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Stress Identification & Management in COTS Family Shelter Residents

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Background

- The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) is the largest service provider for the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless in Vermont.
- Between two different shelters in the Burlington area, COTS is able to shelter fifteen families at a time. Families can stay at the shelters for up to six months while they work with COTS to find employment and affordable housing.
- A major study looking at sources of stress, mediators of stress, and manifestations of stress highlighted that homeless populations experience more stress.1
- Families living in shelters have family routines and rituals that are impacted, resulting in great distress within family dynamic.2
- Brief meditation training may improve quality of life and decrease negative psychological states in the homeless population.3

Project Objectives

- To identify major stressors experienced by homeless shelter populations in the literature and the COTS cohort.
- To understand mechanisms by which homeless individuals and families manage their stress.
- To determine how the current wellness of the homeless population impact their ability to improve their situation.
- To gauge potential interest in alternative, evidence-based stress-reduction strategies in the COTS cohort.
- To identify barriers to implementation of stress-reduction strategies within COTS.

Methods and Materials

- Performed structured interviews with seven adult representatives of seven distinct families (of fourteen eligible) that currently reside in family shelters managed by COTS over a one month period in Fall 2016.
- Questions included a mix of short-answer items and open-ended prompts to explore residents' current stressors and techniques for coping with stress.
- Responses that yielded quantifiable data were subsequently compiled.
- Open-ended were qualitatively analyzed to extract core themes and motifs.

Results

- Commonly Mentioned Stressors:
  - Health
  - Finances
  - Lack of Privacy
  - Children
  - Employment Status

- Sample Quotes from Interviews:
  - “The ways they soothe their stress are not the greatest.”
  - “Breathe it out”
  - “What can you do? It’s only a couple months”

- Sample of Current Coping Strategies:
  - Reading
  - Counseling
  - Sleep
  - Art
  - Meditation

- Sample of Current Coping Strategies:
  - Yes
  - No

- Stress Level Change Since Coming to COTS
  - Increase
  - No change
  - Decrease

- Residents’ Awareness of Suggested Stress-Reduction Methods
  - Support Group
  - Exercise Group
  - Yoga
  - Meditation

- NUMBER OF RESIDENTS AWARE OF METHOD

Discussion

- COTS residents come from a variety of cultural and experiential backgrounds.
- Composition of COTS’ inhabitants, and the discrete needs of those inhabitants, are in dynamic flux.
- Most residents indicated they were at least as stressed while living in COTS as when they were homeless.
- Most residents endorsed receptiveness to some form of stress reduction.
- Our recommendations below reflect these findings and incorporate the current literature.
- Study limitations include a small sample size, interviewed at a single time point.
- Suggestions for areas of future study:
  - How homelessness impacts childhood development.
  - Strategies to reduce the impact of homelessness.
  - Parental recognition of stress in children.

Recommendations

- Offer weekly meditation class and pair with independent, free meditation apps. (Consider incentivizing attendance and app use.)
- Assign a flexible space for weekly yoga with a blend of in-person and video-led sessions.
- Provide nutrition information sheets to residents and their children.
- Explore implementing a car-share program to empower residents with more flexible transportation.

References