Syllabus
Risk & Resilience in Urban Teens:
Mental Health Promotion and Practicum
CAMS-UA.0111 (Fall semester), CAMS-UA.0112 (Spring semester)

Instructors:
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Course Prerequisites: It is expected that students enrolled in CAMS-UA.0111 in fall will proceed with CAMS-UA.0112 in spring. There are no prerequisites for CAMS-UA.0111; students must earn a grade of B or greater in CAMS-UA.0111 in order to advance to CAMS-UA.0112.

Course Description:
The most effective way to learn and retain information is by teaching others. This course is focused on school-based mental health promotion, positive youth development, resilience building and risk-reduction techniques that specifically target behavioral risk factors in adolescents. From tackling cognitive distortions, to stress and anxiety reduction, to effective communication skills and managing difficult conversations, this course provides a powerful and evidence-based toolkit for how to survive the high school (and college!) years. This unique two-semester course provides students the unparalleled opportunity to thoroughly learn and practice these concepts and techniques in the fall and then, in the spring, to teach a 10-week curriculum to 9th grade students at a public high school in New York City.

Course Goals:
   a. Knowledge - Students will learn key aspects of:
      i. Mental health promotion practices and the principles of effective prevention programs
      ii. The importance of theories of behavior change, and how to utilize the key theories in the design of health promotion efforts
      iii. Adolescent risk taking and decision-making
      iv. Experiential Learning Theory
      v. Curricular topics that can be utilized to promote mental wellness among adolescents, including:
         1. Cognitive Behavior Therapy
2. Stress Reduction and Management
3. Interpersonal Communication Skills
4. Risky Behavior & Healthy Decision-Making

b. Skills - Students will be able to:
   i. Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of health education interventions, programs, and materials
   ii. Practice techniques aimed at reducing cognitive distortions, stress reactions, communication problems, and unhealthy risk-taking behaviors
   iii. Deliver curriculum material in an engaging manner
   iv. Effectively facilitate classroom discussions

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**First Semester**

Our course of study this term will lay the foundation and provide essential baseline knowledge for the delivery of an evidence-based, peer-facilitated health education program. The first semester is divided into seven roughly equally spaced units. Throughout the first two units, students will be introduced to the concepts of public health, health promotion/disease prevention, the importance and utility of health behavior theory, and assessing the effectiveness of population-based preventative mental health efforts. In unit three, we will study adolescent behavior, focusing on why adolescents take risks and how they tend to make decisions involving risk. Unit four on Resilience will form a bridge from the concepts and theory to the remaining units in which we will investigate cognitive behavior theory, stress-response, and effective methods of interpersonal communication. In the final unit, we will explore experiential learning theory, and students will engage in a series of activities designed to clarify for them how they learn best. We will end our course with a final examination to assess students’ knowledge of the material covered during units five through eight. The final examination will not be cumulative.

**Second Semester**

We will begin the second semester by reviewing teaching and facilitation skills and then prepare students to act as peer educators and mentors. The focus throughout the term will be on coaching and evaluating the students as they deliver a 10-week health education curriculum in a New York City public high school. Beginning the second week of the term, we will prep students each Tuesday to teach our health education curriculum, which they will deliver on Wednesday afternoons. The following Thursday we will review and process the experience, in addition to critiquing the curriculum and evaluating student performance. Our 10-week health education curriculum will cover the following topics:

1. Sleep Hygiene
2. Irrational Thinking
3. Good Mood Toolkit I
4. Good Mood Toolkit II
5. Chillax I
6. Chillax II
7. Interpersonal Communication I
8. Interpersonal Communication II
9. Adolescent Risk and Decision-Making I
10. Adolescent Risk and Decision-Making II

Course Syllabus:

**Unit 1: Introduction to Mental Health Promotion**
Proponents of a strength-based perspective highlight the need to focus on enhancing quality of life and promoting mental health among adolescents, rather than solely treating pathology. More than just teaching teens to avoid drugs, violence and unsafe sex, promoting social, emotional and cognitive well-being is seen as a more effective way to prevent problem behaviors. Students will define the terms “risk” and “resilience” and examine the risks adolescents face. We will discuss levels of prevention and intervention and begin to consider what makes for an effective public health promotion program. Finally, we will explore various established programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) and Big Brothers/Big Sisters, in an effort to distinguish which factors make for effective health education interventions.

**Required Readings:**


**Optional Reading:**
Unit 2: Theories of Behavior Change

In this unit we will review theories of behavior change in prevention and health promotion, focusing on the importance of theory and how it can be utilized to design effective interventions. We will discuss theory related to behavior change at the individual level (e.g., the Transtheoretical Model), family or interpersonal level (e.g., Social Cognitive Theory), and community level (e.g., social planning). Examples of successful programs employing these theories will be provided. Drawing upon various in-class activities, students will design model health promotion programs employing these theoretical underpinnings.

Required Readings:


Unit 3: Adolescent Risk Taking and Decision-Making

It is well recognized that adolescents take many unnecessary risks, but our traditional understanding of why teens take big risks has been questioned in recent years. In this unit, we will explore the behavioral, biological, and environmental shifts in our thinking about why adolescents engage in risk taking behavior and how they make decisions about risk. We will consider the role of optimistic bias and “gist-based” thinking, along with what distinguishes adult or mature decision-making from that of an adolescent. We will evaluate the role of intuition, rapid cognition, and priming in the decision-making process.

Required Readings:
2011 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey.


**Unit 4: Resilience**

Resilience is a complicated concept to measure due to the absence of an accepted unifying framework and few psychometrically validated measures. This unit will look at the agreed upon aspects of the resilience construct and the ways in which resilience can be fostered in the school setting. We will also introduce coping mechanisms and intervention models targeted at adolescents: specifically, the challenge model, interaction effects model, and the cumulative effects model. This unit will act as a bridge between the concepts and theories taught in the first half of the semester and the more concrete techniques taught in units 6 – 8.

*Required Readings:*


**Midterm Exam (in class)**

**Unit 5: Cognitive Behavior Theory**

How adolescents perceive themselves, interpret others’ actions, and view the world have serious implications for their mood, academic success, relationships, and motivation. This unit will provide an introduction to Cognitive Behavior theory. We will discuss how automatic beliefs and thoughts lead to cognitive distortions, such as all-or-nothing thinking, jumping to conclusions, or personalization, which can in turn jeopardize a teen’s academic success or social and emotional health. We will also review the ABC (activating event-beliefs-consequences) model, the most common techniques of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and ways to overcome barriers to success.

*Required Readings:*


**Unit 6: Stress-Response**

Environmental and psychological stress is ubiquitous in modern day American culture. Our normative adaptive responses to stress can have damaging effects when our stress systems become overwhelmed. This unit will address how stress affects most every aspect of teens’ lives and how they can learn to moderate its impact. We will discuss individual differences in how we react to stress and factors associated with resilience. In addition to addressing the neurological
and physiological effects of stress and their impact on relationships, mood, and overall functioning, students will be taught basic stress management and reduction techniques focused on increasing awareness of stress, increasing resilience, time management, and taking care of our bodies. This unit will also include an in-depth look at the science of sleep and how it affects critical functions such as memory and concentration.

**Required Readings:**


**Optional reading:**


**Unit 7: Interpersonal Communication**

During the teen years, children go from spending over 30% of their time with their parents to under 10% as adolescents. Teens often feel that no one understands their problems or that adults treat them like children and are too strict. Parents, on the other hand, struggle with handling their children’s mood swings, understanding why they seem to forget anything not communicated via text message, and striking a balance between clear, high demands and respect for their teens’ autonomy. Adolescent peer relations too are fraught with confusion, misattribution, and hurt feelings. In this unit, we will examine effective styles of communication and provide students with tools for discussing difficult topics with peers, family members, and others.

**Required Readings:**


Unit 8: Experiential Learning
Understanding one’s own approach to education is vitally important in learning to teach effectively. This unit will focus on experiential learning or learning through the process of direct experience. Students will learn about the Kolb Learning Style Inventory and we will discuss the importance of reflection, analysis, active engagement, and problem-solving. Students will complete the Pratt Teaching Perspectives Inventory, which will help them to clarify their qualitative conception of “good teaching.” We will examine the three levels of curriculum: formal, informal, and hidden. Finally, we will explore and practice teaching/facilitation techniques that can be used in the classroom and in life!

Required Readings:


Final Exam (in class)

Assignments and Examinations:
1. Class participation (10%): Students are expected to attend and participate actively in all class sessions and activities and to demonstrate familiarity with the content of the assigned readings during class discussions. Questions to be addressed in these readings will be posted on NYU Courses; students are also expected to go beyond the direct questions and bring more meaning to the article by drawing upon their own experiences or other secondary materials.

2. Response Papers (40%): Students will be required to compose one response paper of 3 – 5 double-spaced pages for each of the eight units of the class; each paper will be valued at 5% (or 5 of the 100 total points for the course) of the student’s total grade. Assignments will be based upon a series of activities or analyses of readings and will be posted on NYU Courses at the beginning of the semester. The deadline for each response paper will be clearly communicated to students. **Late papers will be penalized one point per day.**

3. Midterm Exam (25%): This exam will cover material from the first four units. The exam will be multiple choice, matching, and short answer in format.

4. Final Exam (25%): This exam will cover material from the last four units. The final examination will not be cumulative. Akin to the midterm exam, the final exam will consist of multiple choice, matching, and short answer questions.