

Study shows combining joyful activities with 'savoring' therapy shows positive mental health results among young people

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With rates of depression rising among young people on university campuses, a team of SMU researchers found that combining two

different therapeutic approaches demonstrated effectiveness in improving students' overall mental health. Their findings show that students receiving behavioral activation (BA) therapy augmented with savoring (S) experienced improvements in positive and negative mood.

Behavioral activation is a therapeutic approach that alleviates depression by increasing engagement in meaningful activities, while savoring focuses on increasing one's capacity to savor enjoyable experiences. The research team found favorable results in their participants who used the combination of approaches when compared to another group using emotional awareness (EA), which requires the participants to observe, monitor and reflect upon their positive and negative moods.

The study, [published](#) in the journal *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, involved 60 students who were experiencing a lack of joy or enthusiasm (known as low positive affect or anhedonia). Researchers sought to see if using combined BA + S therapy compared to EA aided participants in achieving positive emotions (or high positive affect). Students participated in two online therapy sessions and completed daily mood surveys on their cell phones.

Those receiving BA + S were asked to choose enjoyable activities from a list and plan to do them daily. They were also given guidance on how to savor those activities and remember what they enjoyed about them.

After carrying out the activities, participants discussed how doing the activities and savoring made them feel and were encouraged to focus on the positive aspects. Students reported feeling happier each day of the study and were also given ways to use BA + S methods in the future, to possibly continue experiencing positive effect.

Those receiving EA were encouraged to notice their feelings and to think about them, both good and bad. The students reported no positive affect

improvements.

"Behavioral activation has been around for decades and used to treat depression," said Alicia E Meuret, director of the Anxiety and Depression Research Center at SMU and the senior author.

"What's new is the focus on improving positivity instead of reducing negative feedings. Adding savoring, further pushes people to pay attention to what is in these enjoyable activities that make them feel better. The activity then becomes more salient in their memory and makes it easier for them to feel anticipatory reward or excitement."

Depression in [university students](#) is associated with decreased [academic performance](#), a greater likelihood of dropping out and a decrease in quality of life. Additionally, accessing mental health treatments on many college campuses can be challenging due to [limited resources](#), growing waitlists, session limits and the need for outside referrals. One of the benefits of using online BA + S therapy is its ease of accessibility compared to in-person therapy.

"BA + S could help students feel better as a stand-alone strategy or while they wait for traditional treatment," said lead author Divya Kumar, who earned her doctorate in [clinical psychology](#) under Meuret at SMU and is now a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard/McLean Hospital.

"Because there are challenges in accessibility to [mental health care](#), finding ways to provide brief and online [therapy](#) interventions continues to gain momentum, especially if those methods are targeting positive emotions as well as negative ones."

Additional research team members include SMU doctoral student Sarah Corner and data scientist Richard Kim.

More information: Divya Kumar et al, A randomized controlled trial of brief behavioral activation plus savoring for positive affect dysregulation in university students, *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.brat.2024.104525](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2024.104525)

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