A 2020 FOCUS ON THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL WELL-BEING OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A CSCH Brief by Emily A. Iovino, PhD, Jannell Brown, Alyssa Bunyea, Breanna McFarlane, Angel Ojide, Hannah Perry, Daniel Schwartzman, Cyrus Smith, and Sandra M. Chafouleas, PhD[1]

The year 2020 has brought extraordinary and unprecedented challenges for students at all levels that are undeniable. Social isolation, fear associated with COVID-19, concerns about systemic racism, navigation of remote learning, and attempting to balance multiple roles (e.g., student, employee, family member, friend) has put a lot on our plates. Because well-being is a primary focus for our CSCH research team, we decided it was important to reflect on our *own* social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.

For 2020 World Mental Health Day, our CSCH research team is sharing our experiences and thoughts about the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of college students. Our team ranges from first semester college freshmen to graduate students; we come from very different backgrounds and have had widely different experiences. Our hope is that sharing our challenges can help normalize what other students might be experiencing, and that our strategies might be helpful to someone else as we navigate this uneven terrain.

Overall Successes and Challenges

Our first 2020 focus was on summarizing overall well-being, identifying challenges and strategies for success:

Overall Well-Being	
Challenges	**Successes**
- Atmosphere of fear constantly present in social interactions - Physical distancing (by choice or by necessity) limits opportunity to meaningfully engage with others - Balancing getting work done - Mood swings, less motivation - Feeling overwhelmed with schoolwork - Difficulty falling asleep, waking up later	- Positive relationships with others/ meaningful social connections - Safely going out with friends - Emotional awareness, discussing feelings with others - Avoiding or limiting risk behavior - Staying active, spending time outside - Time management

Next, we did a deeper dive into different domains of well-being: social (how we connect), emotional (how we feel), and behavioral (what we do). Although about half of our team indicated that we were moderately successful in each domain, there was variability within each person across the specific well-being domain (social, emotional, behavioral). As a group, we struggled most with emotional well-being.

UCONN

Social Well-Being

➢ *Social well-being refers to how we interact (e.g., positive relationships with others, meaningful social connections).*

Challenges in supporting social well-being included **feeling isolated from others during COVID-19** as a result of recommendations and guidelines to stay safe.

Our team shared that they engaged in strategies to support their social well-being such as **connecting regularly with friends and family** (e.g., using social media, Zoom and other video chat services, Online video games, Netflix Party, setting up weekly discussions about different topics with others who share similar beliefs or experiences) and **engaging in other hobbies** (e.g., reading, watching TV, video games) when having to socially isolate.

> *"It is challenging to isolate and not socialize with others. It is especially difficult when you see videos of other people partying and ignoring CDC suggestions. Every day ends up being very similar and that routine begins to bother me."*

Emotional Well-Being

➢ *Emotional well-being refers to how we feel (e.g., positive coping strategies to deal with negative emotions, general sense of life satisfaction).*

Challenges in supporting emotional well-being included **barriers to taking time off from school/work** (e.g., resistance from employers/professors, 'Type A' personality), and **barriers to engaging in self-care**.

Strategies our team uses to support their emotional well-being include **spending time with others, exercise** (e.g., YouTube workout videos), **meditation/relaxation exercises, engaging in their spirituality, watching TV, getting enough sleep, and spending time outside**.

> *"It is difficult to get out of the house. I have many assignments and find that I am working often, with little time for self-care."*

> *"Strategies I have found to be effective are stepping away from my school work for a moment, taking a breath, and thinking about what I'm feeling in the moment."*

Behavioral Well-Being

➢ *Behavioral well-being refers to how we act (e.g., actions we engage in that support your health, avoiding risk behaviors).*

Challenges our team faces in supporting behavioral well-being include managing time effectively, lack of motivation to be productive, procrastination, and generally staying on top of responsibilities.

Our team engages in strategies to support their behavioral well-being that include **exercising at home, using a planner/calendar to manage activities, staying on top of email/deadlines, creating to-do lists, and using technology to assist with self-management** (e.g., myHomework app, changing phone settings to prevent use of certain applications at night).

> *"I would say that my lifestyle has certainly changed as a result of the pandemic. I wake up later and have less motivation than ever before to focus on school work."*

> *"I try to be as active as I feel like I can be. I go out every day whether to get food or just to take a walk outside. I don't participate in any risky behaviors."*

Desired Well-Being Networks and Supports

Our team also talked about the ideal networks and resources to help support the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students:

- Mental health services at school with same day delivery
- Opportunities to engage with peers with similar experiences (e.g., school-wide events, emotional support groups that are less formal)
- Internet-based supports or chatrooms where people struggling with loneliness
- Self-care integrated into educational activities (e.g., an assignment to implement a behavioral intervention for oneself)
- Virtual fitness classes provided by university
- Free nutrition classes
- A program like AlcoholEdu for incoming students could also incorporate casual drug use

Additional Resources to Support Well-Being

5 Things College Students Should Include in a Plan for their Wellness
Written by CSCH Director Sandra M. Chafouleas, this article addresses steps to help college students create a personal wellness plan.

Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic as a College Student
A University of Michigan Department of Psychiatry resource for college students to help cope with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coping with Stress During COVID-19
Guidance from the CDC around coping with stress during pandemic in a healthy way.

Mental Health in College: A Student's Guide to Recognizing Disorders, Seeking Help, and Promoting Wellness
An Affordable Colleges Online guide for helping college students learn about mental health disorders and how to get support.

If you or someone you know is showing warning sides of serious risk, reach out for immediate help. Connect to your local counseling and mental health center or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

[1] This brief was created by the first author with support from the last author, with contributions from our research team (members listed in alphabetical order).