

# Training teens to handle emotions improves mental health

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Teens who received emotional intelligence training in school had improved scores on several measures of emotional well-being, including less anxiety, depression and social stress, according to a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Improvements from the training lasted up to six months after the program ended.

Emotional intelligence, or EI, refers to the ability to accurately appraise, express and regulate emotion. “The ability to handle emotions is essential for one’s physical and psychological well-being,” said study lead author Desiree Ruiz-Aranda. In addition, adolescents who are healthier mentally are healthier physically and may engage in fewer risky behaviors.

“Emotional abilities need to begin as early as possible and preventive

interventions should ideally be provided prior to developing significant symptoms,” said Ruiz-Aranda.

The study examined about 300 Spanish students who participated in 24 one-hour training sessions during a two-year period. Teens in the study group participated in games, role-playing, art and discussion designed to promote the recognition of emotions in different contexts and to build empathy and emotional problem solving. When compared with a control group, these teens had lower measures of [depression](#), [social stress](#), and other negative feelings, even up to six months later.

Successful programs need to be catered to individual cultures and ages and be applied to everyday settings, Ruiz-Aranda said.

Schools have not done well in preparing students for life with things such as [emotional](#) intelligence training, said Gary Low, Ph.D., professor emeritus of education at Texas A&M University in Kingsville. He added that schools often don’t help students learn to cope with fears, stresses, relationships and other areas of life.

“We just hope that people learn that as they grow older, and I think we’ve not paid attention to developing a curriculum that would really help young people experience more success in life,” he said.

**More information:** Ruiz-Aranda, D., et al. (2012). Short- and midterm effects of emotional intelligence training on adolescent mental health. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. [doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.02.003](#).

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