

Science of Happiness course gives students conclusive mental health boost, study finds

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A university course aimed at teaching students how to improve their mental health has a discernable increase in mental wellbeing, new research reveals.

The University of Bristol's Science of Happiness course is the first of its kind in the UK. It uses the latest peer-reviewed studies in psychology and neuroscience to educate students about what is scientifically proven to make us happier.

The course was launched in 2018 in response to a worrying increase in [student mental health](#) problems across the UK. Based on the most successful course in the history of Yale University, the Science of Happiness sought to combine cutting-edge research with practical advice for students.

[In a recent survey](#) of UK students nearly half said they were currently experiencing mental health issues.

Any student can enroll on the Science of Happiness, the only Bristol University course that gives credits toward a student's degree but does not involve any exams or coursework. Instead, students gain credit for their engagement in weekly activities and "happiness hubs" led by senior student mentors and complete a final group project.

Now, a new paper has concluded that the course really works.

It showed that three cohorts of students ended the course with markedly better mental health than control groups.

Professor Bruce Hood, who runs the course and co-authored the paper, said: "I knew the students would enjoy the lectures as the content is so fascinating, but I was truly astounded to discover the [positive impact](#) on their mental well-being.

"Initially, I thought all the benefits of the course would be washed away by the stress of the pandemic and the lack of social interaction. This definitely happened to other students, but those who took the online

version of the course still benefitted even though the lectures and happiness hubs were virtual.

"This study proves that learning about happiness can improve your mental well-being."

Many previous studies on psychoeducation—an umbrella term from courses like the Science of Happiness—lacked a proper control group or surveyed only a small number of students.

Nearly 1,000 University of Bristol students have taken the Science of Happiness course.

Over three months, they are taught what studies show us about our own brains, proving some things we might always have suspected and overturning myths that hold us back from happiness.

Surprising take aways from the course include:

- Talking to strangers makes us happier, despite a majority of us shying away from such encounters
- Social media is not bad for everyone, but it can be bad for those who focus on their reputation
- Loneliness impacts on our health by impairing our immune systems
- Optimism increases life expectancy
- Giving gifts to others activates our own reward centers in the brain—often providing more of a happiness boost than spending money on yourself
- Sleep deprivation impacts on how well we are liked by others
- Walking in the countryside deactivates part of the brain related to negative ruminations, which are associated with depression
- Kindness and happiness are correlated

Sarah Purdy, the University of Bristol's Pro Vice Chancellor for Student Experience, said: "Offering students a course that was not examined or graded was a new approach for us.

"It was a recognition that equipping students with the skills they need to stay mentally resilient is at least as important as giving them the knowledge they need for their future careers.

"It's hugely gratifying to see that this approach has worked. Not only are students feeling better while at university, but they will take what they have learned with them on the next step in their journeys.

"In addition to preventative approaches like the Science of Happiness, over the past five years the University has transformed its wellbeing services and now offers a wide array of services including counseling, self-help resources, face-to-face specialist support, therapeutic groups, online support communities and several student-led groups."

The paper, "Benefits of a psychoeducational [happiness](#) course on university student mental well-being both before and during a COVID-19 lockdown," was published last week.

The authors Bruce Hood, Sarah Jelbert and Laurie R Santos tested whether a psychoeducational course improved well-being in three cohorts.

- Study 1 found significantly higher mental well-being in first year undergraduates who took the course compared to a waiting-list control.
- Study 2 revealed that students taking the course when COVID-19 restrictions began did not experience increases in mental well-being but had significantly higher well-being than a third matched group.

- Study 3, an online course, increased mental well-being in University students and staff during a COVID-19 lockdown. These findings support the claim that psychoeducational courses are beneficial in both live and online formats and in times of collective uncertainty.

More information: Bruce Hood et al. Benefits of a psychoeducational happiness course on university student mental well-being both before and during a COVID-19 lockdown, *Health Psychology Open* (2021). DOI: [10.1177/2055102921999291](https://doi.org/10.1177/2055102921999291)

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