying sustained attention to one thing presents a challenge. Being able to achieve flow provided a sense of renewal and well-being, bringing a sense of peace as well as accomplishment. Another student recognized that they needed to balance challenge and skill to stay engaged:

> *Before this class, I didn't know there was a word for those moments when you get so into something that time just disappears. Turns out, that's called flow. I've experienced it during football games, weightlifting, and even drawing. It's that feeling when you're locked in and everything just clicks. Learning about flow made me realize that it's important to find activities that challenge me just enough to keep me engaged. (Student 16 Paper, 2025, Sem 2)*

Flow can be achieved in many different activities, and now the student is aware of the benefits of the flow state–being absorbed in something, losing the sense of time, and experiencing positive emotions.

Character Strengths. Students shared the experience of learning about their character strengths and how the results increased their self-awareness. There were 38 students who wrote about character strengths and their interest in the topic. Some students focused on their top strengths, the signature strengths, while others were interested in understanding how to nurture the lesser strengths. One student highlighted an area of growth:

> *Finding my character strengths has helped me to appreciate the little things in life and understand why I act the way I act. Working on my last-place character strengths has been hard, but I am getting better in the weak areas of my character. My weakest area of improvement is teamwork, which tells me that I need to be more open-minded to collaboration and hearing what other people have to say. Working together can help social skills and even help create better ideas as opposed to working alone. (Student 17 Paper, 2023, Sem 1)*

The student recognized their signature strengths but chose to work on the less-developed strength, teamwork. While acknowledging the challenge of working on their lesser strengths, they understood that relationships and collaboration are important skills. Participant H spoke about the value of understanding character strengths: “I learned to use my strengths to my advantage and not focus so much on my weaknesses” (Focus Group). From the student’s perspective, attention was centered on the signature strengths and using those positively, instead of concentrating on the lesser strengths.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The dissertation was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of a one-semester (20-week) Positive Psychology course for high school students. There were 490 students in grades 9-12 who completed the course between 2022 and 2025. Using mixed-methods research, the study examined the impact reported by the students on their social and emotional well-being at three points: the beginning of the course, the end of the semester, and through a follow-up survey in the spring of 2025. Data from a control group of 100 participants who did not take the course were compared to their peers who had enrolled in Positive Psychology. According to Sandvik et al. (1993), "The single most common form of well-being assessment has been the collection of self-reports" (p. 318). The results demonstrated that students who completed Positive Psychology reported improvements in their stress and anxiety levels as well as a decrease in the stressors affecting their well-being. Students also identified the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) they found the most effective during the semester and ones they continued to use after completing the course. The findings from the study should contribute to research supporting a Positive Psychology course in high schools and the benefits of integrating specific interventions for this age group.

A Review of Critical Findings

Anxiety

Based on self-reported data from students who completed the Positive Psychology course, there was a downward trend from the first survey through the follow-up survey on all seven measures of anxiety. For the control group, the anxiety level increased by the end of the semester, even though both groups began at similar baseline levels. The improvement for students in the Positive Psychology course may indicate that students developed a greater awareness of their emotions and strategies for managing their anxiety. According to Fredrickson (2000), “Cultivated positive emotions not only counteract negative emotions, but also broaden individuals' habitual modes of thinking and build their personal resources for coping” (p. 1). With the progression declining further at the follow-up survey, students were able to work on building positive emotions and coping skills. The broaden-and build theory suggests that negative events may feel less powerful because they would be offset by the positive ones (Frederickson, 2001).

The importance of supporting adolescents and providing them with interventions to manage their anxiety cannot be overstated. Mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders are major causes of illness and disability among teens (World Health Organization, 2025). The issue of mental health is a global challenge.

> Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 7 (14%) 10–19-year-olds experience mental health conditions *(1)*, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated. Adolescents with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to social

> exclusion, discrimination, stigma (affecting readiness to seek help), educational difficulties, risk-taking behaviours, physical ill-health and human rights violations. (World Health Organization, 2025, Introduction)

Adolescents in the U.S. are also facing mental health challenges. The Centers for Disease Control (2021) reported "In 2021, 42% of high school students felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities" (p. 60). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2023) reported, "Among U.S. adolescents (aged 12-17): 1 in 6 experienced a major depressive episode (MDE); 3 million had serious thoughts of suicide; 31% increase in mental health-related emergency department visits." In a five-year study, from the National Survey of Children's Health (2016-2020) reported, "…a 27% increase in anxiety and a 24% increase in depression, between 2016 and 2019…The direction of these trends continued into 2020, representing 5.6 million children with diagnosed anxiety and 2.4 million children diagnosed with depression" (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022, p. 8). With numbers continuing to rise, it became critical to implement programs that could support students' mental health.

As a result of the mental health concerns, school districts have increased efforts to support students. Blau et al. (2010) used the term "reclaiming" instead of "recovery" in describing mental health in terms of prevention rather than suffering: "'Reclaiming' is used to reflect interventions and actions that optimize positive mental health for children and youth with identified mental health problems" (p. 141). Interventions in some districts have included school mental health (SMH) programs (Albright et al., 2013; Mcluckie et al., 2014; Stephan et al, 2014), school-based mental health services (Lyon et

al., 2014), social-emotional learning programs (Lawson et al., 2019), and school-based mental health interventions (Kern et al. 2021).

While examining programs and interventions, the field of Positive Psychology emerged as a possible solution to stress and anxiety because it was focused on increasing well-being through evidence-based practices (Seligman et al., 2005). Most existing research has focused on undergraduate students who have already demonstrated an interest in psychology because they were enrolled as psychology majors or minors (Goodmon et al., 2016; Hood et al., 2020; Maybury, 2013). For adolescents, some schools incorporated Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) through short, individual lessons (Platt et al., 2020). There was a lack of research investigating a 20-week Positive Psychology course designed for high school students.

Negative Factors Impacting Wellness

In the quantitative results, all of the negative factors impacting wellness showed a significant change over time. However, there was not a consistent downward trend. For the treatment group, negative factors decreased, while the control group reported a slight increase in the impact of negative factors on their well-being. Academic stress increased at the end of the semester, which was when the final survey was administered to students. Students often feel pressure over grades and tests during that time of year, so they may have felt more anxious since academic stress declined later at the follow-up survey. Anxiety, depression, family stress, social pressure, trauma, and racism/discrimination were all slightly up at the follow-up survey compared to the end of the semester as negative factors impacting their wellness. It is possible that being in the positive

psychology classroom helped support students in using the strategies and they remembered to use the interventions. Once the course concluded, the effect wore off slightly and students became more influenced by the negativity. It was important to note that none of the levels were as high as the initial survey indicating that students retained the content and the interventions.

There are many negative factors that can contribute to stress and anxiety for adolescents. The World Health Organization (2025) identified several risk factors, including exposure to adversity, peer pressure, identity development, social media, cultural expectations, stability of the home environment, quality of relationships with family and peers, experiences of violence, and socioeconomic challenges. Horowitz and Graf (2019) found academic pressure ranking as a major source of stress for adolescents in their Pew Research study: "Most teens (61%) say they personally feel a lot of pressure to get good grades, and another 27% say they feel some pressure to do so." (p. 9). In addition, Steare et al. (2023) conducted a systemic review of 52 studies and found academic pressure appears to be linked to mental health problems in adolescents. These combined pressures can significantly impact adolescents' mental health, which highlights the need for programs and interventions that promote well-being in schools.

At the beginning of the 20-week Positive Psychology course, students learned about teen stress on a global, national, and personal level. Since individuals faced varying degrees of stress and challenges in their lives, students learned that they would be supported by interventions and course concepts, which could help increase their happiness and well-being. These strategies required practice and commitment. The

interventions were meant to help support students manage the negative factors which may be contributing to their stress and anxiety. Duckworth et al. (2005) described well-being as a process which can be supported by interventions:

> We believe that positive psychology interventions are worthwhile in therapy for two reasons. First, positive interventions, by definition, build pleasure, engagement, and meaning, and we believe they are therefore fully justifiable in their own right. Second, we believe that building positive emotion, engagement, and meaning may actually counter disorder itself (p. 641).

Students in the Positive Psychology course learned that the interventions could promote human flourishing and make life more fulfilling especially when trying to manage life's negative challenges. They practiced strategies and skills designed to help them regulate their own internal dialogue and improve actions with others.

Coping Strategies

Many students in both the treatment and control groups reported listening to music as a way to reduce stress. Listening to music mindfully was a strategy which was practiced in the Positive Psychology class, and the results increased at each point in the survey administration. Watching television remained relatively unchanged as a coping mechanism for the treatment group, while viewing increased slightly for the control group. Other coping strategies were shared with students in the course with the possibility that television usage would decrease. A study by Kirgios et al. (2020) on temptation bundling was introduced to students where the subjects paired going to the gym while listening to audiobooks. The students in the Positive Psychology class discussed watching

programs while engaged in other tasks they did not like. Students reported a small increase in the follow-up survey in physical activity; however, the course did not actively encourage students to start or increase these routines.

Cognitive restructuring, using Socratic questioning and reframing thoughts, was introduced to students in the second part of the course. Cognitive restructuring declined at the end of the semester but then increased at the follow-up survey, suggesting that these techniques were practiced more after completing the course. In a study using Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) skills and Socratic questioning, Vittoria et al. (2022) noted that Socratic questioning may work best with individuals who are new to CBT. The coping strategy of facing fears increased each time the survey was administrated, which indicates that perhaps students were challenging their negative thinking patterns, using breathing techniques, and becoming more resilient. In contrast, the control group reported a slight decrease in the use of these cognitive processes at the end of the semester. These findings suggest that the techniques served as effective strategies to challenge and reframe negative thinking patterns for students in the Positive Psychology course.

Mindfulness/Meditation, practicing breathing techniques, and writing in a gratitude journal at least three times per week were core components of the course. These three strategies were reported by students as being effective coping strategies on each self-reported survey. Fredrickson (2000) stressed the importance of meditation and visual imagery: “Relaxation therapies induce key components of contentment, and in doing so, create conditions for experiencing contentment” (p. 10). For the control group, involvement in these practices remained stable. As these strategies were continuously

reinforced throughout the semester, students in the Positive Psychology course may have continued them because they became an important part of the daily practice in class.

Fidgets were obtained through a grant in 2023. Surveying students on the effectiveness of fidgets was not added until later surveys. Some students were using fidgets as part of their individualized educational program (IEP) for anxiety or ADHD, so fidgets were purchased for all students and placed in containers on student tables. Kriescher et al. (2022) evaluated fidget usage in the classroom and concluded that some students may benefit from using them, but fidgets may present challenges for classroom management. While some students ignored the fidgets which were available, others were happy to have access to them. Students reported that fidgets offered an alternative to some problematic habits such as cracking knuckles, skin picking, nail biting, and twirling hair.

Impact of Material Learned in Class

The mixed methods approach proved beneficial in understanding the interventions which students found most effective. Personal stories about using the techniques provided a voice to the quantitative data. Sharing evidence and scientific findings with students about the material was an important component of the course. Tov et al (2022) stated on subjective well-being theory, "…well-being findings are of interest and relevance to students. Happiness and well-being are overwhelmingly a goal that people seek, and students are no exception" (p. 1463). Students appreciated knowing that the material they learned was supported by evidence. They also learned that studies have shown that happy people may not be happy all of the time, as the field of subjective well-being evaluates

"…how people evaluate their lives—both at the moment and for longer periods such as for the past year" (Diener et al., 2003, p. 404). Some students recognized that well-being is a continuous process of awareness, reflection, and personal growth.

Mindfulness, Meditation, and Breathing

Practicing mindfulness was an intervention that students reported as beneficial based in all areas of data collection. Mindfulness, meditation, and breathing techniques were incorporated into the first 5-10 minutes of every class. Twenty different types of breathing techniques were shared, one at a time, and students discussed how they felt after practicing each one. The idea being that they find at least one which could work for them in moments of stress. The advantages of mindfulness were supported in a study by Meiklejohn et al. (2012):

> School-based mindfulness training appears to offer a means for students to cultivate attentional skills as well as an array of other aptitudes that may enhance their capacity to cope with their psychosocial as well as academic challenges. Potential benefits include: fostering pro-social behavior via strengthening self-regulation and impulse control; alleviating the effects of stress that obstruct learning; and providing a skill set that promotes brain hygiene, and physical and emotional well-being across the life span. (p. 304)

The practice of being still without cell phones, conversations, or electronics was challenging for some students in the beginning of the course. Over time, the quiet was viewed more as a gift to just check in with oneself. Kabat-Zinn (2013) explained, "All of us have the capacity to be mindful. All it involves is cultivating our ability to pay

attention in the present moment as we suspend our judging, or at least, as we become aware of how much judging is usually going on within us" (p. 49). A unit of the course was dedicated to mindfulness which covered different ways of being mindful. For the student who struggled to stay seated in the classroom for 10 minutes, the opportunity to practice mindfulness while walking outside opened new possibilities for understanding how mindfulness could support their well-being.

Gratitude

The concept of gratitude expanded over the course as students were encouraged to share things they were good things happening each week with a small group, keep a weekly gratitude journal, and write letters of gratitude. The impact of learning and practicing gratitude increased over time with students. Frederickson (2004) stated, "So although gratitude motivates people to express their appreciation, people may build up their more general skills for loving through the process of thinking broadly about how to repay kindness" (p. 152). Overall, the students' expressions of gratitude broadened and built over time, which has been identified in other gratitude studies (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh & Bono, 2008; Froh et al., 2011; Armenta et al., 2022). A study by Bono et al. (2023) supported the importance of teaching students about the science of gratitude, so helping students understand the research was an important concept in the Positive Psychology course.

While students appreciated expressing gratitude, the gratitude journal assignments were not reported as effective for the majority of the participants in the quantitative survey. Students were provided with the option to write in physical journal, use a journal

application on their phone, or use a template which was available in print or online. They were asked to write three good things that happened to them in a day and explain why they were good at least three times a week. A study by Seligman et al. (2005) found that participants who recorded three positive experiences in a gratitude journal each day for one week experienced greater happiness and reduced depressive symptoms that lasted for six months. The results on the journal in the Positive Psychology class correspond with previous research by Froh and Bono (2008) who referenced a study by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) where adults received more satisfaction counting their blessings once a week rather than three times a week; younger people might also become bored with repeating gratitude practices too frequently. Qualitative analysis of students' final essays revealed 98 references describing how writing in the gratitude journal positively affected their well-being. As a question for future research, Emmons and Crumpler (2000) asked, "What is the link between gratitude and happiness?" (p. 66). Later, Emmons and Shelton (2002) completed a study on logging gratitude for 21 days and found increased psychological well-being. These findings collectively suggest that the frequency of gratitude journaling may influence its effectiveness, which could explain the different results among participants in this study.

For some of the students in the Positive Psychology course, writing gratitude letters and keeping gratitude journals seemed to support a sense of well-being. Diener (2000) expressed that subjective well-being has various components: "life satisfaction (global judgments of one's life), satisfaction with important domains (e.g., work satisfaction), positive affect (experiencing many pleasant emotions and moods), and low

levels of negative affect (experiencing few unpleasant emotions and moods)" (p. 34). Many people tend to ruminate on the negative parts of their day or worry about things they have to accomplish in the future. The gratitude journal provided students with a space to reflect on the positive moments and pleasant emotions and to notice aspects of their day that might otherwise be overlooked. Some students who used a journal application on their phones added photographs to accompany their entries, so they created a digital collection of meaningful memories that they could look back on. Each week, time was dedicated to sharing excerpts from their journals in small groups. This routine helped foster a caring and supportive classroom environment, as students learned more about one another and celebrated each other's successes.

After completing their gratitude letters, students read them aloud to the recipients and delivered them in person. For many students, letter writing felt uncomfortable, yet the heartfelt reactions from the recipients often inspired students to write additional letters. Students were required to write two letters of gratitude to anyone of their choice each quarter. Writing four letters in a semester was not an overwhelming task, and many students described retaining positive memories from the experience. I keep a stack of stationery in my classroom for students who wish to continue this practice throughout the year. Armenta et al. (2022) also found gratitude letter writing was an effective intervention for enhancing well-being. However, based on my survey data, future researchers or educators may want to consider reducing the time spent on gratitude journaling. Completing entries three times a week for an entire semester may lead to decline in the intervention's effectiveness for some students over time.

PERMA

The PERMA model is an acronym for five elements of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2019). The model is an integral part of the curriculum for Positive Psychology courses (Hood et al., 2021; Waters, 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2023; Hanson-Peterson, 2024). The framework for PERMA was highly rated on the quantitative study and the topic was the fifth most referenced theme in students' final papers. In the Positive Psychology class, one to two days was dedicated to each element of PERMA which then served as a foundation for expanding into other dimensions of the course.

The practice of setting goals aligns with the PERMA model (A = Accomplishments) because students worked towards something meaningful to support their personal growth. A study by Davids et al. (2017) applied self-determination theory to goal setting and found that pursuing intrinsic life goals is associated with greater psychological health and well-being. Students rated goal setting highly and it was the third most common topic in their final papers. They were required to set a goal that could be feasibly accomplished in five weeks using WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan), a four-step process developed by Oettingen (2014). Students filled out a weekly form highlighting their progress towards the goal and then met with a group of students who shared a similar goal category such as academic, financial, or personal. The meetings created a sense of accountability, as students knew they would have to discuss their success and challenges along the way. Many students enjoyed the process because they were working towards goals that mattered to them, which aligns with self-determination

theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) stated, “In particular, intrinsic motivation concerns active engagement with tasks that people find interesting and that, in turn, promote growth” (p. 233). The findings support the conclusion that goal setting was an impactful part of the course for students.

The relationships component of the PERMA model (R = Relationships) emphasizes the importance of maintaining connections with partners, friends, family, and the community. This element encompasses feeling cared for, appreciated, and supported by others. Students expressed gratitude in their journals, gratitude letters, and practiced building relationships in the class using active constructive responding. In a study on happy people, Diener and Seligman (2002) found, “It is interesting, however, that social relationships form a necessary but not sufficient condition for high happiness—that is, they do not guarantee high happiness, but it does not appear to occur without them” (p. 83). To practice relationship-building, based on the study by Gable et al. (2004), active constructive responding was practiced weekly as students learned how to share positive experiences in their lives and respond actively to others who shared their own. While managing relationships is a key component of the PERMA model, active constructive responding was not a frequently discussed topic in students’ final papers, as it was mentioned only 18 times.

Being engaged in a task follows the PERMA model (E = Engagement), and flow is a key aspect of this part of the model. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), tasks involving flow “allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible, and provide immediate feedback.” (p.47). Students rated flow highly on the quantitative

survey, and it was a popular topic in their final papers. As part of the goal setting aspect of the Positive Psychology course, students were encouraged to find activities which could induce a flow state. They learned that passive activities, such as watching television, do not result in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Student-athletes often described experiencing flow during training and competition, which was consistent with the findings on athletic performance by Stavrou et al. (2007). These findings highlight the relevance of flow to student engagement and the positive impact that understanding this concept had on students.

Character Strengths

The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths is a classification system of 24-character strengths and six categories of virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths represent one aspect of positive individual traits along with optimism and resiliency in Positive Psychology (Park, 2004; Kobau et al., 2011). Students determined their strengths and virtues by completing the VIA online survey. Student interest in character strengths started out relatively high and remained consistent on the quantitative survey, but it was not a topic they discussed often in their final papers.

Findings from the study suggest that including character strengths in the Positive Psychology course supported student growth, yet additional instruction on this topic may lead to greater benefits. According to Pawelski (2022), focusing on character strengths is an important component that helps individuals flourish, so including the topic in the course appeared essential. Park and Peterson (2005) noted that character strengths can change throughout a person's lifetime, but students did not take the test again within the

same semester. They also indicated that self-reporting was one method of determining character strengths but recommended alternative ways of collecting data such as talking to parents and teachers. In the Positive Psychology course, gathering feedback from others about students' character strengths was not included as part of the curriculum.

While previous research has demonstrated that applying signature strengths in new ways can lead to increases in well-being, students in the Positive Psychology course were not asked to engage in this activity. Seligman et al. (2005) asked adult participants in a study to use their signature strengths in a new way for one week (this was combined with a gratitude journal intervention), and the results showed "increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months" (p. 416). In the Positive Psychology class, students were not asked to use their signature strengths in a new context; however, they were asked to use them as they worked toward their WOOP goal. Park and Peterson (2009) recommended journaling about the use of character strengths and Seligman et al. (2009) suggested that students try to use their strengths in new ways. In the future, this could be emphasized more in the course, as students were not required to write regularly about using their character strengths. Ryan and Deci (2000) stated in their discussion of self-determination theory, "Perhaps no single phenomenon reflects the positive potential of human nature as much as intrinsic motivation, the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (p. 70). Considering self-determination theory, if students feel intrinsically motivated by a challenge, they may be more likely to use their character strengths in different and meaningful ways.

Limitations of the Research

My role as the teacher of the Positive Psychology course must be considered as a potential limitation because I was a central participant in the study. The dual role may have created bias for the students who participated in the interviews, focus group, and in their responses to the surveys and essays. Students may not have felt comfortable reporting their actual behaviors or emotions. As I developed the course, I adjusted the timing of certain content based on early student feedback. As a result, students who enrolled in the class in 2022 may have received certain topics at different points in the semester compared to those who enrolled in 2024.

Student attendance, tardies, and enrollment also affected the research. Some students enrolled in the first period class arrived 15-20 minutes late, and others accumulated ten or more absences during the course. The breathing techniques, mindfulness, and meditation were practiced in the beginning of the class, so these students may have repeatedly missed the interventions. Absences resulted in students being unable to participate in class discussions and actively participate in learning various strategies. In addition, some student-athletes left school after three months to begin training with a university team, and others transferred into the class after enrolling late in the school year. These students missed a significant portion of the material. Froiland's (2018) study on gratitude, which examined undergraduate college students, found that those with the more consistent attendance benefited more from the Positive Psychology course.

Major life events in students' lives may have also influenced the research outcomes. Some students were coping with the loss of a loved one, divorce in the family, new siblings, and moving during the academic year. Current events such as the presidential election, incidents of school violence, and the conflict in the Middle East may have also affected students' well-being and influenced their self-reported outcomes.

The class size may have further affected the environment. The maximum enrollment was 36 students, and some classes reached capacity while others were smaller. Smaller class sizes allowed for more individual attention and opportunities to build stronger student-teacher relationships. Additionally, having close friends in the class may have influenced how comfortable students felt sharing ideas during discussions and provided a sense of camaraderie.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand to examine Positive Psychology interventions in elementary and middle schools. Parents, guardians, and school educators could also receive the opportunity to learn the interventions because students are part of a larger community, which helps shape their development. Lukasik (2021) stated, "Student well-being cannot be analyzed in isolation from the school context. It is useful to frame the school community itself, considering its members, participants in various activities, the existence of influences, and preferred values" (p. 198). Long-term research is needed to examine the effects of involving the entire school community in supporting student well-being and to determine the impact of these efforts on students and the community.

Research on the relationship between gratitude and academic outcomes has mixed findings. Froh et al. (2011) studied gratitude and found that adolescents who practiced gratitude improved their grade point average (GPA), while a gratitude study by Armenta and Fritz (2022) did not find significant differences academically. Questions about GPA were not included in the present study because students initially reported no noticeable changes in their academic performance. Future studies could expand to examine if there is an effect on academic performance for students who are enrolled in a Positive Psychology course.

Future research could continue to explore the sequencing of interventions and the amount of instructional time dedicated to teaching them in a Positive Psychology course. Seligman et al. (2005) asked a similar question:

> An important question left unanswered by the current study is whether more is better when it comes to happiness interventions. Given that the using signature strengths in a new way exercise, the three good things exercise, and the gratitude visit exercise were all effective, does it make sense to assign them all to a person who wishes to be happier? And if so, is there an optimal sequence?" (p. 420).

In the 20-week Positive Psychology course examined in this study, additional interventions were included beyond those identified by Seligman et al. (2005). Future research could consider whether more instructional time should be dedicated to the interventions that were highly rated by students and whether adjustments should be made to those that were rated less effective.

Conclusion

Using mixed-methods design, the results of the study demonstrated that a 20-week Positive Psychology course had a positive impact on the well-being and mental health of the majority of high school students who enrolled in the course. Compared to a control group, students in the Positive Psychology course showed growth as they learned evidence-based strategies and interventions that increased their social-emotional skills during the semester. The course was taught by a teacher-researcher who collected four years of data, including surveys administered at the beginning of the course, the end of the quarter, and at the end of the semester. A follow-up survey in 2025 provided additional insight from students who had completed the course as early as 2022 and shared the interventions that they felt were still effective.

Schools often focus on correcting problems or providing targeted support for students experiencing academic or emotional challenges. While these efforts are essential, it is important that leaders in school districts consider what is going well and examine the strategies and support that could help all students. Additionally, high schools rarely conduct follow-up studies on graduates which leaves a gap in understanding students' long-term outcomes. Taylor et al. (2017) explained a study on Positive Youth Development:

> The main purpose of PYD is to set young people on a positive developmental trajectory so that they are prepared to fully realize their potential and are resilient to the challenges they may face. By fostering social and emotional skills and positive attitudes in students, the school-based, universal SEL interventions

> reviewed in this study achieved these ends during follow-up in terms of significantly improving skills, positive attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance. (p. 1166)

A high school education encompasses far more than academic knowledge and skills; it also involves building civic and social responsibility, fostering collaboration and communication, and supporting students' overall well-being. Social-emotional growth should be acknowledged and measured at each grade level, as students' mental health is paramount to their success both inside and outside of the classroom. The findings of this study highlight the importance of integrating a Positive Psychology course into the school curriculum to support student mental health.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) EXEMPTION LETTER

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

Date: June 4, 2025

Study #: IRB-FY2025-399

Study Tile: Positive Psychology Interventions and Student Mental Health

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:
Jennifer Sepetys
Julia Smith

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:
Category 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available; (ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects; (iii) The research involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated under 45 CFR parts 160 and 164, subparts A and E, for the purposes of "health care operations" or "research" as those terms are defined at 45 CFR 164.501 or for "public health activities and purposes" as described under 45 CFR 164.512(b); or (iv) The research is conducted by, or on behalf of, a Federal department or agency using government-generated or government-collected information obtained for nonresearch activities, if the research generates identifiable private information that is or will be maintained on information technology that is subject to and in compliance with section 208(b) of the E-Government Act of 2002, 44 U.S.C. 3501 note, if all of the identifiable private information collected, used, or generated as part of the activity will be maintained in systems of records subject to the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a, and, if applicable, the information used in the research was collected subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, 44 U.S.C. 3501 et seq.

Notes for Researcher(s):

Documents included in this submission:

- Data Use Agreement - [redacted] (approved by Research Compliance and Integrity Director on 6/4/2025)
- DUA Communications

Letter and Consent Document:
This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent form in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Site(s):
Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:
Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:
Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX B

INITIAL SURVEY: BEGINNING OF THE COURSE

Positive Psychology - Beginning of the quarter survey

First name
Last name

What is an alternative email address for you?

Class Period
- 1st hour
- 3rd hour

Graduation Year
- Class of 2028
- Class of 2027
- Class of 2026
- Class of 2025

Gender Identity
- Male
- Female
- Gender Non-Binary
- Prefer not to answer

Race
- Black / African American
- Hispanic / Latinx
- White
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern / North African
- American Indian / Alaska Native
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

1. How often have you been bothered by the following over the past 2 weeks?

A. Not at all B. Several days C. More than half the days D. Nearly every day

- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

2. How supportive would your FAMILY be if you told them you were struggling with depression or anxiety?
A. Not supportive at all B. A little supportive C. Somewhat supportive D. Extremely supportive

3. How supportive would your FRIENDS be if you told them you were struggling with depression or anxiety?
A. Not supportive at all B. A little supportive C. Somewhat supportive D. Extremely supportive

4. What coping strategies do you use when you are stressed or anxious?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never E. I don't know what that is

Journaling
Talk to a friend
Talk to a family member
Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator
Listen to music
Watch television
Physical activity
Cognitive Restructuring (Redirecting negative thoughts)
Face the fears
Mindfulness/Meditation
Breathing Techniques
Using fidgets

5. Optional: Please describe any other strategies you use when you are stressed or anxious.
6. What factors have been impacting your mental health over the past two weeks?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never

Academic stress
Anxiety
Depression
Family Stress
Social Pressure
Trauma
Racism/Discrimination

7. What barriers have you experienced when considering or seeking mental health services? Please check all that apply.

Don’t need it/No symptoms
Prefer to handle symptoms on my own
Embarrassment / Shame / Stigma
Don't think it will help
Worried about privacy
Don’t know where to go
Not enough time
Parents/Guardians would find out/Be mad
No way to get there
Already tried (didn’t help)
No insurance/Too expensive
Parents/Guardians won’t let me
Currently seeing a therapist
Other:

8. What mental health resources have you used in the past at WBHS? Check all that apply.*

Teacher
Administrator
Counselor
Support Staff
Zen room
None
Other:

9. Which mental health-related programs and services would you like to have available at school? (check all that apply)

Training for all staff on student mental health
Suicide risk training for students
Support groups
Student-led education/awareness groups
Programs for parents/guardians
Other

10. Optional: Comments/Thoughts

APPENDIX C

SECOND SURVEY: END OF THE QUARTER

Positive Psychology - End of quarter survey

First name
Last name

What is an alternative email address for you?

Class Period
- 1st hour
- 3rd hour

Graduation Year
- Class of 2028
- Class of 2027
- Class of 2026
- Class of 2025

Gender Identity
- Male
- Female
- Gender Non-Binary
- Prefer not to answer

Race
- Black / African American
- Hispanic / Latinx
- White
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern / North African
- American Indian / Alaska Native
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

1. How often have you been bothered by the following over the past 2 weeks?
A. Not at all B. Several days C. More than half the days D. Nearly every day
- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

2. Have you used these breathing or mindfulness techniques over the past two weeks outside of our Positive Psychology class? Check all that apply.*

Alternate Nostril Breathing
Body Scanning
Bubble Breathing
Cleansing Breathing
Color Breathing
Five-Minute Mindful Breathing
Guided Meditations
Humming Bee Breath
Loving Kindness Meditation
Mindful Stretching Break
Mindfulness
Ocean Breathing
Rainbow Breathing
Smiling Breath
Take Five Finger Breathing
Triangle Breathing
Yogic Coffee Breathing / Bellow's Breath
None
Other:

3. During flow, time passes quickly, attention is focused on the activity itself, and the sense of self is lost. Have you experienced flow in the past 2 weeks?

Yes
No
Maybe

4. Please share what you were doing when you experienced flow.

5. Prospection is planning and making predictions about the future in a variety of ways. Have you thought more about the past or the future over the past two weeks?

The past
The future

6. What coping strategies do you use when you are stressed or anxious?*
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never E. I don't know what that is

Journaling
Talk to a friend
Talk to a family member
Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator
Listen to music

Watch television
Physical activity
Cognitive Restructuring (Redirecting negative thoughts)
Face the fears
Mindfulness/Meditation
Breathing Techniques
Using fidgets

7. Optional: Please describe any other strategies you use when you are stressed or anxious.
8. What factors have been impacting your mental health over the past two weeks?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never

Academic stress
Anxiety
Depression
Family Stress
Social Pressure
Trauma
Racism/Discrimination

9. You learned about the building blocks of PERMA (Positive Emotions; Engagement; Relationships; Meaning; Accomplishments). Please comment on any of these dimensions that you have thought more about since taking this course.

10. You completed the VIA Character Strengths survey and received a report that ranks your strengths from 1-24. Have you thought about any of your character strengths outside of class? Explain.

11. Have you used any of the fidgets in class?
Yes No

11. Optional - Please use this space for comments/questions/concerns.

APPENDIX D

THIRD SURVEY: END OF THE SEMESTER

Positive Psychology – End of the Semester Survey

First name
Last name

What is an alternative email address for you?

Class Period
- 1st hour
- 3rd hour

Graduation Year
- Class of 2028
- Class of 2027
- Class of 2026
- Class of 2025

Gender Identity
- Male
- Female
- Gender Non-Binary
- Prefer not to answer

Race
- Black / African American
- Hispanic / Latinx
- White
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern / North African
- American Indian / Alaska Native
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

1. How often have you been bothered by the following over the past 2 weeks?

A. Not at all B. Several days C. More than half the days D. Nearly every day

- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

2. Have you used these breathing or mindfulness techniques over the past two weeks outside of our Positive Psychology class? Check all that apply.*

- Alternate Nostril Breathing
- Body Scanning
- Bubble Breathing
- Cleansing Breathing
- Color Breathing
- Five-Minute Mindful Breathing
- Guided Meditations
- Humming Bee Breath
- Loving Kindness Meditation
- Mindful Stretching Break
- Mindfulness
- Ocean Breathing
- Rainbow Breathing
- Smiling Breath
- Take Five-Finger Breathing
- Triangle Breathing
- Yogic Coffee Breathing / Bellow's Breath
- None
- Other:

3. Have you used these mindfulness techniques over the past two weeks outside of our Positive Psychology class? Check all that apply.*

- Mindful creativity
- Mindful eating
- Listening to music mindfully
- Mindful seeing
- Mindful visualization
- None
- Other:

4. Approximately, how often have you been writing in your gratitude journal?*

- Never
- Once a week
- 2 times per week
- 3 times per week
- 4 times per week
- 5 times per week
- 6 times per week
- 7 times per week

5. During flow, time passes quickly, attention is focused on the activity itself, and the sense of self is lost. Have you experienced flow in the past 2 weeks?

Yes
No
Maybe

6. Prospection is planning and making predictions about the future in a variety of ways. Have you thought more about the past or the future over the past two weeks?

The past
The future

7. What coping strategies do you use when you are stressed or anxious?*
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never E. I don't know what that is

Journaling
Talk to a friend
Talk to a family member
Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator
Listen to music
Watch television
Physical activity
Cognitive Restructuring (Redirecting negative thoughts)
Face the fears
Mindfulness/Meditation
Breathing Techniques
Using fidgets

8. What factors have been impacting your mental health over the past two weeks?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never

Academic stress
Anxiety
Depression
Family Stress
Social Pressure
Trauma
Racism/Discrimination

9. What are your thoughts on the following concepts from the course?
A. Extremely interesting and/or insightful B. Very interesting and/or insightful
C. Somewhat interesting and/or insightful D. Not interesting and/or insightful
E. I don't remember learning this

Teen Stress
PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, & Accomplishments)
Growth mindset/Fixed mindset
WOOP/Goal Setting
Selective Attention
Flow
Learned optimism (optimism/pessimism)
Mindfulness
Does money make you happier?
Experiences, Not Stuff
Choice Overload
Gratitude
Character Strengths
Grit
Active Constructive Responding

10. Optional - Please use this space for anything you would like to share.

APPENDIX E

REFLECTIVE ESSAY: FINAL PAPER

Reflection Essay: Final Paper

What have you learned in Positive Psychology that will help you lead a flourishing life?

Throughout this course, you have learned that by engaging in scientifically proven strategies, people can learn to live in a way that promotes happiness, well-being, and reduces negative emotions. This paper will serve as a guide to help you remember important course concepts after you finish the class.

- What are the top 3-5 things you learned?
- Explain why these things are important to you.
- I do not need the definitions of the terms we covered in class.
- Provide examples from your own life in your reflection.
- What do you plan to continue to practice doing after this course?
- If you shared anything you learned in the class with someone else, please explain.

Length: **2-4 pages** (double-spaced, 1" margins, 12-point font, Times New Roman or Arial).

- Use MLA format.
- Check your paper for grammar and spelling errors before you submit it.
- The words should be your own and not copied and pasted. If you are quoting something, make sure to include a Works Cited at the end of your paper.
- I am interested in your thoughts about what worked for you.
- Do not use AI to write your paper! I am interested in your opinions.

This is a list of some of the terms and concepts we covered throughout this semester.

- Building Gratitude
- Spirituality
- PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments)
- Well-being
- Fidgets
- Goal setting

- Grit
- Growth mindset/Fixed mindset
- WOOP
- Selective attention
- Creativity
- Character strengths
- Flow
- Learned optimism
- Active constructive responding
- Does money make you happier?
- Experiences, not stuff
- Does reaching a goal make you happier?
- Are more choices a good thing?
- Cognitive restructuring
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Are more choices a good thing?
- Are we forever chasing rainbows?
- Focus on the solution, not the problem
- Choice overload
- Hedonic treadmill
- Hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness
- Benefits of giving
- Mindfulness (mindful movement, mindful eating, mindful seeing, mindful visualization, mindfulness, and creativity)

Breathing techniques

5-4-3-2-1 (5 things you can see; 4 things you can physically feel; 3 things you can hear; 2 things you can smell; 1 thing you can taste
Alternate Nostril Breathing
Box Breathing
Bubble Breathing
Cleansing Breathing
Color Breathing
Diamond Breathing
Guided Meditations

Humming Bee Breath
Infinity Breathing
Loving Kindness Meditation
Mindful Stretching Break
Ocean Breathing
Rainbow Breathing
Smiling Breath
Square Breathing
Take Five-Finger Breathing
Triangle Breathing
Yogic Coffee Breathing / Bellow's Breath

APPENDIX F

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Individual Interviews

1. Please share your name, grade level, and when you completed the course (semester and year).

2. How would you describe your mental health before taking the course?

3. What strategies did you use, if any, before taking the course to support your well-being?

4. The positive psychology course was designed to help students improve their happiness and well-being. Did you feel your happiness level and well-being levels change throughout the semester? If so, how?

5. How familiar were you with mindfulness and meditation before taking the course?

6. Did any of the mindfulness tools or breathing techniques help you manage stress and anxiety? If so, which ones?

7. Are there any Positive Psychology Interventions that you are still using? If so, which ones?

8. Did you share anything you learned from the course with other people? If so, what did you share and with whom?

9. Did the course have any effect on your academic achievements?

10. I brought a list of the terms, course concepts, and breathing techniques that were covered in the course. Which ones, if any, impacted you the most and why?

APPENDIX G

FOCUS GROUP

Focus Group

1. Please share your name, grade level, and when you completed the course (semester and year).

2. The positive psychology course was designed to help students improve their happiness and well-being. Did you feel your happiness level and well-being levels change throughout the semester? If so, how?

3. Did any of the mindfulness tools help you manage stress and anxiety? If so, which ones?

4. Did any of the breathing techniques help you manage stress and anxiety? If so, which ones?

5. Are there any Positive Psychology Interventions that you are still using? If so, which ones?

6. Did you share anything you learned from the course with other people? If so, what did you share and with whom?

7. Did the course have any effect on your academic achievements?

8. I brought a list of the terms, course concepts, and breathing techniques covered in the course. Which ones, if any, impacted you the most and why?

APPENDIX H

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

First Name
Last Name
Email

High School Graduation Year
- Class of 2028
- Class of 2027
- Class of 2026
- Class of 2025
- Class of 2024
- Class of 2023

Gender Identity
- Male
- Female
- Gender Non-Binary
- Prefer not to answer

Race
- Black / African American
- Hispanic / Latinx
- White
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern / North African
- American Indian / Alaska Native
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

1. How often have you been bothered by the following over the past 2 weeks?
A. Not at all B. Several days C. More than half the days D. Nearly every day
- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

2. Have you used any of the following breathing or mindfulness techniques since the Positive Psychology course ended? Check all that apply.*

Alternate Nostril Breathing
Body Scanning
Bubble Breathing
Cleansing Breathing
Color Breathing
Five-Minute Mindful Breathing
Guided Meditations
Humming Bee Breath
Loving Kindness Meditation
Mindful Stretching Break
Mindfulness
Ocean Breathing
Rainbow Breathing
Smiling Breath
Take Five Finger Breathing
Triangle Breathing
Yogic Coffee Breathing / Bellow's Breath
None
Other:

3. Have you used any of the following mindfulness techniques since the Positive Psychology class ended? Check all that apply.*

Mindful creativity
Mindful eating
Listening to music mindfully
Mindful seeing
Mindful visualization
None
Other:

4. Since the course ended, how often have you written in your gratitude journal?*

Frequently (at least 3 times a week)
Occasionally (about once a week)
Sometimes (2–3 times a month)
Rarely (about once a month or less)
Never (I have not written in my gratitude journal)
Other:

5. During flow, time passes quickly, attention is focused on the activity itself, and the sense of self is lost. Have you experienced flow in the past 2 weeks?

Yes
No
Maybe

6. Prospection is planning and making predictions about the future in a variety of ways. Have you thought more about the past or the future over the past two weeks?

The past
The future

7. What coping strategies do you use when you are stressed or anxious?*

A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never E. I don't know what that is

Listen to music
Watch television
Physical activity
Cognitive Restructuring (Redirecting negative thoughts)
Face the fears
Mindfulness/Meditation
Breathing Techniques
Journaling
Talk to a friend
Talk to a family member
Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator
Use fidgets

8. What factors have been impacting your mental health over the past two weeks?

A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never

Academic stress
Anxiety
Depression
Family Stress
Social Pressure
Trauma
Racism/Discrimination

9. The following list includes course concepts from Positive Psychology . Which, if any, have had a **positive impact** on your well-being?

A. Strongly Agree
B. Agree
C. Neutral
D. Disagree
E. Strongly Disagree

F. I don't remember learning this.

PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, & Accomplishments)
Growth mindset/Fixed mindset
WOOP/Goal Setting
Selective Attention
Flow
Learned optimism (optimism/pessimism)
Mindfulness
Does money make you happier?
Experiences, Not Stuff
Choice Overload
Gratitude
Character Strengths
Grit
Active Constructive Responding

9. Optional: Please provide feedback on any concepts or interventions from the Positive Psychology course that feel have impacted your well-being and mental health.

APPENDIX I

CONTROL GROUP SURVEY

Control Group - Mental Health Survey

Current Class
Psychology
AP Psychology

Have you completed Positive Psychology?
Yes
No

1. Graduation Year
   Class of 2028
   Class of 2027
   Class of 2026
   Class of 2025

2. Gender Identity
   Male
   Female
   Gender Non-Binary
   Prefer not to answer

3. Race
   Black / African American
   Hispanic / Latinx
   White
   Asian / Pacific Islander
   Middle Eastern / North African
   American Indian / Alaska Native
   Other
   Prefer not to answer

4. How often have you been bothered by the following over the past 2 weeks?
   A. Not at all B. Several days C. More than half the days
   D. Nearly every day

   Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
   Not being able to stop or control worrying
   Worrying too much about different things
   Trouble relaxing
   Being so restless that it's hard to sit still

Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

5. How supportive would your FAMILY be if you told them you were struggling with depression or anxiety?
A. Not supportive at all B. A little supportive C. Somewhat supportive
D. Extremely supportive

6. How supportive would your FRIENDS be if you told them you were struggling with depression or anxiety?
A. Not supportive at all B. A little supportive C. Somewhat supportive
D. Extremely supportive

7. What coping strategies do you use when you are stressed or anxious?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never E. I don't know what that is

Journaling
Talk to a friend
Talk to a family member
Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator
Listen to music
Watch television
Physical activity
Cognitive Restructuring (Redirecting negative thoughts)
Face the fears
Mindfulness/Meditation
Breathing Techniques
Using fidgets

8. Optional: Please describe any other strategies you use when you are stressed or anxious.

9. What factors impact your mental health?
A. Often B. Sometimes C. Rarely D. Never
Academic stress
Anxiety
Depression
Family Stress
Social Pressure

Trauma
Racism/Discrimination

10. What barriers have you experienced when considering or seeking mental health services? Please check all that apply.

Don’t need it/No symptoms
Prefer to handle symptoms on my own
Embarrassment / Shame / Stigma
Don't think it will help
Worried about privacy
Don’t know where to go
Not enough time
Parents/Guardians would find out/Be mad
No way to get there
Already tried (didn’t help)
No insurance/Too expensive
Parents/Guardians won’t let me
Currently seeing a therapist
Other:

11. What mental health resources have you used in the past at WBHS? Check all that apply.*

Teacher
Administrator
Counselor
Support Staff
Zen room
None
Other:

12. Which mental health-related programs and services would you like to have available at school? (check all that apply)

Training for all staff on student mental health
Suicide risk training for students
Support groups
Student-led education/awareness groups
Programs for parents/guardians
Other

13. Optional: Comments/Thoughts

APPENDIX J

ANXIETY

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Q4A 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	Between Groups	6.263	3	2.088	2.382	.068
	Within Groups	1285.644	1467	.876		
	Total	1291.908	1470			
Q4B 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Not being able to stop or control worrying	Between Groups	10.508	3	3.503	4.005	.007
	Within Groups	1282.911	1467	.875		
	Total	1293.418	1470			
Q4C 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Worrying too much about different things	Between Groups	15.762	3	5.254	5.597	.001
	Within Groups	1377.170	1467	.939		
	Total	1392.933	1470			
Q4D 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Trouble relaxing	Between Groups	4.892	3	1.631	1.923	.124
	Within Groups	1244.097	1467	.848		
	Total	1248.988	1470			
Q4E 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Being so restless that it's hard to sit still	Between Groups	9.506	3	3.169	3.717	.011
	Within Groups	1250.625	1467	.853		
	Total	1260.131	1470			
Q4F 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	Between Groups	20.542	3	6.847	6.679	.000
	Within Groups	1503.927	1467	1.025		
	Total	1524.469	1470			
Q4G 4.How often bothered pst 2 wks: Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	Between Groups	13.469	3	4.490	4.886	.002
	Within Groups	1347.926	1467	.919		
	Total	1361.395	1470			

APPENDIX K

FACTORS THAT IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Q9A How oftn factor impact mental health: Academic stress	Between Groups	13.710	3	4.570	6.396	.000
	Within Groups	1046.124	1464	.715		
	Total	1059.834	1467			
Q9B How oftn factor impact mental health: Anxiety	Between Groups	18.519	3	6.173	6.163	.000
	Within Groups	1469.413	1467	1.002		
	Total	1487.932	1470			
Q9C How oftn factor impact mental health: Depression	Between Groups	36.279	3	12.093	10.686	.000
	Within Groups	1660.096	1467	1.132		
	Total	1696.375	1470			
Q9D How oftn factor impact mental health: Family Stress	Between Groups	44.020	3	14.673	13.381	.000
	Within Groups	1608.690	1467	1.097		
	Total	1652.710	1470			
Q9E How oftn factor impact mental health: Social Pressure	Between Groups	54.934	3	18.311	17.526	.000
	Within Groups	1532.745	1467	1.045		
	Total	1587.679	1470			
Q9F How oftn factor impact mental health: Trauma	Between Groups	39.536	3	13.179	11.643	.000
	Within Groups	1660.436	1467	1.132		
	Total	1699.973	1470			
Q9G How oftn factor impact mental health: Racism/ Discrimination	Between Groups	28.767	3	9.589	13.001	.000
	Within Groups	1081.984	1467	.738		
	Total	1110.751	1470			

APPENDIX L

COPING STRATEGIES

Coping Strategies

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Q7A How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Listen to music	Between Groups	2.629	3	.876	2.895	.034
	Within Groups	444.007	1467	.303		
	Total	446.636	1470			
Q7B How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Watch television	Between Groups	4.190	3	1.397	1.416	.236
	Within Groups	1446.695	1467	.986		
	Total	1450.885	1470			
Q7C How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Physical activity	Between Groups	5.813	3	1.938	2.183	.088
	Within Groups	1301.915	1467	.887		
	Total	1307.728	1470			
Q7D How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Cognitive Restructuring (Changing negative thinking patterns)	Between Groups	34.048	3	11.349	9.104	.000
	Within Groups	1828.740	1467	1.247		
	Total	1862.789	1470			
Q7E How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Facing fears	Between Groups	30.206	3	10.069	10.049	.000
	Within Groups	1469.942	1467	1.002		
	Total	1500.148	1470			
Q7F How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Mindfulness/Meditation	Between Groups	51.122	3	17.041	17.063	.000
	Within Groups	1465.058	1467	.999		
	Total	1516.179	1470			
Q7G How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Journaling	Between Groups	9.775	3	3.258	2.886	.035
	Within Groups	1656.459	1467	1.129		
	Total	1666.234	1470			

Q7H How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Breathing Techniques	Between Groups	44.247	3	14.749	14.719	.000
	Within Groups	1200.425	1198	1.002		
	Total	1244.672	1201			
Q7I How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Using Fidgets	Between Groups	.446	1	.446	.349	.555
	Within Groups	342.384	268	1.278		
	Total	342.830	269			
Q7J How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Talk to a friend	Between Groups	6.001	3	2.000	2.255	.081
	Within Groups	540.192	609	.887		
	Total	546.192	612			
Q7K How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Talk to a family member	Between Groups	6.924	3	2.308	2.028	.109
	Within Groups	693.271	609	1.138		
	Total	700.196	612			
Q7L How oftn use strategy when stressed/anxious: Talk to a teacher, counselor, or administrator	Between Groups	19.025	3	6.342	5.872	.001
	Within Groups	657.690	609	1.080		
	Total	676.715	612			

APPENDIX M

IMPACT OF MATERIAL LEARNED IN CLASS

		Sum of Squares		Mean Square	F	Sig.
POST01 8. During flow, time passes quickly, attention is focused on the activity itself and the sense of self is lost. Have you experienced flow in the past 2 weeks?	Between Groups	1.761	2	.880	6.308	.002
	Within Groups	143.632	1029	.140		
	Total	145.393	1031			
POST02 10. Prospection is planning and making predictions about the future in a variety of ways. Have you thought more about the past or the future over the past two weeks?	Between Groups	1.046	2	.523	3.568	.029
	Within Groups	150.791	1029	.147		
	Total	151.836	1031			
POST03 4. Approximately, how often have you been writing in your gratitude journal?	Between Groups	275.171	2	137.585	73.665	.000
	Within Groups	1021.640	547	1.868		
	Total	1296.811	549			
POST04 10.Impact of concept: PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, & Accomplishments)	Between Groups	82.230	2	41.115	42.103	.000
	Within Groups	354.481	363	.977		
	Total	436.710	365			
POST05 10.Impact of concept: Growth	Between Groups	12.240	2	6.120	6.308	.002

mindset/Fixed mindset	Within Groups	352.167	363	.970		
	Total	364.407	365			
POST06 10.Impact of concept: WOOP/Goal Setting	Between Groups	1.658	2	.829	.766	.466
	Within Groups	392.880	363	1.082		
	Total	394.538	365			
POST07 10.Impact of concept: Selective Attention	Between Groups	2.718	2	1.359	1.197	.303
	Within Groups	412.320	363	1.136		
	Total	415.038	365			
POST08 10.Impact of concept: Flow	Between Groups	23.459	2	11.730	11.061	.000
	Within Groups	384.948	363	1.060		
	Total	408.407	365			
POST09 10.Impact of concept: Learned optimism	Between Groups	12.830	2	6.415	5.364	.005
	Within Groups	434.110	363	1.196		
	Total	446.940	365			
POST10 10.Impact of concept: Mindfulness	Between Groups	26.371	2	13.186	16.140	.000
	Within Groups	296.560	363	.817		
	Total	322.932	365			
POST11 10.Impact of concept: Does money make you happier?	Between Groups	14.940	2	7.470	9.083	.000
	Within Groups	298.525	363	.822		
	Total	313.464	365			
POST12 10.Impact of concept: Experiences, Not Stuff	Between Groups	3.881	2	1.941	1.879	.154
	Within Groups	374.897	363	1.033		
	Total	378.779	365			
POST13 10.Impact of concept: Choice Overload	Between Groups	3.004	2	1.502	1.321	.268
	Within Groups	412.715	363	1.137		
	Total	415.719	365			

POST14 10.Impact of concept: Gratitude	Between Groups	22.439	2	11.219	12.046	.000
	Within Groups	338.100	363	.931		
	Total	360.538	365			
POST15 10.Impact of concept: Character Strengths	Between Groups	.198	2	.099	.105	.900
	Within Groups	342.643	363	.944		
	Total	342.842	365			
POST16 10.Impact of concept: Grit	Between Groups	2.959	1	2.959	2.366	.126
	Within Groups	268.958	215	1.251		
	Total	271.917	216			
POST17 10.Impact of concept: Active Constructive Responding	Between Groups	.011	1	.011	.008	.930
	Within Groups	297.519	215	1.384		
	Total	297.530	216			

APPENDIX N

FREQUENCY OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TOPICS MENTIONED IN STUDENT FINAL PAPERS

Frequency of Positive Psychology Topics Mentioned in Student Final Papers

Topic	Number of Mentions
Mindfulness	430
Breathing	340
Goal setting	264
Gratitude	235
PERMA/Well-Being	114
Does money make you happier?	103
Flow	86
Experiences, not stuff	83
Growth Mindset/Fixed Mindset/Grit	81
Meditation	71
Is it better to give or receive?	67
Hedonic & Eudaimonic Happiness	45
Character strengths	38
Choice overload	36
Creativity	36
Selective attention	31
Fidgets	29
Learned optimism	21
Spirituality	20
Active constructive responding	18
Cognitive Restructuring	10

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