

DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE SELF-CARE: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. *The global societal challenges reveal decreased ability of people to maintain health and well-being when faced with prolonged stress conditions. Increases in anxiety, depression, and burnout are reported worldwide. The recent research indicates self-care as a useful resource to promote health and well-being and strengthen psychological resilience. The importance and attainability of self-care strategies are the characteristics that may indicate the necessity for self-care behaviour changes by identifying an internal conflict between the two. However, little is known about the determinants of self-care practicing according one's needs. The study aimed to explore the experts' perspectives on self-care needs among clinically healthy adults. The risks caused by inadequate self-care practices and the determinants of self-care behaviour change were identified. The interviews with 12 experts in arts therapies and/or health psychology were conducted. The qualitative content analysis was used to process the data. Psychological, health-related, and social risks were the categories of risks identified. The determinants of self-care behaviour change were categorized as knowledge, self-efficacy, attitude, perceived cues to action, planning, awareness, social support, and motivation. The identified items will contribute to evidence-based development of the intervention to promote self-care.*

Keywords: *attainability, behaviour change, importance, intervention, needs assessment, self-care.*

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, increases in anxiety, depression and burnout have been reported worldwide (Fountoulakis et al., 2022, Sampogna, Pompili, & Fiorillo, 2022). Global societal disasters and uncertainty challenge people's ability to maintain health and well-being, especially in the face of prolonged stressful conditions.

In Latvia, in line with research worldwide (e.g. Garcia et al., 2022; Sanchez-Hernandez, Barkavi-Shani, & Bermejo, 2022), self-care has been identified as one of the resources available to strengthen mental health and promote psychological resilience (Bundzena-Ervika et al., 2021; Rancāns et al., 2021). Generally, self-care is understood as engagement in behaviours that support one's health and well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013; Mārtinsone, Perepjolkina, & Ruža, 2022). The rapid increase in self-care research across the world since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates that self-care is of particular interest in periods of societal crisis.

The Latvian researchers have focused on self-care research since the second decade of the 21st century (e.g. Paičs et al., 2018, 2019). However, self-care studies have gained particular relevance since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. In the framework of the State Research Programme "Covid-19 mitigation", a new self-care measure (Perepjolkina, Koļesņikova, Ruža, Bundzena-Ervika, & Mārtinsone, 2021) was developed within the project "Mental health and psychological resilience, and related factors in the population of Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic, directions for future management" (Rancāns et al., 2021) to explore self-care in the general population of Latvia. In turn, the development and validation of the Self-Care Strategies Questionnaire (Mārtinsone et al., 2022) provided opportunities to conduct the research not only in the general adult sample (e.g. Ozola & Mārtinsone, 2022b) but also in different professional samples (Lāce & Mārtinsone, 2022; Liepiņa & Mārtinsone, 2022; Ozola & Mārtinsone, 2022a). At the same time, popular science developments in the field of self-care (Mārtinsone, 2021) and psychological help (Mārtinsone & Regzdiņa-Pelēķe, 2020) were also produced. The authors, having identified a lack of scientifically correct information on self-care issues in Latvian (Mārtinsone, 2021), provided an opportunity for a wider audience to learn about self-care and get support during the Covid-19 crisis by drawing inspiration for self-care from the experiences of psychological help providers.

Since the development and validation of the Self-Care Strategies Questionnaire (Mārtinsone et al., 2022), self-care research in Latvia has been dominated by studies based on exploration of the relationship between two characteristics of self-care strategies, namely importance and attainability. The idea of the importance and attainability of self-care strategies is derived from the conception of value conflict developed within general and clinical psychology (Fantalova, 1992, 2001). The importance is associated with an assessment or self-assessment of the significance and necessity of a value while attainability refers to an assessment or self-assessment of the achievability of a value (Fantalova, 1992, 2001).

In Latvia, both concepts have been used previously in research on professional competences (e.g. Angena & Mārtinsone, 2020; Kāpiņa & Mārtinsone, 2020). Besides, the Self-Care Strategies Questionnaire (Mārtinsone

et al., 2022) introduces an integrated characteristic of both, i.e. the interaction between importance and attainability. The relationship between the importance and attainability of self-care strategies may be characterized by a mutual balance or predominance of one or the other characteristic indicating the extent to which an individual implements self-care in line with his/her values while the interaction of the two reflects the effectiveness of the self-care strategy. Higher importance is associated with a state of an internal conflict while higher attainability indicates a state of internal vacuum (Fantalova, 1992; 2001).

It is noted that a state of internal conflict between importance and attainability contributes to an individual's motivation to seek solutions (Fantalova, 1992; 2001; Mihailova & Perepjolkina, 2020), thus leading to behaviour change. However, any behaviour change is influenced by multiple determinants.

Intervention Mapping (Eldredge et al., 2016) is a framework widely used to develop health promotion and behaviour change interventions (Fernandez, Ruiters, Markham, & Kok, 2019). Grounded in community-based participatory research methods, it provides a systematic process and detailed protocol for effective, step-by-step decision-making for intervention development (Fernandez et al., 2019). The first of six Intervention Mapping steps envisages to establish a detailed understanding of the problem, the population at risk, the behavioural and environmental causes, and the determinants of these behavioural and environmental conditions (Eldredge et al., 2016). Thus, in systematic development of a behaviour change intervention, a needs assessment is the first part of intervention planning and comprises studying of the discrepancy between the current status and one that is more desirable in terms of quality of life, health, behaviour, and environment (Eldredge et al., 2016). Conducting needs analysis helps the researchers articulate and document needed changes and desired outcomes (Fernandez et al., 2019).

Accordingly, the first step in development of an intervention to promote self-care in adult population is to identify how inadequate self-care practices affect individual's quality of life, i.e. what are the risks shaping the problem that needs to be addressed, and to identify factors (determinants) that influence the risk behaviours.

While the benefits of practicing self-care have been extensively researched (e.g. Luis et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2021), little is known about the risks related to inadequate self-care practices and the determinants that may impact practicing self-care. In addition to literature reviewing and engagement of potential users and other stakeholders, exploring experts' perspectives is considered an effective way to study an issue.

The study aimed to explore the experts' perspectives on self-care needs among clinically healthy adults. The following research questions were posed: (1) what are the experts' perspectives on the impact of inadequate self-care practices

on quality of life; (2) what are the experts' perspectives on the determinants for practicing self-care according to one's needs.

Theoretical background

As mentioned above, self-care is understood as engagement in behaviours that support one's health and well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013; Mārtinsone et al., 2022). At the same time, it is acknowledged that its meaning remains unprecise due to the difficulty integrating the diverse definitions developed across disciplines (Martinez, Connelly, Perez, & Calero, 2021).

According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022), self-care is the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker. Thus, in healthcare self-care is understood as an active participation of individuals in taking care of their own health (WHO, 2022) and is an important part of the treatment and/or recovery process. Unlike healthcare, in psychology self-care is applied to different areas of an individual's life and interpreted very broadly. Self-care conceptualizations often include concepts that are not otherwise associated with self-care (e.g. social support, professional development). The relevance of activities to self-care is determined by the purpose of the behavior or activity, i.e. the focus on caring for oneself.

As identified in research, self-care is understood as an ability (Martinez et al., 2021), a behaviour (Lee & Miller, 2013), a process (Dorociak, Rupert, Bryant, & Zahniser, 2017) or a decision-making process (de Maria et al., 2020).

In defining the concept, the preconditions for self-care to be effective are emphasized. The understanding of self-care as the ability to take care of oneself, based on awareness, self-control and self-reliance, in order to achieve, maintain or promote optimal health and well-being (Martinez et al., 2021), points to the cognitive factors needed. In turn, defining self-care as multidimensional, multifaceted process of purposeful engagement in strategies that promote healthy functioning and enhance well-being (Dorociak et al., 2017) stresses the holistic nature of self-care and the conscious behaviour and determination of the individual. Conceptualizations of self-care include not only personal but also professional self-care (e.g. Dorociak et al., 2017; Lee & Miller, 2013).

Every self-care activity and strategy can be rated by the individual as more or less important to him or her. By giving preference to a particular strategy, an individual prioritize it over another strategy (Ozola & Mārtinsone, 2022a) indicating the value of that strategy and its place in his or her hierarchy of values. Thus, self-care can be viewed as a value (Mārtinsone et al., 2022), i.e. a belief in the desirability of a certain self-care behaviour over an opposite one.

Self-care as a value is characterized by its importance. In the context of self-care, the importance can be defined as an assessment or self-assessment of the significance and necessity of a self-care activity or strategy (Fantalova, 1992, 2001; Mārtinsone et al., 2022). Attainability, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which an individual implements an activity or strategy in his or her life and is defined as an assessment or self-assessment of the achievability of a self-care activity or strategy (Fantalova, 1992; 2001; Mārtinsone et al., 2022).

The relationship between importance and attainability may demonstrate a balance or predominance of one or the other indicating their correspondence or differences. It is believed that a discrepancy between importance and attainability gives rise to internal conflict or a state of internal vacuum (Fantalova, 1992; 2001). The state of internal conflict refers to predominance of the importance while the state of internal vacuum is associated with predominance of attainability. By examining a state characterized by the need to achieve internally meaningful values on the one hand, and the possibilities of achieving these values in reality on the other, the existence of internal conflict or internal vacuum can be identified (Fantalova, 2013). In the case of internal conflict, the discrepancy between the two characteristics is also considered to be one of the determinants of motivation while in the case of internal vacuum cause the sense of meaninglessness (Fantalova, 1992).

Despite a particular strategy is assessed as important, it cannot be effective without an appropriate practicing. The interaction of importance and attainability indicates its effectiveness (Mārtinsone et al., 2022). The optimal state to strive for is a balance between importance and attainability, characterized by a harmonious state without the presence of internal conflict (Fantalova, 2013), as the value that is meaningful to the individual is also achievable in a present or future perspective. Internal conflict resulting from the inability to realize one's values for internal or external reasons leads to psychological dissatisfaction (Fantalova, 1992). At the same time, it promotes motivation for life change and encourages the individual to look for ways of how to implement the unrealized values (Mihailova & Perepjolkina, 2020).

Thus, from a perspective of behaviour change, internal conflict can be considered being developmental, but it should be noted that it is also associated with increased tension. Most of behaviour change theories distinguish qualitatively different stages in an individual's journey towards behaviour change (Cheung, Hors-Fraile, & de Vries, 2021).

Intervention Mapping (Eldredge et al., 2016) is a theory- and evidence-based framework for intervention development that emphasizes the importance to initially understand why individuals engage or do not engage in certain behaviours (Kok et al., 2016) and to identify the determinants by conducting preliminary research in scientific sources and surveying the target population (Kok, Peters, & Ruiters, 2017). The determinants will impact the way of how the intervention will

lead to the expected outcome addressing behavioural, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, social and environmental change objectives (Eldredge et al., 2016).

Knowledge is considered being one of the most important determinants in individual's understanding of a problem and its solutions. However, it is rarely sufficient to promote behaviour change. It is recommended to take into account as many determinants as possible (Cheung, Hors-Fraile, & de Vries, 2021). In systematic development of a behaviour change intervention, a needs assessment is the first part of intervention planning and comprises studying of the discrepancy between the current status and one that is more desirable in terms of quality of life, health, behaviour, and environment (Eldredge et al., 2016). Typically, it includes the assessment of behaviour and environmental contributors to health problems or risks (Eldredge et al., 2016) by development of a literature review and/or engagement of key stakeholders like experts and potential users.

Methodology

Data collection. The semi-structured interview plan was developed including the main questions and possible follow-up questions. The participants were also asked to provide commentaries on the determinants of behaviour change identified in the literature (de Vries, 2017) when addressed to the context of self-care.

Participants. Experts (n = 12) representing the fields of arts therapies (n = 8) and health psychology (n = 4) were invited to participate in the study. The following inclusion criteria were specified: (1) a graduate diploma in arts therapies or psychology; (2) experience of practice and/or research in arts therapies or health psychology; (3) experience of practice and/or research with clinically healthy adults.

Procedure. Online expert interviews were carried out and recorded in December 2022 and January 2023. The participants provided informed consent on confidentiality, anonymity and data security in line with research ethics.

Data processing and analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed and further processed applying qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The deductive analysis was used to develop a preliminary categorization matrix incorporating the categories derived from the literature, i.e. risk factors and determinants of behaviour change (Eldredge et al., 2016). The inductive content analysis allowed the identification of concepts extracted from the data. Primary codes were created and consequently combined into subcategories.

Results

To answer the first research question, namely what are the experts' perspectives on the impact of inadequate self-care practices on quality of life, the

statements on risk factors were extracted from interview transcripts. The primary codes were combined into three subcategories (see Table 1).

Table 1 Results of qualitative content analysis identifying the risk factors of inadequate self-care practices on quality of life (created by the authors)

Categories	Primary codes	Examples of statements
Physical health-related risk factors	Exhaustion	“.. namely to prevent burnout, exhaustion and physical health problems”
	physical health problems	
	reduced energy level	“.. causes increased stress levels, psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety, fatigue”
	psychosomatic symptoms	
	Diseases	
	Tiredness	
being physical unhealthy	“.. the threat is being physically, mentally, socially unhealthy”	
deterioration in health		
substance abuse		
<i>Continuation of Table 1</i>		
Categories	Primary codes	Examples of statements
Psychological risk factors	Burnout	“.. may reduce individual’s quality of life, sense of life meaningfulness, vitality and energy”
	deterioration in mental health	
	reduced sense of meaning in life	“.. as a result, burnout, depressive mood, somatic symptoms may develop”
	reduced vitality	
	depressive mood	
	increased stress level	“.. can lead to chronic stress, burnout, loss of balance and psychosomatic diseases”
	chronic stress	
loss of meaning		
Social risks	shrinking living space	“.. gradually narrowing the living space, digging in”
	being socially unhealthy	“.. the difficulty of building relationship, because instead of taking care of oneself, one expects care from others, but often does not receive enough of it and feels disappointed”
	negative impact on relationships with peers	
	difficulties to build relationship	

Risk factors in the subcategory of psychological risks dominated the experts' responses (53 % of statements). Burnout, deterioration in mental health, reduced sense of meaning in life, reduced vitality, depressive mood and stress-related conditions were mentioned.

Almost a third of statements (29 %) were associated with physical health-related risk factors. Exhaustion, physical health problems, reduced energy level, psychosomatic symptoms, diseases, tiredness, deterioration in health and substance abuse were among the mentioned factors.

The subcategory of social risks is relatively less represented (18 % of statements). The mentioned factors relate to building and maintaining relationships.

It was also suggested that “self-care strategies can be both harmful and helpful, and consequently the effects can be both beneficial and enhancing or diminishing in terms of quality of life”. The opinion is in line with findings from other studies (Mehrotra et al., 2017).

In sum, the analysis of experts’ perspectives indicated three subcategories of risk factors affecting quality of life due to inadequate self-care practices: psychological risks, physical health-related risks and social risks. Psychological risk factors predominated.

To answer the second research question, namely what are the experts’ perspectives on the determinants for practicing self-care according to one’s needs, the statements on behaviour change determinants were extracted from interview transcripts. The primary codes were combined into eight subcategories (see Table 2).

Table 2 Results of qualitative content analysis identifying the determinants for practicing self-care (created by the authors)

Categories	Primary codes	Examples of statements
Self-efficacy	willpower positive experience of practicing self-care Success self-efficacy	“.. positive experiences, small successes, are very important when starting to practice self-care...”
Social support	getting support from peers organizing support from others positive experience of getting support role models of peers	“.. and to be able to organize support for yourself (e.g. babysitting while I sing in the choir) from people around me”
Awareness	Awareness ability to be aware of change level of awareness	“.. the necessary behaviours are fostered by awareness of oneself, of one's needs...” “.. the key factors are the level of awareness, self-discipline and free time”
Knowledge	Knowledge Skills Information evaluation of information	“.. the more information a person has about the possibilities of self-care practices, the more likely he is to try to apply something in his daily life”

		“.. to start practicing the necessary behaviour change, you need skills and a simple structure”
Attitude	determination Attitude searching for solutions self-discipline	“.. [it depends on] whether the individual is prone to self-pity, pity and blame others, or to find and apply solutions”
Planning	Structure practice on a daily basis Regularity free time	“.. structure and the purposeful, regular practice of self-care are to strive for” “.. to find a place for this practice of self-care in everyday life”
Perceived cues to action	self-knowledge realistic perception awareness of consequences	“.. understanding the interconnectedness of current behaviour and its consequences”
Motivation	motivation to act	“.. motivation to act”

Experts’ responses related to the subcategory of knowledge predominated (21 % of statements) what is in line with findings from other studies recognizing knowledge as one of the key determinants of behaviour change both contributing to an individual's understanding of a problem and to the acquisition of new skills (Cheung, Hors-Fraile, & de Vries, 2021). The six subcategories mentioned fairly equally (ranging from 11 % to 16 %) were self-efficacy, attitude, perceived cues to action, planning, awareness and social support. Motivation was mentioned as well.

The analysis of experts’ perspectives indicates knowledge, self-efficacy, attitude, perceived cues to action, planning, awareness and social support as the main determinants for practicing self-care according to one’s needs. The importance of knowledge is particularly emphasized.

The limitations of the study arising from the lack of triangulation should be noted. In future research the quantitative exploration of risk factors and determinants of behaviour change is recommended followed by triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. Triangulation of samples should be carried out by engagement of the target population and other key stakeholders.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was achieved. The experts’ perspectives on self-care among clinically healthy adults were explored.

It can be concluded that the impact of inadequate self-care practices on quality of life is determined by psychological, health-related and social risks.

Knowledge, self-efficacy, attitude, perceived cues to action, planning, awareness and social support are the main determinants of self-care practicing according to one’s needs.

The identified items will contribute to evidence-based development of the intervention to promote self-care. Further research is needed to identify perspectives from potential users and other key stakeholders.

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