

Just breathe: Mindfulness may help freshman stress less and smile more

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Credit: Wikipedia

Mindfulness training may be one way to help students successfully transition to college life, according to Penn State researchers.

The first semester of college is a time of great transition for many students—they often are living away from home for the first time, have

a much more fluid schedule than in high school and are potentially surrounded by a new peer group. For all of these reasons and more, this can be an incredibly stressful time in a [student's](#) life.

To help ease this transition, researchers offered an eight-session [mindfulness](#) training program to first-year students at Penn State, according to Kamila Dvorakova, a doctoral Compassion and Caring fellow in the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center and lead author of the study. In [mindfulness meditation](#), practitioners learn how to develop an accepting, nonjudgmental and kind attitude toward present moment thoughts and feelings, according to the researchers, who presented their findings in a recent issue of the *Journal of American College Health*.

At the end of the eight sessions, the intervention was associated with significant increases in the students' life satisfaction, as well as a significant decrease in depression and anxiety, when compared to students who did not participate in the training. There was also an overall drop in alcohol use between the students who took part in the [mindfulness program](#) and the control group.

"We offered an experiential, practice-oriented training," said Dvorakova. "Rather than telling the students what to do, we had them explore and talk about how to be mindful in their daily lives and discover the benefits for themselves. We found that underneath the stress that students are experiencing is a deep desire to appreciate life and feel meaningful connections with other people. It is our responsibility as educators to create academic environments that nurture both students' minds and hearts."

Dvorakova and Mark Agrusti, mindfulness and meditation integration specialist, Prevention Research Center, adapted the existing Learning to BREATHE program—originally developed for adolescents by Patricia

C. Broderick, research associate, Prevention Research Center—for college students and called it Just BREATHE. The teachings in the eight sessions were themed around the BREATHE acronym: body, reflections, emotions (or awareness), attention, tenderness (or self-compassion), healthy habits and empowerment.

"The beginning of the college career presents such a unique opportunity—all of these students are going through this same transition at the same time," said Agrusti. "These freshmen are beginning to acquire habits and perceptions that will shape their lives as students and adults, so it's a perfect time for them to discover practices, such as mindfulness, stress management, self-care and emotional literacy skills."

Fifty-two undergraduate students participated in the intervention, with another 53 serving as a control. The program included self-awareness practices, emotion-regulation skills and simple mindfulness techniques to help students manage [stressful situations](#), the researchers said. The participants were also given cards and stickers for home practice to serve as reminders to use mindfulness techniques when they encounter stressful situations.

The students indicated that the three most effective in-class exercises were three mindful breaths, breath awareness and mindfulness of emotions. A total of 98 percent of the participants would recommend the program to friends and classmates.

According to the researchers, future studies might include adding more participants, scheduling long-term follow-ups and integrating mindfulness with academic lessons.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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