Mental Health, Substance Use, and Coping among Undergraduate University Students

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Department of Neuroscience
1 in 3 students have a diagnosed mental health or substance use disorder\textsuperscript{1}

About 50\% of Canadian students felt “so depressed it was difficult to function” & 68.9\% “felt overwhelming anxiety” \textsuperscript{2}

16.7\% of Canadian students report seriously considering suicide in the past 12 months\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1} WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders, 2018
\textsuperscript{2} American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Consortium Executive Summary, Spring 2019
Why does it matter?
Academic success strongly tied to student well-being. First year students particularly vulnerable.

When students feel connected to their peers, their professors, and their campus, it buffers against the stress of university life.
The majority of students have depressive symptoms...

Beck Depression Categories

Sex difference, \( p = .001 \)

- Asymptomatic: 39.7%
- Mild: 34.5%
- Moderate: 19.7%
- Severe: 6.1%

Mental Health and Problematic Substance Use in University students: Relationship to biomarkers of Stress and Immune function (2019)

\( N = 539, \) 76.3% (\( n = 411 \)) female, 23.2% (\( n = 125 \)) male, \( M_{\text{age}} = 19.4 \pm 2.1 \)
University Stressors: Constantly/Frequently

- Coursework Demands: 69.8%
- Study/Life Balance: 56.2%
- Financial Problems: 45.2%
- Mental Health Concerns: 37.0%
- Friend/Family Relationships: 37.0%
- Romantic Relationships: 35.6%

University Transition Study – Fall 2019, First year students

N = 73, (n=50 female, n=22 male, n=1 transgender), \( M_{age} = 18.2 \) yrs (±0.74)

- Saliva & Blood – Genetics, Cortisol, CRP, IL-6, TNF-a, Methylation
- Collaboration – PMC & Registrar’s office
More than half of students – 56% are lonely!

Social connections matter... particularly to young women

$r = .57, p < .0001$
Mental Health and Problematic Substance Use in University students: Relationship to biomarkers of Stress and Immune function

\[ N = 539, \ 76.3\% \ (n = 411) \text{ female , } 23.2\% \ (n = 125) \text{ male, } M_{age} = 19.4 \pm 2.1 \]
Initial response to pandemic; shut-down
Social isolation & physical distancing
Prolonged change to society

STRESS

COVID-19
Support for students and new grads affected by COVID-19

April 22, 2020
Ottawa, Ontario

Post-secondary students are feeling the economic impacts of COVID-19. Many students were preparing to start a summer job in May, and are now worried about how to pay rent and cover basic living expenses, while recent graduates are struggling to find meaningful work. This is a critical point in their lives, and we must do everything possible to support their future.

The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced comprehensive support of nearly $9 billion for post-secondary students and recent graduates. This plan will help provide the financial support they need this summer, help them continue their studies in the fall, and help many get the experience they need to start their career. These measures include launching:

- the proposed Canada Emergency Student Benefit, which would provide support to students and recent graduates who are not eligible for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. This benefit would provide $1,200 per month for eligible students or $1,750 per month for eligible students with dependents or disabilities. The benefit would be available from May to August 2020.
- the new Canada Student Service Grant, which will help students gain valuable work experience and skills while they help their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. For students who choose to do national service and serve their communities, the new Canada Student Service Grant will provide up to $2,000 for their education in the fall.

The Government of Canada will expand existing federal employment, skills development, and youth programming to create up to 150,000 jobs, placements, and other training opportunities to help students find employment and develop valuable skills this summer and over the coming months. In addition, to help students continue their studies in the fall, the government will:
My mental health has dramatically taken a toll being in quarantine.

“My productivity has been very low. My life had a strict routine before the quarantine and now there's hardly any routine.

Loneliness. I'm a very social person and this pandemic is really taking a toll on me and my productivity.

I cope by playing video games, going for walks and getting high (weed) since that's about all I can do at home.
Online study May-August 2020

To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted your...

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<td>Social relationships</td>
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<td>Relationship with intimate partner</td>
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<td>School work</td>
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<td>Worry about your own health</td>
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Funding: CU COVID-19 Rapid Research Grant
Fall 2020

20% increase in females

Stress levels in both genders;
1st and 2nd year students experiencing high levels of mental health symptoms during COVID

Understanding Student Stress and Resilience: Examining the Biological Correlates of Mental Health; Preliminary Data

N = 248, 80.1% (n = 197) female, 19.9% (n = 49) male, 1st & 2nd yr UG attending a University, and living in, Ontario
To deal with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, how much have you been...

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<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Exercising</td>
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<td>On social media</td>
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<td>Using cannabis</td>
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<td>Vaping nicotine products</td>
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<td>Eating fast food/sweets</td>
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<td>Watching TV/Netfix</td>
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<td>Drinking alcohol</td>
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<td>Connecting with friends/family</td>
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To cope with the COVID-19 pandemic more females reported that they were...
How can we support student mental health?

Course design (inside the classroom)

Respond, Refer, Report (outside the classroom)
How do we know when a student isn't doing well?
Hello Dr. Hellemans,

I hope this email finds you well, or as well as one can be in these weird times. I am writing because I need some guidance. I find I am struggling to keep up with my classes even though I care very much about learning. I am working around 30+ hours/week currently but have spoken to my manager to reduce the number of hours I am working to see if it helps. My struggles may also stem from having been out of school for about six years now, I graduated high school in 2014. My mental health is suffering greatly right now. I have always had such high expectations for myself and I was so excited to get back into school finally and get myself started on my career path. I can't help but feel disappointed in myself for not being able to reach my goals.

I bring all of this up because as a graduate student who is currently enrolled (as a TA, an RA, and a student), my ability to feel comfort in my own home is gone (something i was not anticipating) and I feel as though my ability to deal with stress is diminishing as a result. I am sleeping about 4 hours a night, and can manage about 2-3 hours of screen time before my brain and eyes are screaming for me to stop.
SUPPORTS FOR OUR STUDENTS

RECOGNIZE/RESPOND

Do you understand your students? Do you know how they are feeling mentally, physically and emotionally?

Sometimes students will tell you when they are not feeling well. Telling someone can be an overwhelming thing for a student to do, so it makes sense to ask:

“*I am concerned you’re not handing in assignments/meeting deadlines/showing up to tutorials - is everything OK?”*

REFER

Ask how you can help.  
Know the Resources  
Assist with navigating supports and resources
Sometimes it’s about mental health, other times it’s about coping. Sometimes it’s both!

**HOW TO RESPOND**

- Are they registered with PMC? Encourage them to engage with their PMC Coordinator to see if they need additional supports.
- Are they experiencing any changes in mood/anxiety/are they not doing well? (See page 2)
- Are they overwhelmed, struggling to organize their time? Refer to CSAS and FITA (See page 2)
- You or the TA can be occasionally checking in/reaching out, and providing appropriate referrals.
BOUNDARIES
The Student Support Certificate is designed to help faculty and staff at Carleton University enhance their capacity to address student needs. The certificate provides growth and development opportunities aligned with the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services’ (CACUSS) Competency Model.

The certificate provides a core level of training in a variety of competency areas, such as:

- Communication;
- Emotional and interpersonal intelligence;
- Intercultural Fluency;
- Indigenous cultural awareness;
- Post-secondary acumen;
- Equity, diversity and inclusion;
I’m so glad you’ve come to speak to me about how you’re doing. Thank you for trusting me with that. Your living circumstances certainly do not sound conducive to mental health at all, particularly during a pandemic. I can only imagine how that must be for you.

...I’ve cc’d Michelle Baulch who is our on-campus care manager. She supports graduate students and I think having a meeting with her to discuss some strategies for ensuring your wellness moving forward would be of great benefit.

Copying Yolanda Yip to this email, one of our incredible SSSC mentors.

Yolanda, would you mind organizing a chat with XXXX who would benefit from having some tips/strategies on time management. He’s in my first year neuro course.
Lead with compassion. Learn with respect.

Ensure every correspondence is compassionate, even if it is firm. Bear in mind when students are not doing well, sometimes they can act out – it is therefore meaningful to approach issues of conduct from the perspective of care and support. When in doubt contact the Office of Student Affairs at osareports@carleton.ca.
STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH IS NOT...

- A sign of weakness
- Evidence that a student cannot “cut it” in your course/program
- A suggestion that a particular individual is different/a deviation from the norm
- A reason to not support a student for any of the above

“I want to thank you for giving us a manageable and top-quality course from DAY ONE. Thank you for considering our mental health in a way that I haven’t really seen from my other instructors. Thank you for your continued support as I adjust to university life, online learning, and the circumstances of this COVID-19 pandemic.”
REPORT

- **Debrief** – an important step after a difficult conversation and doing so with your chair or supervisor is appropriate.

- **Report up not out** – keeping your chair or supervisor informed is key, and other Carleton employees on a “need to know basis” is appropriate.

- When concerned for a student’s **safety**, don’t hesitate; you are trying to help them access support.

- When in doubt – **Care Report**

- **Follow up** with the student if appropriate just to check-in that they are not having trouble accessing supports you provided.
Acknowledgments

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Dr Ashley Thompson
Rebecca Prowse
Dr Alfonso Abizaid
Ayeila Daneshmend
Dr Robert Gabrys, Research & Policy Analyst, CCSA
Dr Robyn McQuaid, Scientist, ROH Institute for Mental Health Research
Next Steps…

✓ How will COVID-19 influence mood and substance use over time?  →  Longitudinal study

✓ How does the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic impact key hormones and genes implicated in stress?  →  First year transition study

✓ How are students from marginalized groups faring with regard to their experiences with mental health resources on campus?  →  Campus Mental health studies

✓ What about Graduate students?  →  Graduate Mental health, COVID-19, and Cannabis Use study

✓ How does problematic cannabis use and mental health relate to academic outcomes, particularly among males?  →  Ongoing; Pan-Canadian Cannabis use study
Expectations and Considerations

➢ Early data suggest we should expect increased mental health problems and problematic substance use
  ✓ Must continue to pivot “circle of care” online with adequate supports
  ✓ Telehealth and text services are effective
  ✓ More, and better paid, psychiatrists needed

➢ 1st year cohort particularly vulnerable
  ✓ If living at home, will they be somewhat protected?

➢ 85% of students seeking on-campus support are white, heterosexual female
  ✓ We need to better meet the demands of our diverse campuses

➢ Conversations around substance use on campus have been traditionally from a punitive/sanctions perspective
  ➢ Need to re-focus around ‘substance use health’ and employ a harm reduction lens