

FROM STUDENTS

Evolving Perspectives on College Mental Health



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In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and much deeper understanding of the mental health epidemic and how it has profoundly impacted college students. Being a college student means facing academic pressures, social transitions, career stress, and many other stressors that present themselves in daily life. With the rising rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout, institutions are carefully reevaluating how they support students' general well-being and mental health. New advances include the recognition that good mental health is crucial to college success, and ensuring that the proper mental health tools are available to students has become a focus point at many universities. The use of these resources is something that is strongly encouraged, and there have been positive implications for the future of the college mental health community.

Campus communities are full of many cohorts, ranging from student-athletes to international students. While mental health struggles are prominent in each of these groups, student-athletes tend to find themselves with their unique struggles. A study conducted by Philip Sullivan et al used the Dual Continua Model (DCM) to understand the implications of mental health versus mental illness in student-athletes. The DCM implies that mental health and mental illness are not the same, but work separately on a spectrum of overall wellness. Using self-report methods, participants (345 Canadian student-athletes) responded to a variety of surveys and assessments regarding their current mental states. Sullivan's findings revealed that mental health and mental illness do not always go hand in hand. Athletes who demonstrated high mental health and low symptoms of mental illness were more resilient and less lonely. In contrast, those who had lower mental health and higher levels of illness demonstrated less productive coping skills and greater loneliness. These findings have very important implications for universities and how they go about their mental health programs. Many institutions focus on traditional services, which target decreasing symptoms. However, these findings suggest that it is just as important for these programs to focus on overall well-being. There should be more holistic and multifaceted approaches to mental health treatment at these universities, which aims to help students build emotional strength, coping skills, and even social bonds. (Sullivan et al, 2025)

When combating mental health struggles, many approaches have positive connotations for individuals. One of these approaches is physical exercise and physical movement. In a study conducted by Yanying Liu, she explored how physical exercise influences college students' mental health, focusing on the mediating roles of social-emotional competence and peer relationships. The researchers instructed participants (around 1,300 college students in China) to fill out surveys regarding their participation in physical activity, their social-emotional competency, their peer relationships, and their mental health. What the researchers found was that not only does physical exercise directly enhance mental health, but it also fosters the development of other skills such as social skills and emotional competence. With this in mind, physical exercise also led to improved peer relationships, which in hand led to greater support systems and greater mental well-being overall. The results of the study can be described as a "chain mediating effect", which means that as physical exercise improved social competence and emotional wellness, it then also led to an overall improvement in mental health. These findings highlight the importance of promoting physical exercise in college, not only for its physical benefits but also for the cognitive benefits that come along with it. This ties back to the idea that taking a holistic approach is fundamental to the success of this initiative, rather than just focusing on symptom reduction. (Liu et al, 2024)

While universities may provide programs and materials necessary for mental health improvement, the key piece to improvement is that students take advantage of these provided resources. No progress can be made if resources are avoided. In a study conducted by Erica Yuen et al, she explored how likely students are to utilize means of treatment. The researchers directed participants (270 undergraduate students), to either search for anxiety coping strategies or use Google Maps for a navigational task. What the results showed was that those who performed a search regarding coping strategies, demonstrated increased mental health literacy, including greater optimism about psychotherapy, and a reduction in certain types of stigma. In turn, the results also showed that the students were less likely to seek out professional help for themselves than they were to recommend help to a friend or family member. This study illustrated the idea that the internet plays a key role in shaping ideas and opinions surrounding mental health. While online resources can enhance understanding and reduce stigma, they may also unintentionally discourage personal help-seeking, possibly due to increased confidence in self-help strategies or concerns about stigma. When it comes to college students, it suggests that not only should university online resources provide accurate information, but they should also guide students with the knowledge of when it is appropriate to seek professional help. Using digital resources for mental health education could empower students to make informed decisions about seeking support, and balancing self-help with professional intervention. (Yuen et al, 2024)

Altogether, these studies can highlight the importance of a multifaceted approach to college mental health. During some of the most crucial years of development, a fine-tuned focus on college students can make or break the up and coming generations. These studies suggest that mental health programs should not focus solely on symptom reduction, but should focus on emotional, physical, and social aspects of mental health as well. Colleges must continue to move beyond the traditional approach to mental health and should invest focus in the changing nature of the epidemic. As awareness continues to grow, so does the potential for meaningful, lasting change in how student mental health is understood, supported, and prioritized. It's time for institutions to treat student mental health as a core priority, not a side initiative. The future depends on how boldly and effectively we choose to act today.

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Yuen, E. K., Gangi, C. E., Barakat, K., & Harrison, F. (2025). College students' utilization of the Internet to search for mental health information: Effects on mental health literacy, stigma, and help-seeking. *Journal of American College Health*, 73(3), 961-971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2024.2404948>