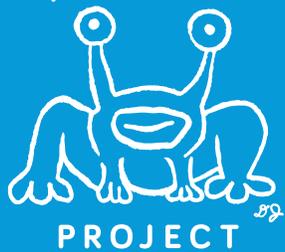


HI, HOW ARE YOU



# College Students' Perspective on Mental Health During COVID-19



AMERICAN  
CAMPUS  
COMMUNITIES

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# College Students' Perspective on Mental Health During COVID-19

## Findings from the College Student Fall 2020 Mental Health Report

Published by the **Hi, How Are You Project** and **American Campus Communities**

### Summary

This report reveals findings from the **College Student Fall 2020 Mental Health Survey** to get a pulse of students' mindsets and what they are doing to maintain strong mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19 and the start of a new academic year.

Conducted in September 2020 by the **Hi, How Are You Project** and **American Campus Communities (ACC)**, the survey was administered via email to ACC residents resulting in **12,188 completed responses**. The survey is among the largest of its kind specifically targeting college students. Participants ranged from incoming freshmen to graduate students in 65 university markets in the U.S.

### Who took the survey?

College Freshman	1,288	10.6%
College Sophomore	3,438	28.2%
College Junior	3,633	29.8%
College Senior	2,794	22.9%
Graduate Student	849	7%
Non-Student	186	1.5%

Thanks to this new data, the two organizations will be better informed as they continue to partner to foster a culture of open dialogue about the importance of mental health at ACC's residential communities on campuses across the nation, especially now that students are coping with the

daily impacts of COVID-19. They will also share the survey findings with university leadership and administrators with the goal to make an even greater impact of breaking down the stigma associated with mental health issues among college students.

The [Hi, How Are You Project](#) is a non-profit organization that funds research, events, thoughtful media content, and comprehensive training programs to start new conversations and destigmatize mental health issues.

It is inspired by musician and artist, Daniel Johnston, who passed away in 2019 after struggling with mental health issues for many years. His famous artwork "Jeremiah the Innocent," a mural bearing the question "Hi, How Are You?," is found on the Goodall Wooten building at the University of Texas at Austin. ACC purchased the building in 2018 to renovate into a student residential community in their hometown headquarters. That's when the partnership began and has since been a guiding tenet for ACC's Residence Life program, which offers events and information on health, wellness and student success for residents.



"Jeremiah, the Innocent" mural at the Goodall Wooten in Austin.

## Top Line Takeaways of 2020 College Student Mental Health Survey

### Stress is Real

As a result of the global pandemic, college students are somewhat or considerably **more stressed in comparison to previous years (85%)**. An added stressor is that more than half of students **(52%) are worried they could be exposed to or contract the virus**.

### Mental Health Matters

The survey reveals that **93%** of students surveyed agree that their mental health is an important component of their overall health and wellbeing, with **66%** saying that COVID-19 has forced them to take a closer look at their mental health.

### Connection is Key

**Socializing with friends** is what students miss the most **(84%)**, but they are **embracing technology** to stay connected with others to **help maintain mental wellness**, heavily relying on **text (87%)**, **SnapChat (80%)** or other social media platforms, and **phone/video conversations (75%)**.

### Knowing Where to Turn

Students need help finding organizations that **promote health and wellbeing** as nearly one-third **(28%) are not at all familiar with national resources**.

### Students Care for Others

78%

The great news is most students (78%) **feel comfortable having conversations to check in regarding other's mental wellbeing.**

57%

More than half (57%) said it would be helpful to have **simple resources to support others.**

*"The good news is, the data shows us this generation clearly understands that their mental health and wellness is just as important as their physical health, and they are open to having dialogues to help themselves and also others."*

**- Dr. Krishna**



Dr. Sonia Krishna, a board certified physician specializing in Child, Adolescent, and Adult Psychiatry and Hi, How Are You Project board member, concurs that whether it is remote learning or the fear of the unknowns of the virus, navigating the pandemic has added more layers of stress and anxiety to college life, which can already be quite stressful in normal times.

## Opening Up About Mental Wellness

When asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: **“I see my mental health as an important component of my overall health and wellbeing,”** 93% of students strongly agreed or agreed.

76% of students said they **felt comfortable talking about the topic of mental health and wellbeing with their close friends**, followed by:

- 56% with **family**
- 48% with **doctors or mental health experts** who are **not** associated with the university
- 30% with **university staff/faculty**

78% of students said they **felt comfortable having a ‘Hi, How Are You?’ conversation** to check in on other’s mental wellbeing, while 22% said they rarely or never feel comfortable.

“I am very comfortable talking to my friends about my mental health,” said Janyah, a Drexel University student. “My best friend and I take one day out of the week to update each other on our lives and our mental health.”

*“It’s reassuring to learn that college students not only take the time to seek help for themselves, but three-fourths said they feel comfortable with supporting and checking in on others as well.”*

**Tom Gimbel**  
**Hi, How Are You Project co-founder**

It is also worth noting that 44% of students said they were **comfortable talking about mental health and wellbeing with anyone (23%)** or **mere acquaintances (16%)**. Dr. Krishna finds this data point to be encouraging as those who are asked “Hi, How Are You?” by peers and acquaintances would likely be open to talking about their mental health and wellbeing including with those outside of their family and close friends circles.

The Hi, How Are You Project was founded on the importance of destigmatizing the conversation around mental health and to mostly encourage people everywhere to check in on

a neighbor, friend, co-worker, family member, or loved one. Asking residents, ‘Hi, how are you?’ is a simple first step toward starting a conversation about their wellbeing and demonstrating that you care.



## Concerns of Exposure

Contrary to popular perceptions that college students are not concerned about COVID-19, the survey revealed that students are **very worried (13%)** or are **somewhat worried (40%)** about **being exposed to or contracting the virus**.

On the flip side, 34% said they are **not too worried** and 14% said they are **not worried at all** about exposure to or contracting the virus.

“Even though I think I’m doing a pretty good job with being responsible and respectful, the sense that the virus is still looming and having to be diligent every day with sanitization, distancing, and mask-wearing contributes to my stress levels,” said Lilly, a Florida State University student.

As COVID-19 continues to impact campuses from coast to coast, ACC has been preparing its properties and educating its student residents with [programs to help mitigate the spread of the virus](#). The ACC message to residents has been corroborative promoting solidarity in helping to curb the spread of COVID-19. ACC has also been working with its universities, health departments, and other governmental authorities to help coordinate outreach, education and mitigation efforts.

## Missing In-Person Interaction

From hanging out with friends and attending events to interacting in class or in labs, it's very clear from the data that students miss gathering in person. While they have been learning remotely,

- **84%** of those surveyed said the number one thing they have missed the most about the university experience is **socializing with friends and others**
- **76%** said they miss **in-class instruction**
- **71%** said they miss **attending events on and off campus**

The survey results also revealed that:

- **60%** miss **easily accessible on-campus resources**
- **57%** miss attending **university sporting events** (football games, basketball games etc)
- **55%** miss **hands-on learning** (science labs, music practice, art classes)
- **52%** miss **in-class instruction**
- **41%** miss **having study groups**
- **32%** miss participating in **community service events/outreach**
- **29%** miss participating in **intramural or club sports**
- **28%** miss **Greek life** or other **club activities**

## Embracing Technology to Stay Connected

While students value in-person gatherings, they are adapting by turning to technology to continue to be engaged with friends, fellow classmates, and family. The data validates that they are **embracing technology** more than ever before to **maintain open communication about how they are feeling** and to **check in on one another**.

- **87%** of students choose to stay connected via **text**
- **76%** engage through **phone** and **video chat**
- **53%** choose to stay connected over **Zoom**

The responses also revealed that social media are popular platforms where students go to connect as:

- **80%** of students use **Snapchat**
- **74%** use **Instagram**
- **34%** use **Twitter**
- **33%** use **TikTok**
- **30%** use **Facebook**
- **23%** use **online gaming**

Fewer turned to **Netflix Party (14%)**, **HouseParty (6%)**, and **live watch parties (4%)**, to stay in touch with others.

“While this is the technology generation, it's wonderful to see that it will never replace the value of human connections and interactions, Krishna said. “It's also great to see that phone and video calls rank high as ways to communicate as they provide quality interaction when in-person contact is not possible.”

Another key indicator that students have a high comfort level with using technology is that **one-third** said they are either **satisfied or very satisfied** with their online curriculum/ distance learning classes, with 36% feeling neutral about it. However, with **29%** reporting they were **dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with remote learning**, Dr. Krishna warns this could contribute to added stress and anxiety to those respondents navigating the current unconventional college experience.

And lastly but importantly, **78%** of students turn to technology to connect with family and friends to **relieve stress and anxiety**.



## When Stress and Anxiety Levels are High, Most Students Turn to Music

When asked what they do specifically to relieve stress and anxiety:

- **84%** of students said they choose to **listen to or play music**
- **78%** said they **talk with friends and family on the phone/video chat**
- **74%** said they **watch TV or a favorite movie**

The Hi, How Are You Project is inspired by musician and artist, Daniel Johnston, who passed away in 2019 after struggling with his own mental health issues. For many, his lyrics and drawings were an encouragement and a constant reminder that they are not alone.

“Music is a great stress reliever. I play saxophone in a few Drexel bands and as soon as I play that first note, all my troubles disappear for a few hours, no matter what happened that day,” said Jill, a Drexel University student.

Other ways they students relieve stress and anxiety include:

- **62%** said they **get outdoors**
- **58%** said they **exercise**
- **43%** connect on **social media**
- **42%** do **something creative (paint, draw, journal)**
- **40%** focus on **diet and/or sleep habits**

“I started practicing yoga recently and I feel like a happier, stress-free person because of it. It has definitely helped me manage the stress of academics, work and extracurricular. I love taking that hour out of my day for self-care and self-healing,” said Lexie, a University of California, Irvine student.

While ranking lower, **reading a good book (28%), worshiping/engaging with their faith (24%)** and **practicing meditation (21%)** were also chosen.

As for which activities students turn to for maintaining strong mental health:

- **85%** said **staying connected with friends and family** is important, and **eating healthy (82%),** and **getting a good night's sleep (80%)** also ranked very high.

Other top-ranking activities for **maintaining optimum mental wellness** included:

- **Exercising regularly (70%)**
- **Focusing on the positives to change their perspective (68%)**
- **Practicing mindfulness (55%)**
- **Getting creative (53%)**
- **Committing acts of kindness to help others and your community (51%)**
- **Seeking inspiration by learning something new (42%)**
- **Focusing on good posture to relieve stress and boost self esteem (36%)**



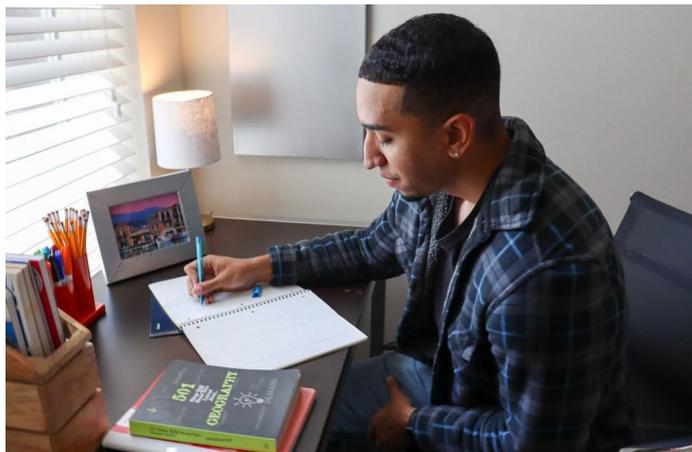
Hi, How Are You Project's [Happy Habits](#) can serve as a conversation starter and a reminder for how individuals can work on their own mental health and balance, especially during these trying times. They are also found at the end of this report.

To promote and raise awareness about mental wellness, ACC regularly holds events and interactive activities such as the more than 200 organized for Suicide Prevention Month, September 2020. Some examples include:

- Creating a public gratitude wall for students to add a note about what they are grateful for
- Collecting notes of kindness from residents, then attaching them to goodie bags for delivery
- Having residents color in the iconic Hi How Are You Project's Jeremiah the Innocent frog to be put on display
- Hosting a virtual painting event, following instructions from a legendary Bob Ross TV episode

*"We strive for our communities to be the place where students can succeed academically and personally. We are delighted to see that many of our residents are being proactive in taking care of themselves and others during COVID and are finding innovative ways to stay connected with their friends as families to relieve stress, as doing so is such a key component to maintaining overall mental wellness."*

**Bill Bayless**  
American Campus Communities CEO

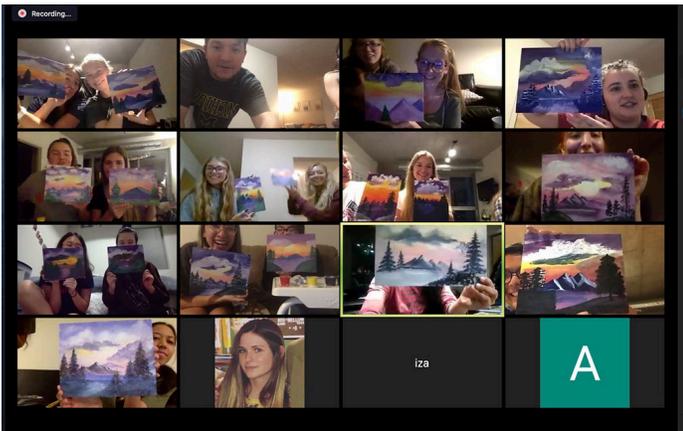


"As a student myself but also a Community Assistant with ACC, it's rewarding to be a peer that fellow students can rely on if and when they need to know where to go for help. It feels good to be part of a community that encourages balance to help maintain optimum mental wellbeing and overall good health, especially during these more trying times," said Tristan, a student at The University of Texas at Austin.

"I think ACC's partnership with the Hi, How Are You? Project is important because college can be very stressful for some people. To help make sure mental health is an important part of a positive college experience, as Community Assistants, we can mainly support student residents by making sure we listen to all their concerns with a deeper understanding and make sure we respond with utmost respect," said Miles, a student at the University of Oregon.



At Royal Village in Gainesville, Fla., Hi How Are You Project's iconic "Jeremiah the Innocent" frog was the hero for this activity that brought awareness about the importance of mental health and checking in on others.



ACC residents attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign came together to de-stress with a Bob Ross virtual painting class.

## Where to Go for Support

Given the fact that **one in five** Americans experience mental health issues with **75%** of mental health issues beginning by **age 24**, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), it's important for college students to know what resources are available.

The survey data reveals there is work to do as:

- **28%** are not at all familiar with any organizations that promote health and wellbeing
- **55%** of students are familiar with The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- **41%** know about their university counseling department/center

"It's important to talk about mental health because I think it reduces the stigma around it that exists," said Allyson, a University of Washington, Seattle student. "I think a lot of the time people refuse to get help because they have a really bad image in their heads on what therapy actually is for."

When asked what types of resources they find helpful to learn more about mental health and wellbeing:

- **67%** of respondents found it most helpful to have simple resources they can reference to recognize warning signs of mental health issues or concerns

- **57%** said having simple resources they can reference to understand better ways to be of support to others is also helpful
- **35%** said having information on how to access university support services would be most helpful
- **34%** said it would be helpful having access to infographics and statistics
- **29%** said reading articles or publications related to mental health and wellbeing



*“Our peer-to-peer training designed with the Hi, How Are You Project equips our community assistants and other team members with the tools to create activities to help reduce stress for our residents, to recognize and understand warning signs and empowers our team to start a conversation and provide resources related to mental health and wellness.”*

**Lonnie Ledbetter**  
**American Campus Communities,**  
**SVP of organizational development**

## Looking Forward

While the majority of college students are more stressed compared to previous years in light of COVID-19, they do see mental health as a key component of overall wellbeing and they are open to having healthy dialogues about it.

As such, the Hi, How Are You Project and ACC are continuing their collaborative partnership to provide peer-to-peer training programs and events for college students that encourage open dialogue on mental wellbeing now during these concerning times and well into the future. They will orchestrate events — such as the [World Mental Health Day Awareness Event](#) on October 10, 2020 and Hi, How Are You Day every January 22 — and promote resources for ACC team members and student residents seeking mental health support and tips for self-care.

The, college students’ current perspectives on mental health as obtained from the more than 12,000 survey responses validates the heightened importance of this level of student engagement. It also provides insights on new ways to effectively communicate to counter the statistics of increasing mental health issues among college age individuals.

