

Anxiety, depression, burnout rising as college students prepare to return to campus

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Ohio State chief wellness officer Bernadette Melnyk led a survey that found depression, anxiety and burnout levels are on the rise among students as they prepare to return to campus. Credit: The Ohio State University's Office of the Chief Wellness Officer

A new "return to campus" survey led by The Ohio State University's Office of the Chief Wellness Officer finds rising rates of anxiety, depression, burnout and the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms among students navigating through a year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to other data on college students throughout the U.S.

Ohio State conducted surveys in August 2020 and April 2021 of randomly-selected students to assess changes in [mental health](#), coping strategies, healthy lifestyle behaviors and needs over time. Among the 1,072 Ohio State students who responded:

Students who screened positive for **anxiety**:

- August 2020: 39%
- April 2021: 42.6%

Students who screened positive for **depression**:

- August 2020: 24.1%
- April 2021: 28.3%

Students who screened positive for **burnout**:

- August 2020: 40%
- April 2021: 71%

Coping methods self-identified by students:

- Eating more unhealthy food rose from 25% to 29%
- Use of alcohol rose from 15.5% to 18%
- Use of tobacco/vaping rose from 6% to 8%
- "Increased physical activity" dropped from 35% to 28%

Students seeing a mental health counselor increased from 13% to 22%

"Mental health promotion and access to services and evidence-based programs are going to be more important than ever," said Bernadette Melnyk, vice president for [health promotion](#), chief wellness officer and dean of the College of Nursing at Ohio State. "Two-thirds of students who are no longer in college are not in college due to a mental health issue. We would not send divers into a deep ocean without an oxygen tank. How can we send our students throughout life without giving them the resiliency, cognitive-behavioral skills and coping mechanisms that we know are protective against mental health disorders and chronic disease?"

In that spirit, Melnyk and colleagues at The Ohio State University and the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center are using the findings to expand resources and integrate them into curricula and campus life. Melnyk and Melissa Shivers, who serves as senior [vice president](#) of the Office of Student Life at Ohio State, are co-chairing a [new mental health commission](#) created by university president Kristina Johnson. The commission will promote and protect the mental health and well-being of students as they return to campus, including enhancing and sustaining a caring and wellness culture that will benefit the entire university community.

The work includes the creation of a new ["Five to Thrive" mental health checklist](#) for all [college students](#) to use as they prepare to return to their campuses:

- 1. Establish health habits that work for you:** Schedule stress reduction, physical activity and healthy eating like you schedule classes and homework time.
- 2. Build resiliency and coping skills:** Practice deep breathing,

mindfulness, gratitude and flipping negative thoughts with positive ones.

3. Find local mental health support: Explore your school's resources and locate/connect with counseling services, a primary care provider and pharmacy.

4. Grow and maintain support systems: Get involved in campus life, meet new people and connect with positive people in your life.

5. Don't wait to get help: Seek professional help immediately if your symptoms or emotions are affecting concentration or functioning.



Mary Trabue speaks with a counselor at The Ohio State University. After struggling with the stress and anxiety of the pandemic and virtual learning, Mary has learned healthy coping mechanisms that help when she's feeling overwhelmed. Credit: The Ohio State University's Office of the Chief Wellness Officer

"Students who were dealing the best in terms of their emotional outcomes were connecting with family and friends, building their resiliency and engaged in [physical activity](#)," Melnyk said. "So as students are welcomed back to campus this fall, these five steps are so critically important to both fortify a foundation of mental resiliency and make self-care and mental well-being a priority. It's actually a strength to recognize when you need mental health help; it's not a weakness."

Provided by Ohio State University's Office of the Chief Wellness Officer

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