

College students are now slightly less likely to experience severe depression, research shows – but the mental health crisis is far from over

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Some schools have started experimenting with preventive strategies to promote the mental health of their student body.

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Many high school seniors across the country are in the throes of college applications – often a high-stakes, anxiety-ridden process.

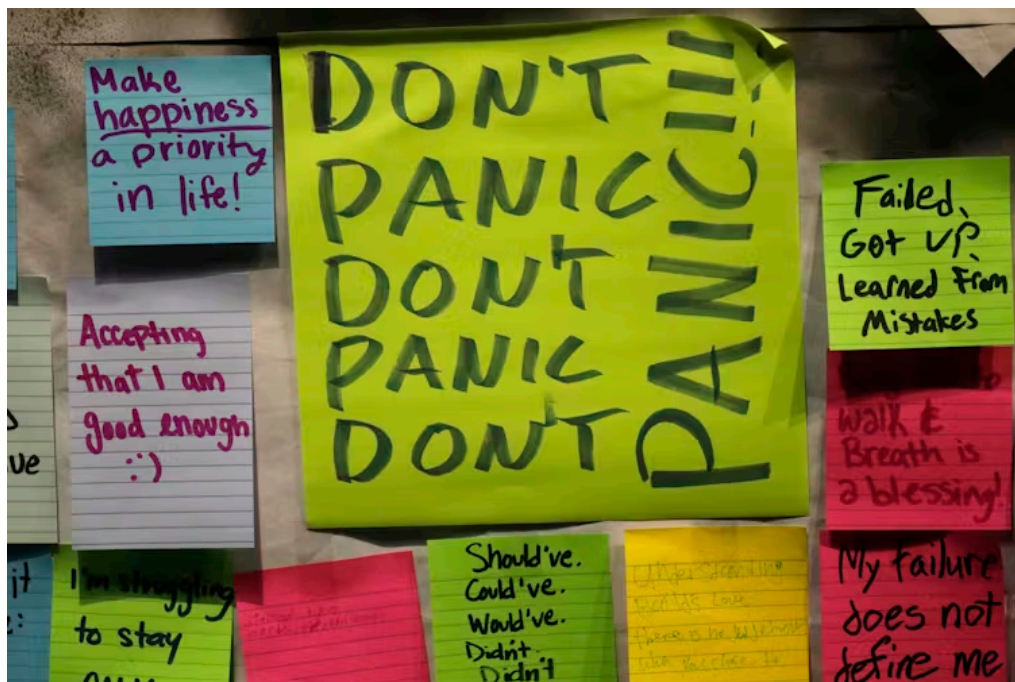
But the stress doesn't necessarily stop once students are admitted.

Emotional stress, mental health and tuition cost are the top three reasons that college students drop out, according to a 2023 Gallup poll of 14,032 students.

By most standards, there is a mental health crisis among college students. But the University of Michigan's healthy minds survey, the country's largest student mental health study to date, recently found that college students are reporting lower rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety and suicidal thoughts for the third year in a row.

Conducted in 2024 and 2025 and surveying more than 84,000 students across 135 American colleges and universities, the study finds that severe depression symptoms among college students dropped in the past two years to 18% – down from 23% who said they experienced severe depression in 2022. Students who have suicidal thoughts dropped from 15% in 2022 to 11% during 2024 and 2025.

I have worked in student affairs and college health for the past 25 years, leading substance abuse prevention and mental health promotion efforts, and overseeing a range of clinical services. Despite these recent optimistic findings, I'm still alarmed by the prevalence and acuity of students' mental health concerns nationwide.



Students' emotional well-being in college has carryover effects into their academic performance, and whether or not they stay in school.

Rick Bowmer/Associated Press

Taking a break

College students experience high levels of stress due to a confluence of factors, including academic pressures, financial concerns and complex social dynamics. Understanding the root causes of students' stress is an important precursor for schools to come up with effective ways to help students manage their anxiety and succeed in school.

But even when schools offer extensive mental health support programs, students occasionally need to take a break to focus on their health and well-being.

Over the past 10 years, I have reviewed and approved medical withdrawals for 133 students at Babson College. From fall 2015 to early spring 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, an average of 12 students per year left on medical leave out of the nearly 4,000 students enrolled at the school.

The average number of students taking medical leave then increased by about two people a year from fall 2020 through 2025. Approximately 82% of these cases are mental health-related.

Roughly 70% of these students ultimately return to campus and eventually graduate. In general, very few students who take a leave of absence from school end up returning.

However, there are some schools that use proactive, nondisciplinary policies to support students taking a break to pursue more intensive treatment. These policies can provide clear treatment recommendations and instructions on what conditions students need to be met in order to return to school, resulting in a higher likelihood of the students enrolling once again.

Understanding well-being

Well-being is a word that is top of mind for many higher education leaders, yet colleges and universities do not have a single definition of what well-being means, though it is often a term schools use to talk about students' mental health. Well-being generally encompasses acknowledging and being comfortable with your feelings, and being equipped to manage stress.

While there is movement toward embedding student mental health and well-being into the very fabric of an institution, many colleges and universities still rely on reaching students in more traditional ways – through health fairs and information tables in the student center, for example.

While these strategies certainly serve a purpose in helping to raise awareness of mental health resources, when used in isolation, they are unlikely to result in actual behavioral change among students.

Students of color, particularly Black and Latino students, are more likely than white students to temporarily withdraw from college.

One step institutions can take: Hire more faculty, staff and mental health counselors who are people of color and can better connect with minority students through shared lived experiences.

Well-being is central to students' success

In 2007, an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech University shot and killed 32 people, and wounded 17 others, before he died by suicide.

Schools since then have adopted early alert systems – often referred to as care teams – to help identify students who are struggling, either academically, socially or emotionally. The idea is that schools can intervene and get students connected with campus resources such as academic advisers, student success coaches, accessibility services, financial aid and mental health support.

Ongoing training for faculty, staff and students on how to activate these systems of support and make referrals to a care team is critical to their success. The goal is to cast a wide net so students do not fall through the cracks and go unnoticed when they are not mentally well, which is what happened with the Virginia Tech shooter.

Dozens of campuses, including New York University, Indiana State University, the University of North Dakota, The Ohio State University and Harvard University, have also embraced mindfulness practices in recent years, offering breath work and other forms of meditation for their students as free services on campus.

Some campus police departments have also begun using therapy dogs to help support students' mental health and bolster community engagement.

Other schools, like Stevens Institute of Technology and Princeton University, have stopped keeping labs and libraries open 24/7 as a way to encourage students to take a break and rest – though admittedly most institutions that have made these changes have done so as a result of budget cuts, and less so as a proactive, preventive measure.

Positioning students for success

I have long argued that well-being is central to academic, personal and professional success.

In recent years, I have also encouraged schools to position well-being as the key driver to student academic, personal and professional success.

Research has linked students' well-being to them staying in school, and findings suggest that colleges can develop targeted mental health programs to improve retention rates. In other words, focusing on the health and well-being of students may, in fact, lead to better outcomes – emotionally, physically and academically.

Ryan Travia received funding from the American College Health Foundation for serving as lead author and researcher for a series of papers on framing and measuring well-being from 2019-2022.

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