

# Three Timely Tools for Promoting First-Year Student Success During & After COVID-19: Positive Psychology, Mindfulness, & Self-Compassion

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More than one-half of college students today report experiencing emotional distress and their distress rates have been increasing throughout the past decade. The COVID-19 crisis is further elevating students' stress levels by increasing their sense of social isolation and restricting their access to usual sources of social and emotional support. These developments underscore the need for universities to enhance students' emotional preparedness via campus-initiated outreach programs that deliver mental health and wellness education to incoming students. A growing body of scholarship points to the efficacy of three self-regulatory tools students can use to bolster their emotional and psychosocial capacity to thrive in college: (1) positive psychology, (2) mindfulness, and (3) self-compassion. The extensive body of research cited in this article strongly suggests that these tools can alleviate the growing mental health challenge on university campuses. If these practices are combined into an integrated tool set and delivered to students via engaging, interactive educational modules that are experienced by most or all of the entering class, they have the potential to exert a systemic and synergistic effect on student' emotional wellbeing and university success—during COVID and beyond.

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The current mental health crisis on college campuses underscores the need for greater attention to students' emotional wellness. More than half of college students today report experiencing emotional distress (ACHA-NCHA, 2017) and their distress rates are trending upward (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019). Compounding these mental health challenges is the current COVID-19 crisis, which national surveys indicate is elevating students' stress level (Active Minds, 2020), lowering their access to social support, and increasing their sense of social isolation (*PLOS One*, 2019). The confluence of these developments calls for a more inclusive view of college preparedness that devotes greater attention to addressing students' *emotional* preparedness.

Campus counseling centers often lack the capacity to accommodate the number of students seeking help with emotional challenges and there are many students who do not initiate contact with counseling services for emotional challenges due to stigmas associated with seeking help for mental health (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer,

2012). Students from minority racial and ethnic groups, in particular, exhibit low rates of help-seeking for emotional challenges (Cheng, Kwan, & Sevig, 2013)—a particularly disturbing finding given that a disproportionate number of these underrepresented students comprise the growing number of first-generation college students—whose stress levels are likely to be exacerbated by lower levels of academic preparedness, less college knowledge and social capital, and limited fiscal resources. Thus, reactive “passive programming” approaches to promoting emotional wellness that require students to initiate contact with personal counselors for help with mental health issues need to be augmented by campus-initiated outreach programs that deliver emotional wellness education to students proactively. Such early outreach would not only provide preventative support for students who may be at risk for attrition due to mental health problems; it would also promote the success of students in the “murky middle” whose levels of academic performance are compromised by less-than-optimal levels of emotional wellness—that is to say, students who are languishing in college, not flourishing or thriving in college (Schreiner, 2015).

A substantial and growing body of research points to the potential of three self-regulatory tools that students may use to enhance their emotional and psychosocial capacity to thrive in college: (1) positive psychology, (2) mindfulness, and (3) self-compassion. This article defines and describes these tools, summarizes research supporting their respective effectiveness, and concludes with a discussion of how these tools may be delivered to first-year students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology involves the practical application of psychological research on human flourishing and optimal functioning to help humans lead more engaging, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. The overarching aim of positive psychology is to enhance the growth and development of the “whole person” (Miller, 2015) through systematic study of positive human traits or attributes—such as strengths, virtues, empathy, and civility (Positive Psychology Center, 2020).

Optimal emotional well-being cannot be attained solely by managing negative emotions like anxiety and depression; it requires attention to and development of positive emotions (Ivetzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2015)—such as: optimism, contentment, vitality, joy, happiness, gratitude, self-acceptance, strength recognition, experiencing feelings of accomplishment, excellence and “flow”, finding meaning and purpose in life, and developing personal character (Compton & Hoffman, 2020). Studies show that experiencing positive emotions act as a buffer against depression and other negative emotions by lowering their level of intensity and duration (Fredrickson, 2003). These findings highlight the importance of augmenting reactive therapeutic programs designed to “treat” students’ emotional distress with proactive psychoeducational programs that fortify students’ capacity to experience positive emotions.

Postsecondary scholars have called for incorporating positive psychology into new-student orientation programs (Louis & Schreiner, 2012) and peer leadership programs (Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, & Lopez, 2009). Schreiner (2015) argues further that infusing the principles of positive psychology into the college curriculum (e.g., via first-year seminars) is the most effective and efficient way to equip college students with the non-cognitive (holistic) skills they need to initially engage in college and continually thrive in college.

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness has been defined as purposeful, nonjudgmental attentiveness to the present moment in oneself

and in the external world; it is a state of receptive awareness to whatever arises as it arises (Siegel, 2007)—without evaluating it or trying to alter it (Compton & Hoffman, 2020)—and bringing one’s attention back to the present moment when it wanders from it (Dreyfus, 2011). Mindfulness Training (MT) involves intentional practice in the art of detecting distraction (e.g., “Where did I go? I was supposed to be paying attention to my breath”). MT strengthens one’s ability to give undivided attention to the task at hand (Gunaratana, 2019), particularly if the task requires deep concentration or may not seem interesting (Tart, 1994). Experimental research demonstrates that MT helps people to: (a) maintain their focus of attention to the task at hand (Chan & Woollacott, 2007), (b) reduce “mind wandering” during tasks that require close attention (Mrazek, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2012), and (c) sustain attention on tasks over an extended period of time (Lutz et al., 2009). Brain imaging studies also reveal that MT increases neurological activity and connectivity in areas of the brain associated with focused attention (Tang & Posner, 2015).

College students who have experienced MT report that it “helps them ‘get more out of’ their academic work because they learn how to ‘bring the mind back’ when a professor is lecturing or other students are talking” (Grace, 2011, p. 241). Research on first-year college students indicates that mindfulness practice facilitates their adjustment to college (Ramler, Tennison, Lynch, & Murphy, 2016)—even after controlling for such factors as self-efficacy and social support (Mettler, Carsley, Joly, & Heath, 2019). Other studies indicate that college students with higher levels of mindfulness experience lower levels of anxiety in response to academic stressors and use less defensive, more effective coping strategies (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). Even just a 15-minute, focused-breathing mindfulness exercise has been found to lower feelings of stress and lessen emotional reactivity to stressful stimuli (Arch & Craske, 2006).

### **Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion is the capacity to forgive, encourage, and motivate oneself when struggling with feelings of personal failure or inadequacy. It involves “turning directly toward one’s suffering and embracing it with feelings of kind, connected presence ... in a way that enhances well-being, resilience, and coping with difficult thoughts and emotions” (Neff & Davidson, 2016, p. 38). Consistent with the practice of mindfulness, self-compassion also focuses on being present and non-judgmental, but goes further to underscore the importance of being especially present and mindful of negative experience, and mindfulness builds on positive psychology’s emphasis on the power of experiencing positive emotions by emphasizing that experiencing negative emotions compassionately is equally powerful.

In a major meta-analysis involving multiple studies, it was found that higher levels of self-compassion were associated with higher overall levels of mental health and fewer feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (Barnard & Curry, 2011). These findings have been reported for all age groups, including adolescents and young adults (Ferrari et al., 2018). In a study of college students experiencing symptoms of PTSD, students with higher levels of self-compassion had less severe post-traumatic symptoms and were better able to face negative feelings triggered by the traumatic event (Neff, 2011).

Self-compassion training has also been found to reduce chronic academic stress among college students (Zhang, Luo, Che, & Duan, 2016). Even brief self-compassion interventions have been helpful in reducing college students’ feelings of depression and increasing their feelings of optimism, happiness, and self-efficacy (Smeets et al., 2014). Research also indicates that undergraduate students with higher levels of self-compassion: (a) are less likely to report feelings of homesickness during their first term in college (Terry, Leary, & Mehta,

2012), (b) experience fewer social adjustment issues throughout their time in college (Kyeong, 2013), (c) exhibit lower levels of procrastination (Sirois, 2014), and (d) demonstrate higher levels of resilience—namely, they are more likely to respond constructively to academic and personal setbacks (Neely et al., 2009), maintain self-motivation and sense of competency, and perceive mistakes as learning opportunities (Neff, Hseih, & Dejitterat, 2005).

### Conclusion

Research cited in this article strongly suggests that equipping students with the practices of positive psychology, mindfulness, and self-compassion is an effective strategy for alleviating the growing mental health challenge on college campuses. If combined, these three practices are likely to have a synergistic effect on students' emotional wellness and college success.

If there is a silver lining in the current COVID-19 cloud, it may be that it attracts greater attention to addressing students' social and emotional needs. The increased use of online education necessitated by COVID-19 could be leveraged to deliver emotional wellness programs that contain intentional content, behavioral modeling, and guided experiential exercises relating to the three research-based practices described in this article. This mental health programming can be delivered in a non-remedial, non-stigmatic fashion via engaging and interactive educational modules infused into existing first-year programs (e.g., new-student orientation, first-year seminars, and peer mentor training). If delivered early in the first year and to most or all of the entering class, it has the potential to exert systemic impact on college students' emotional wellbeing—both during and after COVID-19.

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