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## Pilot program offers lessons to help youths overcome adversity

Oct. 28, 2019 — A UTSA researcher is helping youths cope with life's challenges and build resiliency skills. **Heidi Rueda**, an associate professor of social work in the College of Public Policy, is collaborating with a San Antonio youth-serving and community-based after-school program to conduct exploratory research on building skills to overcome adversity.



The area selected for the implementation of the program, in the 78207 ZIP code, is located at the center of “concentrated poverty” on San Antonio’s Westside. According to the 2019 strengths and needs assessment survey by Good Samaritan Community Services, over half of the youth in this area are being raised by a single mother with low levels of literacy, low school performance, food insecurity and a high crime rate that in turn can contribute to trauma.

In collaboration with Good Samaritan Community Services, “Mind Matters: Overcoming Adversity and Building Resilience” consists of 12 lessons targeted to youths who have experienced these forms of trauma. The program includes life skills on soothing and regulating emotions, managing stress, developing empathy, developing goals and intention, building a support system, and seeking help. Rueda is studying how youths are benefitting from the curriculum as part of evaluating the program’s efficacy.

“We hope this program will benefit youths locally and through research and publication,” said Rueda. “This can help others who may want to utilize a mindfulness program based on the latest in neuroscience research.”

Rueda said that trauma can cause lasting changes in the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex regions of the brain. This means that negative emotions, such as fear, are heightened and not properly regulated.

The adolescent brain is already challenged to balance emotions with rational thinking. Rueda says experiencing trauma increases their risk of suffering from anxiety disorders, inhibited memory, difficulty organizing information and concentrating in school. As a result, Rueda said, these youth are more likely to engage in high-risk activities, such as drinking alcohol, skipping school, criminal behavior and even suicidal thoughts.

“Adverse events or trauma, due to their impact on the brain, can affect students’ behavior and their ability to plan and learn, which in turn affects how well our students do in school,” said **Tansy Cattanach**, program coordinator at Good Samaritan Community Services. “Our hope is that, through implementing the Mind Matters curriculum, we will help students build resilience and develop coping mechanisms to overcome the obstacles they face.”

Through her evaluation of this curriculum, Rueda is assessing how mindfulness, coping and resiliency-building skills, such as building support systems and goal setting, can help to buffer the effects of trauma for these youths and empower them to live life more fully and with hope for the future. Her preliminary findings suggest that the groups provide a safe refuge for youth to share about their experiences and receive support. Youths are coming to class each week, motivated to learn about these topics, and are better able to notice stressors and use their own strengths to grow from emotional challenges they are experiencing.

Three UTSA graduate students in the master of social work program are working with Rueda to deliver and evaluate the curriculum. This provides these students with an excellent opportunity to practice group leadership, trauma-informed service delivery, youth programing, and program evaluation skills.

“We feel this program has such a great potential to be positively impactful on a population that typically experiences such high amounts of complex trauma,” said **Abigail Vera**, a UTSA graduate student working on the project.

“It is exciting so far to see the youths engage in the lessons,” she added. “Some of them have identified and adopted the regular use of their favorite mindfulness exercises in their daily life. I am eager to see how this experience and Mind Matters with youths at Good Samaritan Community Services progresses.”

Future plans include further adaptations of the program to better serve youth across various age groups, continued evaluation and publication of findings, and reaching more youth with the program in the summer of 2020.

— [Ingrid Wright](#)

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