

Mindfulness techniques help teens reduce stress related to COVID-19

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Credit: Colorado State University

Researchers at Colorado State University have found that teens who practice mindfulness techniques show fewer signs of stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic than those who do not.

Although the impacts of COVID-19 vary among individuals and families and are not yet fully understood, past research shows that stressful life experiences can damage [mental health](#), especially for teenagers and [college students](#). During adolescence, individuals are more susceptible to stressful experiences because of dynamic changes occurring in their social worlds, brains and bodies. Most mental health disorders begin during adolescence, making it important to understand how an event like the COVID-19 pandemic affects teenagers and college students, and what they are doing to cope.

"Teens who are more mindful report [better health](#) and less stress than other teens, but we don't know the extent to which mindfulness helps teens cope with stressful events as disruptive and unique as a pandemic," said Rachel Lucas-Thompson, an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

A group of CSU researchers studied the mental health and mindfulness practices of participants in Campus Connections, a mentoring program that pairs college students at CSU with at-risk youth in the community. They surveyed participants at the beginning of the Spring semester as a baseline, not knowing that a pandemic was just around the corner.

When COVID-19 caused schools and universities to begin remote learning, the researchers pivoted their focus to look at the effects of the pandemic, using an online tool to survey 40 college student mentors and 33 of their teen mentees in June and July.

Impact of mindfulness

Among other things, the research team assessed the effect of mindfulness exercises that participants learned as part of Campus Connections. These techniques include breathing exercises and focusing on the present.

Participants also answered questions about their well-being, how COVID-19 has affected their lives, their exposure to [media coverage](#) about the pandemic as well as to what extent they were internalizing (for example, exhibiting anxiety and depression) or externalizing (displaying anger or acting out) their COVID-related stress.

The project was led by Ph.D. student Reagan Miller with her co-advisors, Lucas-Thompson and Associate Professor Lauren Shomaker, all in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies. Miller received a College of Health and Human Sciences Dean's Fellowship for 2020-21, which will support her continued work on the project. In addition, the study was funded with a grant from the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station, supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

Before the pandemic prompted the university to switch to remote learning in March, the mentors and mentees in Campus Connections had four sessions using "[Learning 2 Breathe](#)," a mindfulness intervention for adolescents. Miller said preliminary survey results showed that the mentees who reported using mindfulness techniques also reported fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder due to the pandemic. The researchers also found that overall, neither the mentors nor mentees showed signs of mental health decline as a result of COVID-19.

Arguments, stress and media

When asked if they were arguing with their parents about social distancing guidelines, 60% of the mentees and 74% of the mentors said rarely or never.

"That was very surprising to me, but that's a good thing," Miller said.

"Previous research by our team and others has shown how detrimental

fighting with parents is for teens' mental and physical health, and their academic success," Lucas-Thompson added.

On average, both groups said they were moderately stressed by COVID-19. About 24% of the mentees and 21% of the mentors said that they sometimes worried that their families were in financial danger because of COVID-19. Approximately 23% of mentees and 33% of the college students said that they were sometimes anxious or fearful because of COVID-19.

Among the mentees, 75% reported spending less than an hour a day listening to or reading media coverage about COVID-19, while that figure was 46% among the mentors.

"It's encouraging that a majority of Fort Collins teens and nearly half of CSU college students in this study were reporting low frequency of media exposure to COVID-19," Shomaker said. "Being informed is good, but excessive or repetitive access to media coverage of the pandemic can be anxiety-provoking and unhelpful, especially for young people."

Other findings

Among the college students, lower scores on surveys that measured "acting with mindful awareness" and greater problems with sleep disturbance were associated with higher COVID-19 stress. Around 19% of the mentees and 34% of the mentors said they had someone they care about contract COVID-19. Only one respondent, a mentee, had contracted COVID-19.

When researchers asked both groups what they were doing to feel less stress around the [pandemic](#), about half reported using mindfulness techniques.

"Overall, these initial findings suggest that by helping teenagers to cultivate and practice mindfulness," Miller said, "they may feel more capable of coping with the impacts of COVID-19, as well as other chronic stressors."

Provided by Colorado State University

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