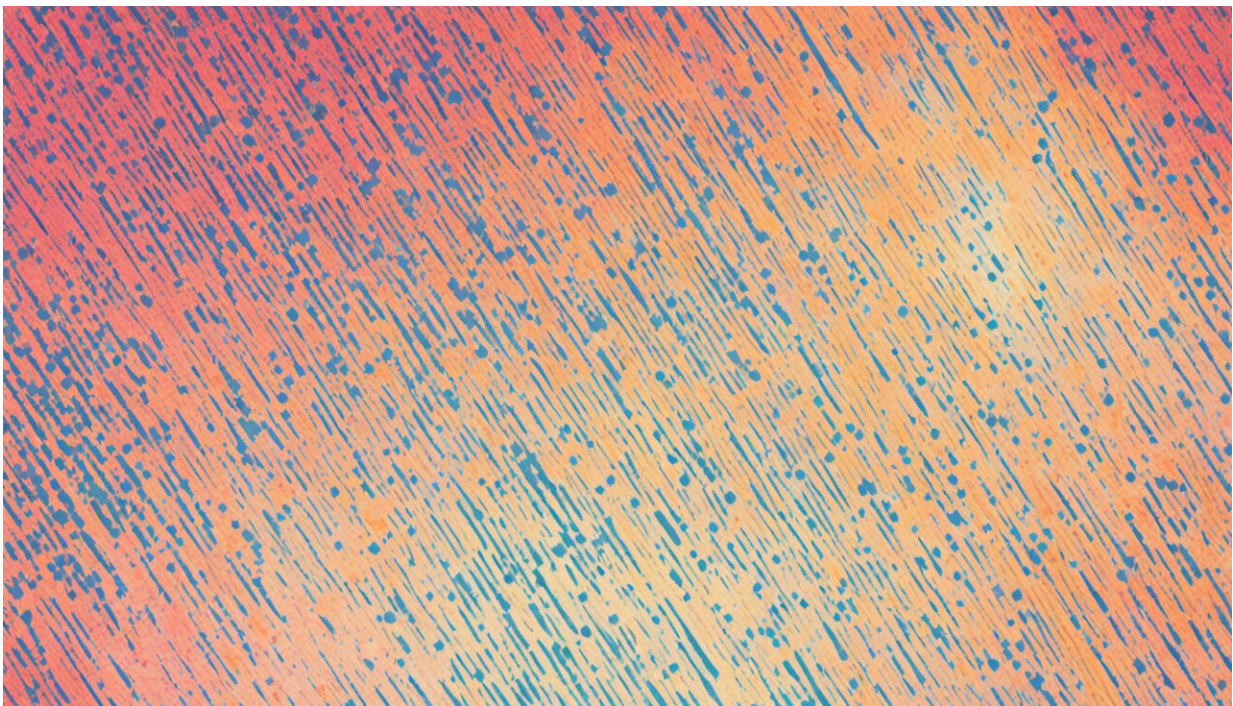


Amid COVID-19 stressors, international students and universities should prioritize mental health supports

December 23 2021, by Ezgi Ozyonum, Qiyang Zhang



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

After experiencing weeks or months of excitement building up before you left your home for the thrill of a North American education, you might now be feeling vulnerable in a foreign country, especially with news of [the new omicron variant](#).

You may feel lonely and wondering what to do during this holiday as your friends are spending time with their families, a luxury you may not have due to [complicated international travel restrictions](#). In addition, as some campus and university services have been restricted due to COVID-19 and many will be on holiday hours, you may face isolation which can evoke emotional memories and hardships.

So, here we [are, Ezgi and Qiyang](#), two international students. Our research expertise is respectively in critical analyses of international education, and student well-being and school-based [mental health](#) intervention. We study at Concordia University in Montreal (Ezgi) and at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (Qiyang). We offer suggestions to you—and your communities—on how to better support your mental health and wellness.

Managing elevated pandemic stressors

On top of the obstacles you have probably faced, such as [adjusting to the drastic change of food, weather, language and culture](#), the pandemic has [disconnected you socially](#), [applied severe economic pressure on you](#) and [made immigrating much more challenging](#).

Additionally, if you are an Asian international student, you have likely been coping with [the stressors of elevated racial discrimination](#). Research in the U.S. shows this discrimination in the pandemic has included hate crimes and vicarious discrimination (seeing or hearing about hate crimes and discrimination and worrying about them), and that these experiences are associated with poorer self-reported mental and physical health. In Canada, researchers similarly documented a [surge of COVID-19 anti-Asian racism; hate crimes targeting East or Southeast Asian](#) descent people rose by 301 percent in 2020.

Studying under these circumstances is challenging. Therefore, we

consider your psychological, social, and emotional well-being as we write this holiday letter to you.

Mental health stigma

We care about you, not only because of the obstacles you face, but also because of the lack of help-seeking behaviors among international students. [Almost half](#) of the international students in the U.S. and Canada come from India and China. Researchers with the China-India Mental Health Alliance have found [that people often associate mental health counseling with negative connotations](#) in these countries. [Social stigma](#) can burden you heavily, especially when we consider that your host institutions may be unaware of these cultural barriers.

Therefore, mental health may not be a topic you have previously been encouraged to reflect on. Maybe you've been told to keep your head down and just get good grades. Or perhaps you think that it is only you who is struggling, and everyone else has it together.

Peer-support groups

Have you previously tried peer support groups? These groups provide [informational and emotional support](#) and expand your network. While socializing with your peers, you can [reduce a sense of alienation, improve your self-esteem and have feelings of empowerment.](#)

For example, [Concordia University offers various student groups](#), including the Canadian Asian society, that help students with [essential skills for building strong professional communities](#). There are also [peer wellness ambassadors](#) trained in active listening and providing peer support. Search for your institution's social support opportunities to get involved and benefit.

Combating systemic racism and cultural biases

Experiencing discrimination could undermine both mental and physical health. You are likely frustrated by injustices and would like to take action against racism. It is necessary to combat anti-Asian racism and other [systemic problems on and off-campus](#).

Princeton University [began offering a workshop during new first-year student orientations on its racist history and the power of student activism](#). We advise you to keep your eyes open for similar workshops.

Participating in unconscious bias [workshops is essential to empower us to become agents for change, equipped with concrete tools](#). The most effective training does more than help students become aware of their own biases in a new environment, but also to build stronger networks with other students concerned with bias, discrimination or systemic racism from intersectional perspectives.

Although we encourage you to find these workshops, your institutions may not offer or tailor them to your needs. We suggest seeking ways to have your own racial justice task force and build bridges with fellow students [engaged in countering systemic racism](#). Raise your voice and share [your perspective while learning from others, broadening your vision and widening your social network](#). This engagement is essential.

Culturally responsive counseling services

It is OK not to be OK. University counseling services are available to help. Please do not worry about privacy issues, as all conversations will remain confidential. We encourage you to try at least one session, especially if you have doubts.

Having said this, we know that mental health and [student support campus programs tailored to specific communities are critical](#). Research proposes that one reason for [Asian Americans' under-use of mental health services is existing services aren't culturally competent](#). [Peer leaders may help you navigate](#) what culturally relevant services are available at your campus.

Some universities have counselors and therapists who are proficient in foreign languages or have international backgrounds. For example, Tufts University's counseling and mental [health team hires a culturally sensitive generalist clinician who is bilingual in English and Mandarin and has expertise in counseling international students on life transitions, cultural adaptation and racial dilemmas](#).

We worry about your well-being and encourage you to take steps to take care of yourselves. For students, this might mean stepping forward to ask for help or pinpoint what social supports, engagement and institutional supports you need, or sharing this article with your peers, communities and institutions so that they can become aware of your needs and support you better.

For people in university communities, it might mean making an extra effort to reach out to international students on or off campus they know over the holidays. In the longer term, what's critical is prioritizing hiring counselors of diverse backgrounds, providing more social chances for international students to bond and organizing workshops to discuss [international students'](#) needs and concerns.

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