

To improve students' mental health, study finds, teach them to breathe

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Justin Sung '22 practices a breathing exercise. Credit: Yale University

When college students learn specific techniques for managing stress and anxiety, their well-being improves across a range of measures and leads to better mental health, a new Yale study finds.

The research team evaluated three classroom-based wellness training

programs that incorporate breathing and emotional intelligence strategies, finding that two led to improvements in aspects of well-being. The most effective program led to improvements in six areas, including depression and social connectedness.

The researchers, who reported findings in the July 15 edition of *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, said such resiliency training programs could be a [valuable tool](#) for addressing the [mental health](#) crisis on university campuses.

"In addition to [academic skills](#), we need to teach students how to live a balanced life," said Emma Seppälä, lead author and faculty director of the Women's Leadership Program at Yale School of Management. "Student mental health has been on the decline over the last 10 years, and with the pandemic and racial tensions, things have only gotten worse."

Researchers at the Yale Child Study Center and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI) conducted the study, which tested three skill-building training programs on 135 undergraduate subjects for eight weeks (30 hours total), and measured results against those of a non-intervention control group.

They found that a training program called SKY Campus Happiness, developed by the Art of Living Foundation, which relies on a breathing technique called SKY Breath Meditation, yoga postures, social connection, and service activities, was most beneficial. Following the SKY sessions, students reported improvements in six areas of well-being: depression, stress, mental health, mindfulness, positive affect, and social connectedness.

A second program called Foundations of Emotional Intelligence, developed by the YCEI, resulted in one improvement: greater mindfulness—the ability for students to be present and enjoy the

moment.

A third program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, which relies heavily on mindfulness techniques, resulted in no reported improvements.

In all, 135 Yale undergraduate students participated in the study.

Across college campuses, there has been a significant rise in [student](#) depression, anxiety, and demand for mental health services. From 2009 to 2014, students seeking treatment from campus counseling centers rose by 30%, though enrollment increased by just 6% on average. Fifty-seven percent of counseling center directors indicated that their resources are insufficient to meet students' needs.

The researchers say resiliency training tools can address the overburdening of campus counseling centers directly. In the sessions, "Students learn tools they can use for the rest of their lives to continue to improve and maintain their mental health," said co-first author Christina Bradley '16 B.S., currently a Ph.D. student at University of Michigan.

Researchers administered the training sessions in person, but the courses can also be taken remotely.

"Continually adding staff to counseling and psychiatric services to meet demand is not financially sustainable—and universities are realizing this," Seppälä said. "Evidence-based resiliency programs can help students help themselves."

Davornne Lindo '22 B.A., a member of the Yale track team who participated in the SKY Campus Happiness program, said practicing breathing techniques helped her to manage stress from both academics and athletics. "Now that I have these techniques to help me, I would say

that my mentality is a lot healthier," Lindo said. "I can devote time to studying and not melting down. Races have gone better. Times are dropping."

Another participant in the SKY program, Anna Wilkinson '22 B.A., said she was not familiar with the positive benefits of breathing exercises before the training, but now uses the technique regularly. "I didn't realize how much of it was physiology, how you control the things inside you with breathing," Wilkinson said. "I come out of breathing and meditation as a happier, more balanced person, which is something I did not expect at all."

More information: Emma M. Seppälä et al. Promoting Mental Health and Psychological Thriving in University Students: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Three Well-Being Interventions, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsy.2020.00590](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00590)

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