

Science of Happiness students beat lockdown blues

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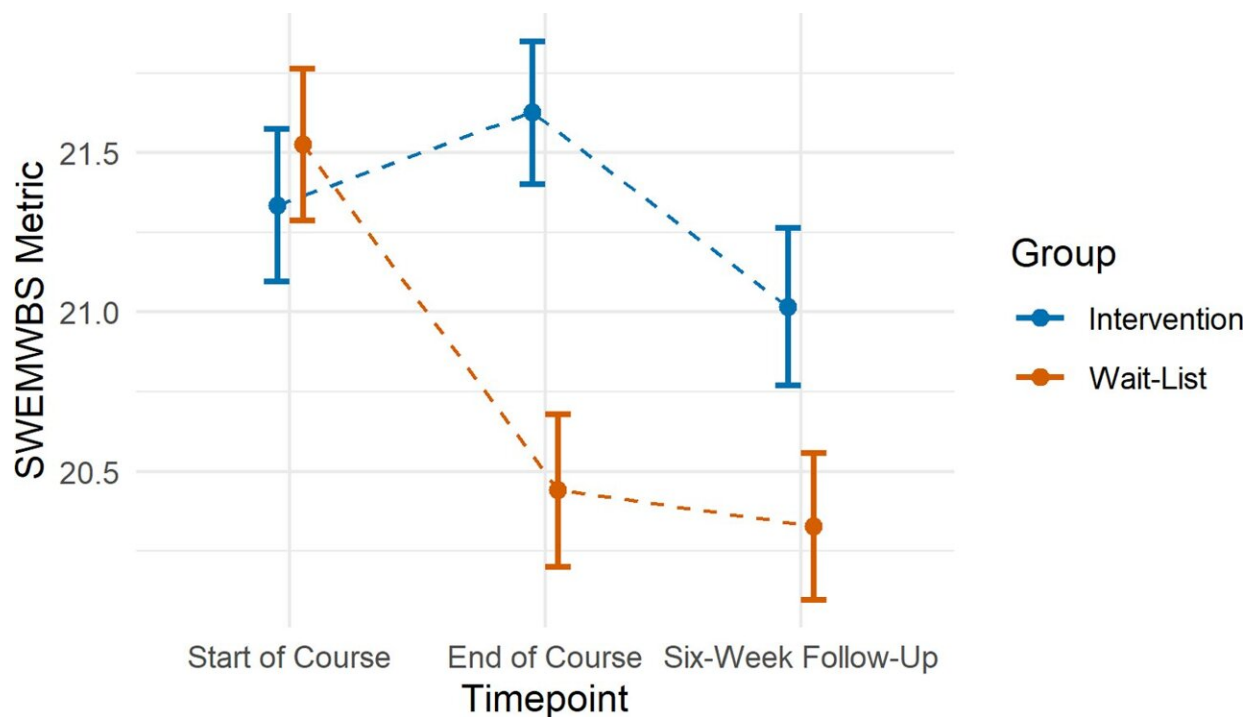


Fig 1. Mean SWEMWBS scores according to timepoint in the intervention and wait-list comparison groups. Error bars represent standard errors. Credit: DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0263514](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0263514)

Students who took the University of Bristol's Science of Happiness course during the pandemic reported markedly better mental health than students not on the course.

Meanwhile, the course was delivered wholly online, opening up the possibility that it could be offered to thousands more students each semester.

Bristol's Science of Happiness course is the first of its kind in the UK and the only course at the University that gives credits toward a student's degree but does not involve any exams or coursework.

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 U.K.

Professor Bruce Hood heads up the course and is behind a new study, published today (Feb 16) in the journal *PLOS One*, that looked at the experiences of Bristol students who took the 11 week course compared to those who did not.

It found that the 166 participants maintained their mental wellbeing over the semester (Oct 2020–Feb 2021) compared to the [control group](#).

The control group, along with many other people around the world feeling the effects of lockdown, showed a significant decline in wellbeing and increase in anxiety during the same period.

Professor Hood said: "Psychoeducational courses like the Science of Happiness have been shown to benefit students. However, what was less clear is how it would help students during a pandemic that not only affected nearly everyone's mental health, but also meant they had to study for it online.

"The results were a welcome sign that the course is achieving its aims. It was also pleasing to see it working with all content and interactions conducted online.

"The fact that benefits were replicated with a wholly online version, provides support for expanding the provision of such courses to reach larger populations where in-person lecturing is problematic. We believe that provision of such a course should be part of the educational experience for all students."

A previous study by Bruce and his team, released March 2021, found that three cohorts of students ended the course with markedly better mental health than control groups.

Izzy Bond took the course while a psychology undergraduate and went on to become a course mentor, facilitating seminars with around 10 students. She is now doing a psychology masters and has plans to take on a research Ph.D.

She said: "I was curious about a course that involved no examinations and was purely for your own benefit. I did it twice, once before and once during the pandemic, and really enjoyed it both times.

"As a mentor I'd help students understand the course content and we'd chat through the studies and do more informal things, like go for walks.

"One of the things that really stood out from the course is when we did a quiz which ranked what we felt were our strengths and weaknesses. Studies have shown that those who do jobs that match their strengths have higher [life satisfaction](#)—all of my strengths suggested I would enjoy being an academic, which really confirmed my decision to pursue becoming a lecturer."

Nearly 1,200 Bristol students have now taken the Science of Happiness course and it has been turned into a successful BBC podcast, the Happiness Half Hour.

Professor Sarah Purdy, pro-vice chancellor for [student](#) experience at the University of Bristol, said: "This evidence is really important in developing our understanding of the benefits of psychoeducational courses on mental health.

"It's clear that Professor Hood and his team are offering something that is engaging, educational and genuinely effective for improving mental health—and it has become an important piece in our support package for our students.

"Dr. Hood's work raises interesting possibilities about widening the scope of the Science of Happiness course and we are working with him to realize those."

The Science of Happiness course is based on the most successful course in the history of Yale University. It has since become a free online course with nearly 4 million enrollees.

Surprising findings from the Science of Happiness 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.

More information: Catherine Hobbs et al, Evaluation of a credit-bearing online administered happiness course on undergraduates' mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0263514](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0263514)

Provided by University of Bristol

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