Students’ Experiences of a Voluntary Random Acts of Kindness Health Promotion Project

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Abstract

Objective: To examine students’ experiences of a voluntary random acts of kindness (RAK) project introduced in a large, undergraduate health promotion classroom setting. Participants: 107 university students out of 348 students enrolled in an undergraduate course. Methods: Fifteen weeks following the completion of the project, youth participants completed a 25-item questionnaire that was created for this study and included both closed and open-ended items. The questionnaire was designed to primarily examine participation in the project, its perceived impact on the classroom environment, class cohesion, course participation, and students’ personal wellbeing including stress and confidence. Results: Respondents completed an average of 13 RAKs each and commented on the positive impact on their mental health. 73% reported an increase in their enjoyment of class; 65% indicated that class cohesion improved; 62% felt they learned about themselves; 59.6% reported a reduction in stress; 94.9% reported increased awareness of how their actions impacted others; and 84.1% reported continued, post-course voluntary participation in the project. Conclusion: Students benefited from the intervention in terms of enhancing their sense of belonging, contributing to their community, and improving experiences of stress and negativity. Further research on the utility of RAK projects within youth health promotion in classroom settings is warranted.

Keywords: health promotion; university/college health; mental health

Youth Engagement in Health Promotion

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Introduction

Mental health among college and university students is a growing concern in terms of complexity as well as an increase in volume and severity (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010; Storrie et al., 2010). In fact, college and university students across North America report high levels of psychological problems (Gallagher and Taylor-Webmaster, 2014). A recent survey by the American College Health Association (2014) of 66,887 students revealed that 33.2% of respondents felt so depressed within the last 12 months that it was difficult to function, and 54.7% felt overwhelming anxiety within the last 12 months. Similarly, in Canada, 19.8% of students surveyed in 2013 had been treated for a mental health condition within the last year, and another 14.3% reported that they had seriously considered suicide (American College Health Association, 2013).

The intensification of students’ psychological needs across North American college and university campuses has been framed as a mental health crisis (Eisner, 2011). Mental health problems have a profound impact on all aspects of campus life -- at the individual level, the interpersonal level, and the institutional level (Byrd and McKinney, 2012). It is imperative that the mental health of university students be studied, in service of offering innovative and effective approaches to help curb the crisis and assist students who are struggling (Hunt and Eisenberg 2010; Schwartz and Kay, 2009; Zivin et al., 2009). Students’ needs are constantly changing and evolving, and a recurrent challenge to addressing campus mental health effectively, is finding ways to translate research into the real world environment in a cost-effective manner (Kitzrow, 2003). Colleges and universities have the ability to influence students during prime adult-developmental years, and
therefore are in a prime position to promote, protect, and improve the health of their students and the greater community by creating health-conducive working, learning, and living environments (Health and Welfare Canada, 1998; Tsouros et al., 1998). Health on campus is no longer seen as simply a question of crisis management; instead, post-secondary institutions approach matters of mental health in more proactive and systematic ways, reflecting the advantages of prevention over reaction. In fact, high priority is currently given to developing inclusive campus communities where students are socially connected and supported (Silverman et al., 2008). Therefore, a hypothesized area for exploration is the use of positive activities in classroom and on campuses for youth mental health promotion and to enable communities to thrive.

Researchers suggest that positive activities (e.g., writing letters of gratitude, practicing optimism) serve as both protective factors and coping strategies for mental health challenges (Layous et al., 2014). Positive activities reportedly boost individuals’ wellbeing to the extent that they increase positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and psychological needs satisfaction (Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013). Additionally, positive activities mitigate mental health risk factors and act as a toolkit when individuals are faced with challenging conditions or events (Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema and Watkins, 2011). A specific positive activity that has been demonstrated to be successful in the past has been performing acts of kindness (Chancellor, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).
Background

The Butterfly Effect; A legacy through kindness (hereafter referred to as the Butterfly Effect) was a voluntary health promotion class project. In the context of the project, the term “random act of kindness” (RAK) was used and was defined, in general, as a deed for one person meant to benefit another person – an act emitted out of the will and intention to extend positivity, without expecting anything in return. The professor (JDI) of a large (348 undergraduate students) introductory Health Promotion course, whose professional and research interests include university students’ physical and mental health, attempts each year to identify opportunities so that interested students can ‘experience’ aspects of the course material (e.g., health promotion program planning, implementation, evaluation, and management). Previous years’ projects have included walking/running fund-raisers, and vegetable and fruit food drives. For the 2013 class, she offered to the class the idea of a voluntary RAK project to take place (primarily outside of class time) over the final three weeks of the one-term course, and the class chose to accept the initiative through a class vote. They then submitted project name ideas and voted to adopt The Butterfly Effect: A legacy through kindness. The overarching goal was to provide the students with a health promotion experiential learning opportunity by encouraging a movement toward acts of kindness being the norm, rather than the exception, and, in turn, to facilitate positive mental health and wellbeing.

Although the basic idea came from the Professor, the students identified the form the project would take and took on all of the organization and management of the project. The class decided that each member could participate in The Butterfly Effect to whatever extent s/he chose, if at all, by anonymously submitting RAKs directly to the professor to record for the
class (in response to the class' request), or to the Facebook/Twitter accounts that were created and administered by students for the purpose of the project. All RAKs could be viewed through social media; the latter were intended to provide an avenue for the class to share and raise awareness of the project and encourage the involvement of their peers and community (including the university community and social media communities). The Butterfly Effect lasted the duration of the final three weeks of the course, and concluded with the last day of classes. RAKs conducted by students were diverse; some examples included buying a stranger a coffee, shoveling snow for neighbors, assisting seniors carry grocery bags, and volunteering at a local homeless shelter.

Students’ anecdotal comments to the professor (JDI) and a classmate who was in charge of the Facebook page (NP), suggested that the project and conducting RAKs had a positive impact on both the campus environment and student wellbeing. These anecdotal reports led to the authors’ decision to more formally explore students’ experiences with the project and how student-led RAK initiatives could be utilized in postsecondary settings. Therefore, the purpose of this retrospective study was to examine students’ experiences with the voluntary, health promotion project, The Butterfly Effect.

Methods
This cross-sectional retrospective survey study was implemented 15 weeks following the completion of the course in which students were enrolled, for two reasons. First, the decision to conduct this study was made as a result of students’ anecdotal and unsolicited feedback that the project was having a substantial impact; secondly, the authors wanted to
understand students’ perspectives when they had no affiliation or associated grade concerns with the course. Ethical approval was obtained through the institution’s Office of Research Ethics.

Participants

Participants in the study (n = 107) were recruited through the introductory Health Promotion course website, which allowed for the invitation to be sent to all 348 students in the class; this represents a 31% response rate. Approximately 83% were female, the average age was 20 years (80% were either 19 or 20 years), and the majority, 65.7%, identified as White.

Instrument

The 25-item questionnaire was created specifically for this study and included both closed- and open-ended questions (Appendix 1). Questions were designed by the researchers, were informed by both the anecdotal reports from students who participated in the project and previous literature, and were pilot-tested with a small sample of students known to the researchers, to ensure each item made sense and was interpreted in the manner intended. The questionnaire focused on the extent of respondents’ participation in the project, the perceived impact the project had on the classroom environment and students’ personal identity, as well as the general perception of RAKs. Specific exploration was taken towards addressing class cohesion, course participation, as well as students’ personal wellbeing related to stress, confidence, self-exploration, and sense of community contribution. The majority of questions were based on a 7-point Likert scale anchored from 0 ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 ‘strongly agree.’ Students were given the chance to respond and expand on
every topic, as well as provide feedback about their personal experience. The online questionnaire was administered through the software tool Survey Monkey, a protected site familiar to the researchers. Online administration of the survey enabled the potential for large numbers of respondents and for respondents’ answers to remain anonymous.

Analysis

Survey Monkey’s descriptive statistics program was used to quantitatively analyze responses. Additional comments and feedback provided by students in the open-ended questions were analyzed by both researchers using inductive content analysis as described by Patton (2002), whereby the major themes emanating from the data were identified and illustrative quotations were noted.

Results

Extent of Project Involvement

One open-ended question invited respondents to indicate the approximate number of RAK they personally completed throughout the duration of the project (i.e., three weeks). Responses ranged from 0 to “countless” and “a lot.” Out of responses that indicated a precise number, the average was 13 RAKs, with the most frequent answer being 5 RAKs. Additionally, students were invited to indicate the areas in which they participated and engaged in the project. The most reported areas of involvement included voting on aspects of the project (93.5%), completing RAKs (92.5%), and Facebook engagement (80.4%). Only eight students indicated that they did not directly complete any RAKs. Further analysis revealed that all students who did not complete RAKs still participated and contributed to the project by other
means (e.g., contributing ideas, project voting). All respondents chose to participate and contribute in at least one area, with a plurality of students participating in multiple areas.

Students’ Perceptions of Project Outcomes

Participant survey results and feedback are presented in four sections. The first three sections represent participants’ perceptions on classroom environment outcomes, perspectives on personal identity outcomes, and perceptions of RAK engagement. Illustrative comments reflective of the majority of those that accompanied the close-ended questions are presented in each section. The forth section represents overall/general qualitative findings.

Participants’ perceptions of classroom environment outcomes

Table 1 represents students’ responses to questions in relation to the impact RAKs had on the classroom environment. Most strongly, students indicated that their class enjoyment due to the Butterfly Effect Project increased, with 73.0% of students indicating strongly agree or agree. One individual supported this experience by explaining that while s/he was not the best student, s/he never missed a class because s/he “loved being there and loved being involved.” Another student commented, “[I] now enjoyed coming to class and enjoyed class discussion on the project.”

Students also responded positively to feeling an increase in class cohesion and sense of belonging with 65.0% and 55.0%, respectively, indicating strongly agree and agree. Quotes that supported this finding included, “I was more of a class member, rather than a student number,” and “I believe it strengthened our class as a whole.” Class participation as a result of the project (e.g., class attendance, class engagement, questions asked during class) was the area least
emphasized, with only 34.3% of survey respondents indicating strongly agree and agree. Many participants indicated that they were already coming to class regardless of The Butterfly Effect project but this was found to vary for any given individual. For example, one student reflected that as a result of the project, s/he “felt more comfortable participating and asking questions in class.”

Table 1
**Participants Reported Perceptions on Classroom Environment Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Mean (7-point scale)</th>
<th>Survey Responses, Participants, No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt an increase in class cohesion (e.g., class unity, peer acceptance, sense of belonging in class, a common class vision)</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>2(2.0) 0(0.0) 0(0.0) 9(9.0) 24(24.0) 37(37.0) 28(28.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My own participation in class increased (e.g., class attendance, class engagement, asked questions)</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>2(2.0) 7(7.1) 5(5.1) 28(28.3) 23(23.2) 22(22.2) 12(12.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants' perceptions of personal identity outcomes

Table 2 presents responses regarding personal identity based on project participation. Students felt strongest towards sensing an increase in personal wellbeing (e.g. happiness, self-satisfaction) as a result of their participation in the project, with only 2 students indicating any level of disagreement. One participant commented that s/he felt happier as a result of the project, and another stated his/her self-esteem increased and it was reflected in new mannerisms. Over half of students (59.6%) reported a reduction in negative stress. One student said, “[I felt] less stressed during the project,” and another stated that his/her experience with life stressors decreased. Almost two-thirds (62%) agreed that the project helped them learn about themselves, including “reflect[ing] on my values.” Many (61.0%) participants reported an increase in their overall confidence, and one participant explained that for him/her, there was a connection between “always being kind and being happy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My enjoyment of being a member of the class increased</th>
<th>5.95</th>
<th>1(1.0)</th>
<th>2(2.0)</th>
<th>0(0.0)</th>
<th>3(3.0)</th>
<th>21(21.0)</th>
<th>38(38.0)</th>
<th>35(35.0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt an increased sense of belonging as a university student</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
<td>2(2.0)</td>
<td>12(12.0)</td>
<td>29(29.0)</td>
<td>33(33.0)</td>
<td>22(22.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Not all numbers add to n=107 (100%) because some respondents did not answer all questions.
Table 2
Participants Reported Perceptions on Personal Identity Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Mean (7-point scale)</th>
<th>Survey Responses, Participants, No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt an increase in my personal wellbeing (e.g., happiness, self-satisfaction)</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt a reduction in my experience of negative stress</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>2(2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned about myself</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>3(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt more confident</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>3(3.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Not all numbers add to n=107 (100%) because some respondents did not answer all questions.

Participants’ perception of engaging in RAKs

Table 3 provides data pertaining to students’ perceptions of RAK engagement and project participation. Almost 95% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the project increased their awareness of how their actions impacted others. Students’ comments included that “a little goes a long way” and that “it was amazing how much people appreciate the little things.” Almost 90% of respondents also became more aware of opportunities for engaging in RAKs. One student stated,
“[I] always think of opportunities” to complete RAKs. Most (90.0%) agreed that RAKs enabled them to contribute meaningfully to the community, with one student expressing that “[we] are changing the world, one step at a time.” In addition to helping others, 91.9% of respondents recognized the positive impact of engaging in RAKs. One student reflected that engaging in RAKs is “a way to help yourself by helping others.”

When asked about their interest in continuing the formal Butterfly Effect project, students were in strong agreement, with a mean of 5.95 on a 7 point scale. Only six participants indicated no future interest in a ‘formal’ project, although five of these six individuals indicated that they continued to complete RAKs post-project completion. This continuation of RAKs was reported by the majority of respondents, with 84.1% (n=90) indicating that they still partake in RAKs on their own, despite the formal ending of the project approximately three months prior to the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Mean (7-point scale)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree / Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in continuing The Butterfly Effect project in the future</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>5(4.7)</td>
<td>1(0.9)</td>
<td>0(0.0)</td>
<td>5(4.7)</td>
<td>8(7.5)</td>
<td>45(42.5)</td>
<td>42(39.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more aware of opportunities for engaging in random acts of kindness</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
<td>1(1.0)</td>
<td>8(8.1)</td>
<td>20(20.2)</td>
<td>41(41.4)</td>
<td>27(27.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have an increased appreciation for the positive impact I can have on others by completing random acts of kindness | 6.07 | 1(1.0) | 0(0.0) | 1(1.0) | 3(3.0) | 15(15.2) | 43(43.4) | 36(36.4)

I have an increased appreciation for the positive impact I can have on myself by completing random acts of kindness | 5.84 | 1(1.0) | 0(0.0) | 1(1.0) | 6(6.1) | 20(20.2) | 47(47.5) | 24(24.2)

Through my own random acts of kindness, I feel that I contributed in a meaningful way to my community | 5.74 | 1(1.0) | 1(1.0) | 2(2.0) | 6(6.0) | 20(20.0) | 49(49.0) | 21(21.0)

*Note. Not all numbers add to n=107 (100%) because some respondents did not answer all questions.*

**Common themes from students’ general feedback**

Participants offered rich descriptions regarding RAKs and their project experience throughout the survey. Table 4 outlines eight common themes that emerged from student feedback and illustrative quotes are provided for each theme. The 8 themes are: (1) social support and the creation of a ‘family’; (2) comfort and acceptance; (3) RAKs and habit formation; (4) new perspectives; (5) happiness and desire to do good; (6) personal growth and going out of comfort zones; (7) motivating others and creating a legacy; and (8) importance of sharing RAKs.
Feedback from students also included suggestions for future RAK interventions. Many students expressed that the project should have started earlier in the semester, and would have preferred if the project had been longer in duration. A common theme that emerged from a subgroup of students was for the creation of a formal structure and student leadership positions in order to sustain project momentum. Additionally, students found that the project incorporation and balance with coursework was beneficial and was a factor in facilitating student engagement. Students also reported that the ability to share RAKs was crucial to the project success, and in the future, even more avenues for awareness and sharing should be included such as an expansion of the social media outlets.

Table 4
Common Themes Emerging from Participants’ General Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social support and the creation of a ‘family’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“[The project] changed the atmosphere to a loving community and united us all into one big family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It created a totally different atmosphere than any class that I have ever had; making everyone feel equally loved and a part of a big family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everyone could use a helping hand and I feel that it unites a community of different ages and ethnicities.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort and acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I felt more comfortable in front of my classmates… It really opened up a lot of opportunities for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I felt less judgment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wanted to donate clothes at the clothing swap last year but was intimidated to join events, this year I feel more comfortable and was very glad I was able to donate.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random act of kindness continuation and habit formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Butterfly Effect is a way of being with people on a daily basis. It is not so much about participating. It is about including it into your daily habits.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I have continued to volunteer in seniors homes…. I also continue to hold doors open and help people on and off the bus. It does not feel like random acts of kindness any more, it has come pretty natural to help others.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Realizing I made people happy made me happy too. I didn’t want to stop doing nice things just because the term was over, so I do still do random acts of kindness. Sometimes I don’t realize I’m doing them, it kind of becomes a part of you.”

**New perspectives**

“[The project] put things in a different perspective. The stress of school, money, or outside stress do not seem so grand in comparison.”

“Being a part of such a tremendous "effect" at university made me look at that class and even life through different eyes. I learned that every little difference counts and how good it could make you feel when you did something extra nice for a person.

**Happiness and desire to do good**

“I feel happy to do good for others and it is rewarding. I am always thinking of the project and it motivates me to do good.”

“Made me feel happier helping others.”

“It makes you feel better about yourself, thereby creating a positive attitude in your own life. This motivates me to continue to conduct random acts of kindness wherever I can.”

“I could see myself being more positive and seeking good things in others and in myself.”

“Increased my positive attitude.”

**Personal Growth and going out of comfort zones**

“My communication skills definitely increased because of this project. I feel less awkward when talking to strangers.”

“I volunteered to do things that I normally wouldn't do.”

**Motivating others and creating a legacy**

“I am part of a community that will hopefully take my random act and be motivated to carry it on.”

“I believe [this project] carried on onto others and motivated people outside the group to pass on random acts of kindness. I believe the project has a positive impact on the community and even on campus I have seen random acts of kindness… I believe it has resonated and passed on. Not only am I noticing myself engaging more in random acts of kindness, but I am noticing those around me. I think that is what the project is all about: a reciprocal legacy.”

**Importance of sharing random acts of kindness**

“I never did the acts as a way of being recognized, but after The Butterfly Effect I’ve come to realize that sharing the events with others can never be a negative thing. If they chose to judge it as an attention seeking action then there is nothing I could do about that but the sharing of the act can spur others on in their actions. In a way the sharing of the act is just another act of kindness.”

“I don’t see the Butterfly Effect as an excuse to do acts of kindness, but as a way of sharing these experiences with other like-minded people as well as hopefully being a model for future positive behavior.”
Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine students’ perceptions of the impact of participating in The Butterfly Effect health promotion project. Overall, positive outcomes were indicated in the areas of personal impact, classroom impact, and the larger campus and community. There is considerable support to suggest RAKs are an effective intervention to support students, especially with regard to promoting happiness, self-satisfaction, and confidence; and reducing the experience of negative stress. In essence, the findings indicate that the in-class voluntary RAK project might promote positive mental health and wellbeing, and its application within the field of youth health promotion is noteworthy to create conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable and Haidt, 2005).

This study provides insight into RAKs as a social experience and as a facilitator for social connections. The project contributed to a sense of community that reportedly extended beyond the members of class. Social networks have been identified as essential for supporting mental health in the university setting in particular in that students in need tend to turn to their peers and immediate environment for support (Dunne and Somerset, 2004; English et al., 2012). The social support and sense of belonging facilitated by the Butterfly Effect project was underscored by respondents. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), a strong social connection and sense of belonging are important protective factors against stress, isolation, depression, and emotional distress, and further literature suggests that perceived social support also contributes to one’s ability to deal with adversities (Bovier et al., 2014; Phinney and Haas, 2003; Pidgeon et al., 2014).
The Butterfly Effect extended beyond the classroom, and students indicated a strong sense of belonging within the university community. Our findings are consistent with specific research conducted with university and college students suggesting that higher levels of affiliation towards the institution is linked to positive outcomes for mental health (Hoyle and Crawford, 1994). Additionally, a greater sense of school belonging among university/college students is linked to positive perceptions of social acceptance (Freeman et al., 2007). Furthermore, a particular finding in our study was that participants expressed feelings of increased comfort and belonging. Corroborative research supporting our particular finding suggests that perceived support is important in the university context as it leads to an increase in internal resources for coping and reduces the impact of mental health stressors (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

An increase in well-being, as well as happiness and positivity that result from performing RAKs were also reported by participants, and this is consistent with a study conducted by Otake et al. (2006). The authors reported that when individuals acknowledge and recognize kindness, their subjective happiness increases, and that happiness leads to more kind acts and to an increased sense of gratitude. The voluntary nature of the Butterfly Effect class project, students’ active participation in it, and their reported feelings of an enhanced classroom experience are in line with existing research that found that if a particular practice feels natural and enjoyable, an individual will be more likely to feel intrinsically motivated to perform it (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This intrinsic motivation, we suggest, helps to explain why some students were actively engaged in completing RAKs and chose to continue their participation even after the course ended.
Fredrickson (2001) advocates that positive emotions stimulate people to act and approach (rather than avoid) rewards and opportunities in their lives. This is interesting as our study indicated that performing RAKs fostered student awareness of kindness opportunities and created an enabling situation to engage in RAKs for friends/family/strangers. It is possible that through a collective class initiative, perceptions of emotional barriers were reduced and RAKs became acceptable and encouraged. As noted previously, many students described an internal shift in themselves and the discovery of new perspectives; they experienced a change in their ability to contextualize issues in a different way, and experience less daily stress as a result. This finding is especially relevant, as much of the work of community mental health promotion has to do with shifting attitudes—emphasizing the importance of maintaining positive mental health instead of dealing only with individual distress (Grzywacz and Keyes, 2004).

Lastly, students very strongly indicated they had an increase in appreciation and understanding on the positive impact RAKs can have on others in their community, as well as on themselves. The spread of RAKs and the need to share these acts may be attributed to a longing for connection. Fowler and Christakis (2010) suggest a general model indicating that behaviors spread by the avenue of social networks, and that initial public good can spread thereby impacting dozens or even hundreds of people. This application of this model to the Butterfly Effect reflects students’ motivation for others to become involved in the project and for the creation of a legacy and random act of kindness continuation.
Limitations

Although this study provides some valuable insight into kindness interventions for university students, it is not without limitations. The timing of The Butterfly Effect project was short in duration, lasting only three weeks and at the end of the semester before students departed for Winter holidays. The project only involved one particular class, and the population of students were all studying Health Sciences. As a result of the course subject area, students may have been more interested and inclined to participate in a project of this nature with potential health benefits. Future studies should aim to enroll a larger and more diverse sample and include a control.

A further limitation was that because of the spontaneous nature of the project, there was no baseline questionnaire against which to compare post-project findings. Also, the questionnaire used for the study was not validated before distribution. Although just under one-third of the class completed a questionnaire, a majority of the class did not, and this limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the larger group. Further, 87% of respondents were female whereas only 78% of the class composition was female. Lastly, a criticism of RAKs is their subjectivity and the lack of quantitative measurement, and further tools for assessing the impact of random act of kindness on mental health should be explored.

Conclusions

Regardless of the noted limitations, important conclusions can be drawn. One strength of the present study and the use of RAKs is that there is potential to reach a large number of individuals with RAKs in a cost-effective manner. In light of the
mosaic of areas in participants’ lives that impact mental health and wellbeing, future research should explore the use of RAKs through a longer and more intensive intervention (such as lasting the whole year) with a view towards eliciting and assessing longer term impacts.

In conclusion, random acts of kindness can be seen as a tool within the field of youth health promotion, and reflect the belief that ‘people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play’ (Positive Psychology Centre, 2016). Promoting and supporting acts of kindness in the college and university setting appear effective and are warranted as viable student mental health promotion initiatives. Acts of kindness have potential for long-term impact and sustainability and provide strategies for coping and managing mental health challenges as well as promoting wellbeing. The results of this study provide valuable information to guide assessment and further development of potential support services and programs to assist youth in the postsecondary setting. It is strongly suggested that further research be conducted on college and university students for further programming and initiatives involving the use of acts of kindness in generating positive interventions.

From a combined teacher and student perspective (i.e., the authorship team of this manuscript), the fact that so many of the health promotion students decided to participate in the voluntary, experiential learning opportunity is an uplifting outcome. Not mentioned in the body of this manuscript was the wide attention the project received outside of the members of the class. The campus newspaper ran a front-page story on the project; the campus administration invited JDI to give a sold-out keynote talk on ‘kindness’ for the university community; NP published an experiential journal article.
(Paviglianiti, 2015) and has been invited to present on the project at multiple academic and community meetings as well as a recent conference; and the 2014 Introductory Health Promotion class embraced and grew the project further. At a time when mental health and stress challenges are considered overwhelming for many (Storrie et al., 2010), there clearly still exists a desire to be engaged, help others, and take on responsibilities that make the communities in which we learn, work, and grow kinder and gentler places for humanity.

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