

# Student-run mental health education efforts may improve college mental health climate

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Getting college students to engage with peer-run organizations that focus on mental health awareness can improve college students' knowledge about mental health, reduce stigma and may play an important role in improving the campus climate toward mental health, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

The study, which involved 1,129 students from 12 California [college](#) campuses, is the largest longitudinal study examining the impact of a [student mental health](#) peer organization on students' mental health stigma, knowledge and helping behaviors.

Researchers found that students' familiarity with Active Minds, one such student mental health peer organization, was linked to a decrease in stigma about [mental health issues](#) over time, while involvement with the program was associated with an increase in helping behaviors. The study was published online by the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

"Student-run organizations aimed at teaching peers about mental health issues may be instrumental in shaping a more-supportive climate toward mental health issues on college campuses over the course of a single academic year," said Dr. Bradley D. Stein, the study's corresponding author and a senior physician scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization.

Recent studies estimate that 20 percent to 36 percent of college students

cope with some form of serious psychological distress, yet only about a third of these students receive services despite the fact they often have access to on-[campus](#) help.

Many student peer organizations on college campuses actively work to educate students about mental health issues and are designed to reduce the stigma often associated with seeking help for emotional or psychological problems. This is important as students with mental health problems are more likely to receive needed services if they feel the climate on their college campus is more positive with respect to mental health.

Active Minds is the oldest national nonprofit organization encouraging students to speak openly about mental health, with more than 400 student-run chapters on college and high school campuses across the United States.

With funding from a special state tax intended to improve [mental health services](#), the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) has provided support for Active Minds chapters on college and university campuses across the state.

"College is a challenging time in the lives of the state's young adults so it's important to make sure students' mental health needs are adequately addressed," said Wayne Clark, executive director of CalMHSA. "We're pleased that the investment by counties statewide in these peer-run programs are improving students' views about mental health and their coping skills."

To assess the impact of the Active Minds programs on the California campuses, RAND researchers surveyed 1,129 students from 12 campuses that have Active Minds chapters. Students surveyed included both those who were involved with Active Minds and those with little or

no knowledge of the organization.

Students completed surveys three times over the 2016-17 academic year, and were asked about their familiarity with Active Minds and their knowledge of and attitudes toward a number of mental health issues. More than 60 percent of the students surveyed had little familiarity or involvement with the Active Minds program at the study's onset.

Researchers found that increased familiarity and involvement with Active Minds was associated with increases in perceived knowledge about mental health and decreases in stigma about mental health over time. These changes were seen even among students with no direct involvement with Active Minds.

Students who became more involved with the organization were more likely over time to provide emotional support to peers and connect someone with mental health struggles to professional help.

Researchers say the findings suggest that student peer organizations that use a combination of individual, small-group and large-scale education programs can meaningfully influence not only students' perceived knowledge and attitudes, but also their behaviors within a single academic year.

"It appears that involvement in the types of activities conducted by Active Minds may translate into positive changes for many students," said Lisa Sontag-Padilla, the study's lead author and a behavioral social scientist at RAND. "Further research should examine what types of activities trigger the biggest changes, as well as to what extent involvement increases a student's own mental [health](#) and their ability to seek help."

Provided by RAND Corporation

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