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Celebrating Women Conference: Promoting Well-being Among Utah Women

Emma Parkhurst, Lisa Schainker, & Naomi Brower

Abstract

The Celebrating Women Conference is an annual Utah State University (USU) Extension event designed to increase Utah women's knowledge of health and well-being. It also provides opportunities for social connection, serves as an inspiration for a positive lifestyle change, and cultivates new skills for women to thrive in life.

Introduction

Mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression often disproportionately affect women (World Health Organization, n.d.). Mental health among Utah women is a concern as Utah consistently ranks higher than the national average for depression (Utah Department of Health, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of overall wellness that includes the ability to manage stress and contribute to one's community (2014). Wellness encompasses physical, environmental, social, emotional, and financial well-being (SAMHSA, 2017). It also includes the cultivation of skills such as problem-solving, coping, positivity, maintaining balance, and social connection (Roscoe, 2009). Efforts to increase awareness of mental health issues and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health are essential. Doing so may strengthen the positive impact women have on their families, their communities, and ultimately the state (Utah Women and Leadership Project, 2017).

Response & Target Audience

In response to the need for mental health awareness and wellness resources specifically for women, Utah State University (USU) Extension formed a committee of female faculty from the Home and Community department with expertise in mental health and other aspects of wellness to plan the Celebrating Women Conference (CWC). The purpose of the CWC is to provide women with an opportunity to enhance their wellness while fostering a connection with one another. The educational content utilized by CWC was designed to address various areas of wellness and cultivate balance to promote optimal mental health.

The CWC was adapted to an online format in 2020 due to COVID-19 and has remained virtual to meet the needs of women across the state, especially in underserved rural areas. The CWC team improves the program each year based on feedback from conference attendees. In 2021, the virtual event featured nine (9) live webinars presented by experts that addressed various aspects of wellness (e.g., financial, social, emotional). The webinar presentations were followed by the keynote presentation. Attendees who joined the live event selected one of three parallel presentations during each of the three 45-minute sessions throughout the morning. Each session was recorded and attendees received access to all recorded presentations as well as pre-recorded webinars. Many community partners were involved and provided in-kind donations that were given to randomly selected participants who completed the evaluation.

The primary audience of the CWC is all adult women in Utah. It was promoted across the state through social media, email lists, and local newspapers and news sites. In 2021, there were 139 total registered participants representing 13 counties across Utah, ranging from Box Elder in the north, to Washington in the south. Of the total number of registered participants, there were 7 participants from six other states (AZ, CA, WA, OK, TX, and ID).

Outcomes and Impact

All participants were asked to complete an evaluation survey after the event. In total, 42 women completed the evaluation survey ($n = 42$). On average, respondents were 46 years old and primarily White (94%), with 3% being African American, and 3% not reporting their race. Almost all the respondents (97%) reported that their knowledge of overall health and wellness improved because they participated in the conference. Specifically, almost all the respondents reported that their knowledge improved after the conference on the following topic areas: healthy ways to manage stress (90%), caring for their body in a positive way (87%), and creating a positive outlook (87%). In addition, 90% of the respondents reported they were “likely” or “very likely” to make a positive change in their lives after the conference. A follow-up question asked, “What changes do you plan to make as a result of the information you have learned?” Responses were coded into 13 unique themes; the top five themes and example responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Planned Changes of Participants after the CWC

Theme	Example Response
Self-Awareness and Mindfulness	“Being more mindful and aware in my everyday life”
Stress and Overwhelm Management	“Practice ways to remove stress from my life”
Eating	“Make better eating choices”
Growth Mindset	“Finding a growth mindset more often”
Focusing on the Positive and Reframing Thoughts	“To once again focus more on the positive”

In addition to knowledge improvements and positive intentions, some participants shared their experiences. One participant said they planned to “better network with other women and step into a space where there were more female voices”. Another said they were “inspired to make positive changes in my life.” Lastly, a participant revealed the importance of self-care, writing “I am a priority.”

Public Value & Next steps

The most common themes identified by participants were self-awareness and mindfulness, stress and overwhelm management, growth mindset, and focusing on the positive and reframing thoughts. These themes are all directly related to mental health. Many of the themes are also related to resilience-building, which is the ability to adapt to difficult situations. Evaluation results suggest that CWC attendees benefitted through increases in knowledge and skills related to creating and maintaining well-being, which is known to be connected to positive mental

health. Events such as these are critical to supporting healthy individuals and ultimately healthy communities (Utah Women and Leadership Project, 2017).

The CWC team at USU Extension plans to develop innovative strategies to expand their reach to more Utah counties and additional states. They plan to collaborate with other USU Extension programs that focus on mental health, such as rural mental health initiatives, to ensure that women living in underserved rural communities can benefit from this critical information.

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