

The role of appreciative inquiry in sustaining academic mental health

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Purpose

We would like to start by offering a short background context. In the past three years the Counselling Services Unit (CSU), within the University of Malta (UoM) collaborated with various other University Departments and Faculties setting up psycho-social-educational programs enhancing mental health awareness among university academics, including doctoral candidates and early researchers. These programs emanated from researched observations carried out at UoM whose results were in line with the existing body of knowledge in the mental health field, tallying with data obtained from the community of knowledge (Camilleri, 2023; Cefai & Camilleri, 2009; Cuschieri et al, 2020; Dalli Gonzi & Camilleri, 2022; Metcalf et al 2022). Research indicates that appreciative inquiry and self-reflexivity sustain academic mental health through the provision of a democratic, bottom-up process allowing various voices to be heard, while commencing a conversation which can initiate social movement (Cooperrider et al, 2008). Oddone et al., (2021) note how peer-mentorship enhances the creation of reciprocal emotional support, motivation and a sense of community, supporting the creation of a shared vision for the way the group wants the organisation to function (Mohr & Watkins, 2022). To this end a conversation needs to start between the institution, the academic and the student for the benefit of the latter and the development of a sense of achievement in the former (Wisker & Robinson, 2016). Personal and bottom-up critical self-reflexivity are viewed as an essential tool in bringing about social movement to generate organisational change (Valeix, Moss & Morris, 2020), thus enhancing academic mental health.

The program consisted of Appreciative Inquiry oriented focus groups and workshops with academics, early researchers, students and staff regarding: leadership; mentoring; trauma/resiliency. The learning objectives of these workshops were to:

- a) gain knowledge on how to develop a continuous, long-term relationship built in a climate of trust, support and mutual understanding, providing the participant with the opportunity to develop potential in a secure environment. Such tools could then be generalized to peer relationships.
- b) gain self-development through the exploration of personal psychological processes of leadership and communication styles in a safe and supportive learning environment.
- c) develop sufficient self-awareness to become aware when one is over-stressed, gain skills how to handle one's stress and to learn to make healthy choices. These skills could then be extrapolated to daily life.

Workshops were interactive, focused on the voices of the participants and included the following appreciative inquiry questions:

- What in your work/life is going on well?
- What requires improvement?
- To this end what strategies do you employ and what are the outcomes?
- What resources do you require and how can CSU support?

Following these workshops some participants became empowered to take concrete action to enhance their relationship with their colleagues and students. One Faculty set up its own Wellbeing Committee to discuss students exhibiting issues and ways to support them. Another Faculty requested leaflets from the CSU to disseminate among Faculty members, empowering students to seek psycho-social support. Academics attending these workshops reported an enhancement in teamwork and healthier interactions within the departments where they worked (personal disclosure). They appreciated learning how to handle distressed students, noting the importance of learning about listening skills and how to raise awareness about self and others and the interaction between the two. In general academics required support in developing more constructive criticism, and critical reflexivity with special focus on work-life balance.

The aim of the workshop is to offer a similar experience to Conference participants who choose to attend, commencing a conversation with non-local participants, adopting a hands-on lived experience approach through similar workshops. This would hopefully motivate conference participants to embark on similar ventures in their home Universities. The interactive exercises intend to support participants experience what it means to integrate

psychoeducation with critical self-reflexivity within a learning self-developmental cycle. In the sense that self-development and critical-self reflectivity not only prevent stress and burnout but facilitate a sense of achievement and self-transcendence sustaining academic/researcher mental health.

Design

We are proposing to hold interactive groups with conference participants who will be interactively exposed to an appreciative inquiry approach to self-development through self-awareness. The workshop proposes to commence a conversation with the participants on how to improve and sustain mental health through activities of daily living. The workshop will commence with a brief presentation regarding the existing body of knowledge about the subject matter and then continue on a reflection about the appreciative inquiry questions listed above. Through this interaction they will be given space for sustainable self-development and to offer feedback of their lived experience of this approach. This would also widen the feedback received to the international community.

Results (if applicable)

Following the interactive session, a feedback form will be distributed, filled in anonymously on-site and collected. Feedback will be collated and disseminated after the conference through the Conference organisers. It is expected that participants will become more aware of the positives in their lives, that there will be a feeling of normalization of their experiences and an increased awareness of how to work together to bring about change enhancing the already existing social movement. The results will be used for publication while respecting the anonymity of the participants.

Implications

Supporting academics to become more aware of their levels of mental health prevents stress and burnout, enhancing positivity. Doing it together as a group at this Conference may give rise to an internationally resonant bottom-up conversation influencing policy formation across the board. As one academic noted 'Discussing what's being taught gives the possibility of being able to express your point of view, and being given feedback for it, makes it possible to develop your thoughts accordingly.' As academics accept that they need support to enhance their interactive skills and mental health (normalisation) stigma will decrease bottom-up.

Academics' reciprocal support within the research community may give rise to hope that policies may change as the conversation widens and voices become more vibrant

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Resources

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