

OSCAR: Development of the Mental Well-being Training Framework for Academics

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Purpose

This abstract aims to present the mental health framework developed for Project OSCAR (Online, open learning recommendations and mentoring towards Sustainable research CAREers), funded by ERASMUS+ Key Action 204 Higher Education. OSCAR aims to support the professional development of researchers, through the development of an online training and mentoring tool on mental health and career management. The tool uses AI based learning recommendations, to researchers across Europe. The training element of this initiative involves (not exclusively) the development of transversal skills from the mental health and well-being domain. In fact, there are growing concerns in recent years about the mental health of academics and the negative impact of academic workplaces and its demands on researchers' mental health and well-being (Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Badri, 2019). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to learn how to manage stressful situations in their careers and improve their mental well-being. Taking that into account, the framework related to mental health was developed by the authors in order to propose and clarify the relevant and specific mental health skills that researchers can acquire and train, fostering their psychological well-being, allowing them to better deal with the demands of the academic workplaces and to create sustainable careers.

Design

OSCAR's Mental Well-being Training Framework was designed to theoretically define important dimensions of well-being for academics. The authors considered two complementary perspectives of well-being: (1) Diener's subjective well-being, which includes the concepts of life satisfaction and hedonic balance (Diener, 1984, 2009), and (2) Ryff's psychological well-being, which includes the dimensions of Self-Acceptance, Positive

Relations With Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). These dimensions were divided into five broad domains that represent different and mutually interdependent components of psychological functioning and well-being (Life satisfaction, Personal Growth, and Environmental Mastery were not included in this framework): Emotions (reflects hedonic balance dimension), Behavior & Agency (reflects autonomy dimension), Social Connections (reflects the positive relations with others dimension), Self-concept (reflects self-acceptance dimension), and Purpose & Meaning (reflects purpose in life dimension).



Fig. 1 Macro framework

To identify the skills that would be included in each domain, content analysis was carried out, and used to define the set of skills, addressing the common difficulties and needs of researchers. Authors considered both the research regarding academics' mental health, as well

as the general research on human psychological functioning. In the end a set of 16 skills were defined: ‘Finding Meaning in Life’, ‘Finding Meaning at Work’ (domain Purpose & Meaning), ‘Awareness of Well-being’, ‘Recognizing and Understanding Emotions’, ‘Emotion Regulation’, ‘Stress Management’ (domain Emotion), ‘Setting Goals’, ‘Resilience’, ‘Accountability’, ‘Finding a Work-Life Balance’ (domain Behavior & Agency), ‘Strengthening Social Relationships’, ‘Assertive Communication’, ‘Interpersonal and Social Empathy’ (domain Social Connections), ‘Dealing with Perfectionism’, ‘Self-Kindness’, and ‘Self-Confidence’ (domain Self-Concept).

Implications

The OSCAR Mental Well-being Training Framework sets out to address academia’s mental health difficulties directly through skills training, and also indirectly by bringing awareness to this topic, creating a space of discussion between researchers, which will, hopefully, help in the elimination of the stigma associated with mental health issues in academia. Furthermore, some of the skills embedded into OSCAR can help individual researchers to act in ways that can induce over time a systemic change – for example social empathy, accountability, and assertive communication (Segal, 2011; Bergsteiner, 2012; Bergsteiner & Avery, 2003). The academic system may have to adjust to the type of research culture that OSCAR promotes and whereby individual researchers actively take care of their mental health, well-being and quality of life.

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