

**Full Research Proposal: Study of How the Practices and Perceptions of Self-Care Relate to
Burnout and Resilience in Undergraduate Students at Southern Adventist University**

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Abstract

This study explores the practices and perceptions of self-care among undergraduate students at a private university and its relationship with burnout and academic resilience. This research attempts to fill the practice and research gap related to the the growing concern of burnout among students, which leads to having notable rates of depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation as reported in recent years. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, detachment, and reduced motivation towards academic or professional responsibilities. While existing research underscores the significance of self-care in mitigating burnout and fostering resilience, there is a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate within specific student populations, namely undergraduate students at a faith based, private institution. This study highlights the multifaceted nature of self-care practices, including physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, it elucidates how gender, academic workload, and extracurricular involvement influence self-care behaviors among undergraduate students, impacting their overall well-being. This research underscores the positive effects of self-care practices on academic stress reduction and resilience enhancement, evidenced by higher GPAs and lower levels of burnout among students who prioritize self-care. It further explores the connection between self-care, stress, and academic resilience, emphasizing the pivotal role of self-care in maintaining resilience amidst adversity.

Introduction to Practices and Perceptions of Self-Care

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, research shows that college students have experienced mental health issues and burnout rates higher than before (Son, 2020). According to the The Healthy Minds Study, “44% of students reported symptoms of depression, 37% reported anxiety disorders and 15% reported having seriously considered suicide in the past year—the

highest recorded rates in the history of the 15-year-old survey” (Shine, 2023). Students’ increased mental health struggles may lead to burnout. Burnout in college students is described as having feelings of exhaustion due to studying, a cynical attitude causing withdrawal and detachment, and a reduced desire to fulfill professional or academic requirements (Thuruthel et al., 2021). This type of burnout, often referred to as academic or learning burnout, can also be described as the process of students losing interest in their studies and academics due to emotional exhaustion caused by extended periods of academic stress. Research shows there is a rise in burnout rates among students (Kosmin, 2023). Academic burnout can have consequences for university students, such as an increase of dropout rates, especially among women (Sanjari et al., 2023). Self-care shows promising results in reducing the risk of burnout and bolstering academic resilience defined as the ability to achieve academic success despite challenging circumstances, such as unfavorable environmental situations, adverse living conditions, or a disadvantaged background (Diebold, 2017). Self-care is defined as “a process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote holistic health and well-being of the self” (Greene et. al, 2017), it fosters increased emotional resilience, equipping individuals to better cope with adversities and stressors including academic challenges (Loi & Pryce, 2022). This current study aims to explore the relationship between perceptions and practices of self-care and burnout and academic resilience. Although the importance of self-care in mitigating the effects of burnout with self care has been established in the literature, there is currently no research conducted with the specific population of Seventh Day Adventist undergraduate students at a faith-based institution and how the respondents’ practices and perceptions of self care relate to their burnout rates and academic resilience. This is why it is important to explore this topic within this specific population.

Literature Review

Overview

A thorough literature search was conducted using databases. The search elements included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies. The search was further narrowed to studies related to graduate and undergraduate students, as well as professionals working in helping professions. The research reviewed included topics such as burnout, definitions of self-care, and how it is perceived by college students. Furthermore, we explored topics of perceptions of self care, effects of practicing self care, the relationship between self-care and burnout and academic resilience. Research was reviewed to discover what previous researchers have found regarding the relationship between the perceptions of these terms, as well as practices of self-care. In the following sections we will further explore these topics in depth.

Self-Care

The literature defines self-care as “a process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote holistic health and well-being of the self” (Greene et., al, 2017). In the social work literature there are different dimensions of self-care: physical/biological, emotional/psychological, social/leisure, and spiritual. Physical/biological self-care is related to taking care of one's body, including practicing good sleep, hygiene, regular exercise, and eating well. Emotional/psychological self-care practices that attribute to optimal mental health, including journaling, psychotherapy, and addressing past wounds. Social/leisure self-care addresses the human need of socializing in the social environment, including spending time with friends and family and participating in leisure and creative activities. Last but not least, spiritual self-care promotes spiritual well-being and some practices may include meditation, yoga, going to church, and spending time in nature (Greene et., al, 2017). As a practice, self-care shows

promising results in reducing the risk of burnout (Diebold, 2017). Good self-care practice is very important for undergrad students. As a practice, self-care encompasses intentional or specific attempts to improve health and wellness over the life span by addressing personal needs related to mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and social states (Corey, 2018).

In one study, researchers sought to find what self care practices were the most common specifically among college students and working professionals. The study found that the most common self-care practices were maintaining supportive relationships and mindful awareness of thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. (Chatterjee, 2020). Furthermore specifically self-care practices done by participants that were most practiced done by participants in this study were mindful relaxation and physical care.

Perceptions of self-care

Perceptions of self-care can vary depending on one's personal understanding of what self-care can look like in life. It can include a wide variety of activities that may not even be perceived as self-care. For example, music therapy can be a form of self-care. While this wasn't classified as self-care practice in one study (Bittman, 2004), research shows that engaging in recreational music making demonstrated statistically significant reductions of multiple burnout and mood dimensions (Bittman, 2004).

Perceptions of self-care can also vary depending on a student's major. Nursing students expressed that their packed schedules, feelings of guilt, and overwhelming responsibilities as students, employees, friends, and family members hindered their efforts towards self-care (Ashcraft & Gatto, 2015). "Students in professional health care education programs are taught to care for others, but do not always learn to practice self-care behaviors" (Campoli & Cummings, 2024, p.1). In a study conducted with psychology students, they stated that they feel guilty when

spending time doing non-school related activities (Diebold et al., 2018). Since students are often told that schoolwork supersedes all other activities, this may lead to students feeling as though their programs were inconsistent in their self-care messages. Students in the fields of nursing, psychology, and medicine have all expressed that they felt as though they did not have time to take care of their health and well-being because of the expectations of school as well as a lack of time (Diebold et al., 2018).

Effects of Practicing Self Care

College students who practice self care have improved mental and physical health. In a study completed with MSW and BSW students in the public university context, the effects of practicing self-care on multiple dimensions such as spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and professional, have been a significant variable in lowering academic stress, especially when practiced regularly (O'Neill et. al., 2019). Erdley-Kass (2022) found that higher GPA correlated with the physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of self-care among college undergraduates. Therefore, in the literature there is a clear and significant relationship between self-care practices and student health and academic outcomes.

Understanding the connection between the purposeful care for one's self and higher GPA can provide a template for best practices to be included in the undergraduate curricula across universities, positively influencing students' academic performance and resilience.

Self-Care Practices and Gender

Self care can vary depending on many factors, with an influential factor being gender. Previous studies on self-care practices employed primarily samples of nursing students, with predominantly female respondents (Chow & Kalischuk, 2008; Riordan & Washburn, 1997; Shriver & Scott-Stiles, 2000). However, an understanding of the influence of gender on self-care

practices has been limited. In general, females experience multiple roles and pressures such as managing both career and personal commitments, which parallel on university campuses with balancing personal, sometimes family, and academic demands. This increase in role demands may lead to less time allocated for self-care, which in turn, increases negative coping habits such as alcohol use. Jackson (n.d.) found that the increased rate of drinking among females may be a coping mechanism to offset higher rates of stress. On the other hand, being a student athlete participating in team sports positively influenced self-care practices having higher scores on the activity and rest scales. While health education undoubtedly plays a role in self-care practices, there are other factors that influence self-care among the university student population (Jackson, n.d.). The practice of self-care is essential for college students, because they are at a critical point in their development; this is the age when they establish healthy coping routines for a lifetime. While it is important to be mindful of the long-term implications of self-care practices, it is also essential that student self-care practices are also examined with short-term outcomes in mind such as addressing the damaging effects of alcohol and illicit drug use and other negative coping behaviors that may alleviate academic stress for a short time (Jackson, n.d.).

Barriers to Self-Care

College students reported different barriers to self-care, one of which is the unique, profession-specific culture. Often, mental health challenges are managed through self-care activities, as defined by Corey (2018). In one study conducted with students majoring in engineering, respondents reported that the reason they did not seek mental health assistance was due to the professional culture in the engineering field coupled with the high stress due to academic expectations (Jensen et. al, 2023). This specific qualitative study included 30 undergraduate student respondents selected by using a maximum variation sampling strategy.

The limitations of the study were that it was only conducted at a single academic institution, therefore with a small sample size, and with students in one specific major. Martin (2008) studied the effect of developing and implementing a “self-care for future professionals” online course to address barriers to self-care which included a negative view of self-care practices. The results showed that students who took this course over an eight week period had a positive change in perceptions about the need for self-care as a healthy coping strategy.

Self-care and burnout

A growing body of research indicates that appropriate self-care may effectively reduce high levels of stress and burnout (Kim et al., 2018; Rico & Bunge, 2020). In a study with 159 graduate students in psychology, students reported higher levels of stress stemming from responsibilities that range from school-related work to personal commitments, especially related to the cost and lack of time to implement wellness strategies (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).. Dealing with high levels of stress over time paired with ineffective coping strategies can lead to a feeling of burnout. A study done by Ashcraft and Gatto (2015) with 75 first year nursing students showed that reduced self-care behaviors increased levels of job satisfaction and burnout. “A systematic review of burnout research among students during the last five years found that more than one-third of them (40%) experienced a debilitating state of burnout” (Thuruthel et al., 2021). Research conducted among students worldwide has revealed that experiencing burnout negatively affects how well they think, feel, and behave, impacting their overall well-being. Traits such as decreased involvement in academics, struggles with focus, reduced problem-solving skills, feelings of inadequacy, lower academic achievement, and a lack of confidence in academic abilities are linked to student burnout (Thuruthel et al., 2021).

Estrada (2023) examined the relationship between reported levels of self-care, stress, and school burnout among graduate students in the applied areas of psychology (i.e., school,

counseling, clinical psychology). The results indicated that participants who endorsed higher levels of self-care had significantly lower levels of stress. Similarly, participants who endorsed higher levels of self-care endorsed statistically significantly lower levels of school burnout (Estrada, 2023). As a practice, self-care shows promising results in reducing the risk of burnout (Diebold, 2018).

Self-care and academic resilience

The relation between self-care practices and academic resilience has been shown through various studies. One study investigated the nature of the association between academic self-efficacy (ASE) and academic resilience. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is a major determinant of engagement in self-care behavior. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments; therefore, academic self-efficacy is strongly related to academic resilience.

In a study conducted with undergraduate students, participants were exposed to an adverse situation, describing either a personal or vicarious academic adversity (Cassidy, 2015). ASE was measured pre-exposure and academic resilience was measured post-exposure. ASE was correlated with, and a significant predictor of, academic resilience and students exhibited greater academic resilience when responding to vicarious adversity compared to personal adversity. High self efficacy has shown higher academic resilience, but in order to maintain high self efficacy, maintaining self care is crucial (Cassidy, 2015). A systematic review of the literature showed that higher self-efficacy was associated with engagement in self-care behaviors (Tan, 2021). However, more research is needed to identify factors that are related to resilience and

establish the precise nature of how such factors influence academic resilience, thus assisting the development of interventions aimed at promoting resilience in students (Cassidy, 2015).

There has been a decline in academic resilience in academia. The retention rates and graduation rates can be affected due to this decline (Frisby & Vallade, 2021). In one study, researchers asked college students about how to address building academic resilience; self-care was mentioned as a way at an individual level. Engaging in self-care was defined as enacting strategies that addressed threats to resilience and academic performance, or improving it through overall wellness (Frisby & Vallade, 2021). Reed, Lebovitz and Layson-Wolf (2023) found that resiliency provides some protection against burnout. The reason that resilience is important in the context of university settings is that burnout is related to disengagement with academics. It was found that students' academic performance was affected more by self-care practices related to physical health such as sleep and nutrition, rather than physiological factors (Reed et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The literature review shows the importance of self-care and how taking care of oneself can help reduce burnout and stress among different groups of people. The review found that self-care covers a wide range of activities, such looking after physical health, managing stress, and spending time on hobbies and relationships. Being involved in these activities was linked to lower stress levels and, in some cases, better school or work performance. However, some people face challenges in taking care of themselves because of the expectations and culture in their field of study or work.

While there is a wealth of literature on the topic related to self-care, there was no specific study conducted with undergraduate students at a faith-based university. One of the university's

faith tenets is healthy living and taking care of one's physical, emotions, and spiritual well-being, making the study of perceptions of self-care highly important for programming, curricular and extracurricular activities. Therefore, it is important to study the perceptions of self-care in this university context.

Methodology

This study utilized a cross-sectional and mixed methods design to study a sample of students from Southern Adventist University. We used an online survey to collect quantitative data and from that population we selected a purpose and quota to participate in an in-person interview for qualitative data in an individual interview. The paper reports on the survey component of our study.

Sampling and Recruitment

The participants selected using a non-random approach with convenience and snowball sampling for up to 150 -200 undergraduate students from Southern Adventist University (SAU). They were all full time students who participated in our survey. Students were also 18 years or older to participate in the survey. Study participants were recruited using fliers (see Appendix A) that have been approved by Southern Adventist University and were posted around the campus and via social media advertised as well as the school newspaper The Southern Accent. We also went to classrooms and asked professors if we could talk to their class and asked them to participate in our survey.

Measurement

Research Constructs: We measured the perceptions of self-care using twenty-four questions (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and regularly) from the Mindful Self-care Scale,

which has 6 subscales and a reliability of 0.93. We measured burnout using nine questions (always 100%, often 75%, sometimes 50%, seldom 25%, and almost never 0%) from the School Burnout Inventory, which has three subscales and a reliability of 0.88. We measured general resilience using six questions (strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree, and strongly agree) from the Brief Resilience Scale, which has a reliability of 0.88. Lastly, we measured academic resilience using eighty-three questions (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) from the Academic Resilience Scale, which has a reliability of 0.90 (see Appendix B). We measured GPA by asking “what is your current GPA?” (see Appendix B). We measured the self-care practices of physical, psychological, emotional, and social by using table one from Erin E. Ayala and Amanda L. Almond’s study, *Self-Care of Women Enrolled in Health Service Psychology Programs: A Concept Mapping Approach*. For Physical self-care there were thirty-six questions (1=not at all important, 2=not important, 3=neutral, 4=important, 5=extremely important). For psychological self-care there were twelve questions (1=not at all important, 2=not important, 3=neutral, 4=important, 5=extremely important). For emotional self-care there were twenty-five questions (1=not at all important, 2=not important, 3=neutral, 4=important, 5=extremely important). Lastly, for social self-care there were thirty-two questions (1=not at all important, 2=not important, 3=neutral, 4=important, 5=extremely important) (see Appendix B).

Demographic variables: The last part of the survey questionnaire asked demographic questions to determine each participant’s major, course load, job, minor, if they have multiple majors, their academic standing, race, ethnicity, age, and gender.

Protection of Human Subjects

To obtain consent, we created digital consent forms for the online survey which is accessible through a QR code on flyers. Researchers will ensure that results are only shared to data analysis consultants or researchers conducting the study. Results will not be identifiable, including the names or any identifying information. Survey data will be secured by researchers. This will be accomplished by data only being retrievable by researchers and advisors, and a password will be used to ensure that data cannot be seen by other viewers. Data will not be opened in the presence of those not authorized to access data.

Data Analysis

We will use SPSS version 29 to analyze the survey data. First, descriptive statistics will be used to summarize demographic and background variables and the research question variables (self-care perceptions and practices, resilience, and burnout). Next, multiple linear regression analyses will be used to test the hypotheses. Non-parametric tests will be used if the data will not meet the assumptions for multiple regression.

Two multiple linear regression analyses will be utilized to answer our research question. First, we will use a multiple regression analysis to test if there is a relationship between the independent variable of perceptions of self-care and the dependent variables of burnout. A second regression analysis will do the same for the dependent variable of resilience. The analysis also includes an R^2 for the effect size of all the predictors or independent variables as a whole and the standardized β for the strength of each individual predictor. Before conducting the regression analyses, we will conduct preliminary tests to assess if the data meets the assumption for multiple regression. If the assumptions will be violated such that regression is not possible,

then we will use alternative statistical tests. Finally, we will discuss any differences or relationships, not only in relation to statistical significance but also in terms of practical significance.

We will use multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between the independent variable of self care practices and perceptions of self care and 4 dependent variables (GPA, academic resilience, general resilience, and burnout) $p=.05$. We will use the multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between the independent variable of self-care practices and perceptions of self-care and 4 dependent variables (GPA, academic resilience, general resilience, and burnout) $p=.05$.

Discussion

Summary of Study

The purpose of our study was to find out the perceptions and practices in self-care among undergraduate college students at Southern Adventist University and how these contribute to their overall resiliency and their burnout rates. Our study was cross-sectional because we were collecting data from many individual students at once. They completed our one time survey and were interviewed. We have two types of effect sizes that determined how strong the independent variable's relationship was with each dependent variable, the standardized beta coefficients, and one dependent variable. For each regression analysis, we looked at the effect size for the individual relationship between each independent and dependent variable.

Recommendations and Limitations

Based upon the final analyses, specific recommendations for further research, practice, and program/curricular development will be proposed. Limitations of the study will also be explored.

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