

# College is even more stressful for girls: Study

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(HealthDay)—Even before COVID-19, college could be a challenging experience, but a new study suggests those stresses are much higher for female students.

Still, in the face of a continuing pandemic, all students may need interventions to develop healthy coping strategies, the study authors said.

"They're balancing work, classes, relationships and family—and then now you're throwing COVID on top of that," said study author B. Sue Graves, an associate professor in Florida Atlantic University's department of exercise science and [health promotion](#), in Boca Raton. "Our study was before COVID, but they were stressed enough with those other issues."

For the study, the researchers surveyed students who were registered for one of a few different health and wellness classes: yoga; Pilates; and a class in which students learned about weight management, handling [stress](#), exercise and other components of healthy living.

The investigators compared men and women under age 30, looking at their [levels of stress](#) and their coping mechanisms for those stresses.

"Having COVID on top of all this just really is taking their coping mechanisms to another degree, in my opinion, but that's an observation. Of course, I don't have any specific data for that," Graves said. "I thought they were stressed enough in a normal situation."

Who suffers the most? The study found that female students had higher levels of stress than their male peers did.

According to the report, women used four coping strategies to deal with stress: self-distraction; emotional support; instrumental support; and venting. Some of those coping strategies are effective and some less so. Women are also blaming themselves and others for their stress, the findings showed.

Just over 34% of undergraduate college students said the top impediment

to learning was their stress, according to the Spring 2019 Health Assessment by the American College of Health Association cited in the study.

The [stressful environment](#) makes college students vulnerable to mental health problems, including [anxiety](#), depression, self-harm and suicidality, the researchers added.

Past research by others has uncovered different results, Graves noted, suggesting that may be due in part to when the studies were done, such as at the beginning of a term versus close to finals time, which is when this study was conducted.

The latest findings suggest that more universities should address stress and coping with it for incoming students, especially freshmen and sophomores.

"The fortunate thing is many universities do have really good health services and support services, but some of the students don't use them and I think sometimes we might need to do a little bit better job getting that [information] out," Graves said. "If students can locate those and find them, I think sometimes that helps them take that next step."

The findings were published online Aug. 12 in the journal [PLOS ONE](#).

Jeffrey Arnett, a research professor in the department of psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., takes a different approach to the idea of reducing stress and anxiety among college students, though he notes that past studies have often found that women and girls of all ages do experience higher levels of stress and anxiety.

"My thinking lately is that we're thinking of stress and anxiety in the wrong way. We always assume, as this article seems to assume, that

stress and anxiety are bad and the less of it you have the better, but I don't really think that's true," said Arnett, who was not involved in this study. "I think stress and anxiety can be healthy to a certain extent."

Arnett suggested that stress and anxiety can be a motivator, inspiring a person to study more for a test they're feeling anxious about.

"Some people do experience stress and anxiety to a point where it is debilitating. It's overwhelming. They feel bad. They feel like they can't handle it all. That's obviously not good," Arnett said.

In that case, some positive ways to reduce anxiety can be talking to a friend or loved one and exercising, he said. Arnett suggested there is a sweet spot to anxiety, somewhere between feeling motivated and feeling overwhelmed.

"I think it's different for different people, but I think when it interferes with your activities, instead of motivates your activities, then it's past that sweet spot," Arnett said.

**More information:** Purdue University in Indiana offers [stress-handling tips for students](#).

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