

Chapter 3

HeartMath®: A University Initiative

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ABSTRACT

HeartMath® is a program designed to build resilience and enhance coping skills in response to stress, challenges and adversity (Institute of HeartMath®, 2014) through self-regulation and the use of biofeedback technology. Many faculty from the Florida Atlantic University's Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing have become certified HeartMath® trainers and have committed to bring this program to their college community: Students, staff and faculty. This chapter describes HeartMath® and its implementation at the college. Exemplars are offered that explicate the value of the program and inspire the development of future initiatives within the University and broader community.

As I sat in the meeting listening to the requirements of a new faculty member, I could feel my anxiety building – my headache was pounding, and I was having difficulty swallowing. Would I ever be able to meet all these expectations, publish all those articles, find research money, and be a great teacher? Then I remembered, HeartMath®, and to BREATHE, change my emotional response, and recall the feel of my daughter's arms reaching around me and telling me how much she loved me. I continued to breathe and felt myself relax, bathed in the feeling of love that thinking about her gave me. I am a good teacher, I can write an article, I can get funding – my colleagues will help me.

Okay, I can do this – one step at a time. - Anonymous

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INTRODUCTION

University educators, students, and healthcare professionals experience stress and anxiety on a daily basis and are challenged to develop strategies to enhance self-care and well-being for those they serve. The Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing (CON) at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) initiated a strategy to bring HeartMath® to the college. HeartMath® is a program designed to build resilience and enhance coping skills in response to stress, challenges, and adversity (Institute of HeartMath®, 2014) through the use of technology and self-regulation. The HeartMath® program originated from the HeartMath® Institute, a nonprofit organization based in California whose mission is to “help people bring their physical, mental, and emotional systems into balanced alignment with their heart’s intuitive guidance” (HeartMath Institute, 2016, para 1). The program, based on self-regulation and self-management theory and biofeedback techniques, can be used in educational settings to better prepare healthcare professionals and all students to cope with stress and anxiety.

Two faculty members from the CON had attended the HeartMath® Institute in California and returned to the college with the intent to share their knowledge with students and to improve their own self-care. In the fall, 2014 a new FAU administration team arrived. They had utilized HeartMath® at their previous university and were aware of the outcomes HeartMath® interventions could provide: increased test scores and graduation rates and a strategy to cope with stress and anxiety. In the fall of 2014, the HeartMath® program was presented to the CON faculty and by spring 2015 a strategy to bring the certified trainer program to the CON and university was implemented. Twenty-three nursing faculty and key administrators and faculty from other departments and colleges were trained as Certified HeartMath® trainers in May of 2015. Since that time a strategic plan has been developed to fully implement the program at the CON and to extend the program to the broader university and community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding the introduction of HeartMath® into the CON’s approach to caring for self and others is guided by three distinct yet unifying approaches to caring: The FAU CON philosophic framework, Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory, and Grey, Schulman-Green, Knafel, and Reynolds (2015) self-management model. The usefulness of the three approaches provides a solid grounding and variable guidance for self-management interactions.

FAU CON Philosophic Framework

Nurturing the wholeness and well-being of others in caring is the focus of nursing at FAU (FAU, 2012). This definition guides the practice of nursing in which the nurse responds uniquely to the call for caring from the one nursed. This approach is patient/client focused, grounded in compassion, and draws on the broad knowledge base of the nurse, who provides care for the whole patient/client: mind, body, and soul. The nurse asks the patient/client “What matters most to you at this moment and how can I be helpful to you?” The verbal and/or written responses to the questions then form the essence of a plan of care directed toward nurturing the wholeness and wellbeing of the patient/client. In the authors’ experience everyone has hopes and dreams of caring for themselves and of living a balanced life. Tenets of social

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