

The college student in a pandemic: Findings show strategies to support, improve mental health critical to wellbeing

December 22 2020



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A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)*, published by Elsevier, reports that in a group of first-year university students COVID-19 mitigation protocols, including

remote learning and stay-at-home orders had a modest, but persistent, impact on mood and wellness behaviors. Students enrolled in the university's wellness program, however, had improved mood levels and fewer attention problems.

"Like other college and university students, those in our study were displaced from their dorms and peer groups-required to leave campus immediately-and expected to continue their academic work as usual remotely," said lead author William Copeland, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont's Larner College of Medicine, Burlington, VT, U.S..

Principal investigator and senior author, Jim Hudziak, MD, Professor and Director of Child Psychiatry and the Wellness Environment program at the University of Vermont said: "These data emerged as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic from a longitudinal five-year study to test the impact of a novel curricular, residential and digital programs to promote wellbeing and prevent negative outcomes among [college students](#). Our goal was to test the impact of the pandemic on the mood and wellness behaviors in the participants of that study."

The findings are based on surveys conducted during the Spring 2020 semester at the University of Vermont.

As part of a larger study, a sample of 675 first-year [university students](#) had already completed a full battery of measures assessing student health and wellbeing at the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in the study also completed nightly surveys on mood and wellness behaviors throughout the spring semester. Of these students, 576 completed the same battery of measures at the end of the spring semester, 600 completed at least one item from a COVID-19-related survey implemented in late March, and 485 completed nightly surveys of mood and wellness behaviors both before

(and after) the onset of the COVID-19 crisis.

The pre- and post-battery tests and nightly assessment results were complementary, but not all students had similar experiences. On the battery, students displayed increased levels of both behavior and attention problems from the start of the semester-pre-COVID-19-to the end of the semester. According to Prof. Copeland, the greater the perceived personal disruption by the pandemic, the greater the impact. The researchers also found that students enrolled in UVM's Wellness Environment program had improved mood levels and fewer attention problems compared to the non-Wellness Environment students. On the nightly survey, students reported lower levels of mood and wellness behaviors (e.g., exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, sleep) following the onset of COVID-19. The researchers noted that these changes occurred immediately and persisted across the rest of the spring semester.

First-year college students are believed to be more at risk for several reasons, including the poorly regulated risk-taking and emotional functioning, typical of late adolescent neurodevelopment. The UVM Wellness Environment program, which is designed to support students in the transition to college and encourage students to make healthier decisions, features educational and residential components and has an expectation that students commit to a substance-free environment. The study's authors hypothesized that students in this program may display fewer adverse effects of the COVID-19-related disruptions.

"We suggest that colleges and universities track students' emotional health and develop specific protocols to support mental health for those that struggle. This study also suggests that [wellness](#) programs like UVM's may increase [social support](#) and support [student](#) resilience in the face of ongoing disruptions from college life," concluded Prof. Copeland.

More information: William E. Copeland et al, Impact of COVID-19

Pandemic on College Student Mental Health and Wellness, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.466](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.466)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: The college student in a pandemic: Findings show strategies to support, improve mental health critical to wellbeing (2020, December 22) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-college-student-pandemic-strategies-mental.html>

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