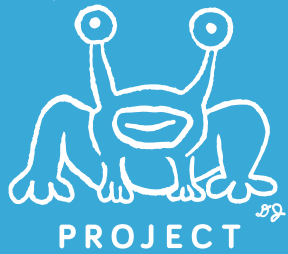


HI, HOW ARE YOU



A Year in Review: College Students' Perspective on Mental Wellness



AMERICAN
CAMPUS
COMMUNITIES

OCTOBER 2021

A Year in Review: College Students' Perspective on Mental Wellness

Findings from the College Student 2021 Mental Health Report

Published by the **Hi, How Are You Project** and **American Campus Communities** - October 2021

About the Survey

This report shares learnings from the **College Student 2021 Mental Wellness Survey** conducted in September 2021 by the **Hi, How Are You Project** and **American Campus Communities (ACC)**. The survey is the largest of its kind specifically targeting college students. It was administered via email resulting in **8,903 responses**. Participants ranged from incoming freshmen to graduate students in university markets across the U.S.

| | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| College Freshmen | 10.4% |
| College Sophomores | 26% |
| College Juniors | 27.1% |
| College Seniors | 24% |
| Graduate Students | 10% |
| Currently Not a Student | 2.5% |

Who Conducted the Survey and Why?

For the survey, ACC teamed up with [Hi, How Are You Project](#), a non-profit organization that funds research, events, thoughtful media content, and comprehensive training programs to start new conversations and destigmatize mental health issues. [ACC has an ongoing partnership with the non-profit](#) serving as a guiding tenet for ACC's Residence Life program, which offers events and information on health, wellness and student success for residents. ACC aims to foster a culture of open dialogue about the importance of mental health at its residential communities at campuses across the nation, especially now that students continue to cope with the daily impacts of COVID-19.



The survey findings will further help inform the programs and initiatives centered around mental health and wellness for college students. The two organizations are sharing the results with university leadership and administrators across the country with the goal to make an even greater impact on helping to break down the stigma associated with mental health issues among college students.

2021 Survey Top Line Takeaways

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|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mental wellness continues to be an essential component of students' overall health & wellbeing. |  | COVID-19 has prompted students to evaluate their mental wellness. |
|  | Stress and anxiety are pervasive, but levels are down from last year. |  | Students most look forward to socializing & interacting in person. |
|  | Students continue to have high care quotient for others and seek peers to open up to. |  | Social media permeates students' lives with more positive/neutral impact than negative. |

Dr. Sonia Krishna, a board certified physician specializing in Child, Adolescent, and Adult Psychiatry and Hi, How Are You Project board member reminds us that stress and anxiety are real but can be managed.

"According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), 75% of mental health troubles arise before the age of 24. That is not surprising because the human brain continues to grow and evolve until age 25, which can cause symptoms to arise based on biological changes. Plus, there are added social impacts among college students that impact mental wellness.

And while stigma around mental health is still very real, the report reveals that it is starting to decrease, and with increased awareness and support, we have seen more students be comfortable with sharing and openly communicating about their troubles. This is certainly great news since college years are a high risk and critical time for impact when help and resources should be readily available."



"It is encouraging to see the numbers holding steady around students understanding that their mental health and wellness is just as important as their physical health, and that overall, stress and anxiety levels are not as high as they were last year." - Dr. Krishna

Mental Health Really Matters

93% of the college students surveyed agree that **mental health is an important component of their overall health and wellbeing**, which is holding steady compared to last year's survey.

Let's Look at Stress and Anxiety

The big learning from the 2021 survey is that stress and anxiety levels are down as students report a **25% DECREASE** in how their anxiety levels compare to previous years. This year, **62%** of respondents say their levels are somewhat more or considerably more stressful compared to previous years, with last year's result for the same question totaling 85%.

- **22%** say their anxiety and stress is considerably less (**5%**) or somewhat less (**17%**) than in previous years.
- **16%** say they are seeing no change in their stress levels this year.

Of those survey respondents who are more stressed and or anxious than previous years, the **number one reason at 76%** was not from COVID-19 related issues but rather was attributed to **re-engaging in academics or resuming a full course load**.

66% of the responses were for reasons that were **COVID-19 related:**

- Fear of being exposed to or contracting COVID-19 (**36%**)
- Uncertainties of university policies and COVID-19 response (**30%**)

Other top reasons include students saying they are more stressed this year than in previous years were:

- Returning to on-campus social interaction (**52%**)
- Financial situation (**51%**)
- Moving to a new community (**34%**)

What situations are adding to your stress and anxiety?

| | | | |
|---|-----|---|-----|
| Re-engaging in Academic/Resuming Full Course Load | 76% | Moving to a New Community (Leaving Home) | 34% |
| Returning to On-campus Social Interaction | 52% | Uncertainty of University Policies and COVID Response | 30% |
| Financial Situation | 51% | Family Relations | 22% |
| Exposure to or Contracting COVID-19 Virus or Variants | 36% | Social Justice Issues | 18% |

“The results from the survey are consistent with what we are seeing at our center at a time when students continue to need support in record numbers. We are seeing that students are wanting to socialize after a year and a half of missing their friends, however they are concerned about readjusting to returning to on-campus activities.”

- Dr. Marla Craig, Senior Associate Director for Clinical Services of the Counseling & Mental Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin



Calming Activities

When asked what students do specifically to relieve stress and anxiety, **listening or playing music (82%)** was chosen as the top activity, which ranked number one in last year’s survey as well. **Talking with family and friends (80%)** was the second most popular choice and third was **watching TV or a favorite movie (72%)**. Getting outdoors and exercising were also popular among more than half of those surveyed.

| | |
|--|-----|
| Listen to or Play Music | 82% |
| Talk with Family and Friends | 80% |
| Watch TV or a Favorite Movie | 73% |
| Get Outdoors | 58% |
| Exercise | 55% |
| Do Something Creative (Paint, Draw, Journal, etc.) | 41% |
| Focus on Diet and/or Sleep Habits | 40% |
| Connect on Social Media | 39% |
| Read a Good Book | 31% |
| Worship/Engage with my Faith | 23% |
| Meditation | 22% |



“ Daniel Johnston’s lyrics and drawings have served as encouragement and a reminder to those of us who are struggling that we are not alone. It is wonderful to see that music ranks number one again this year as a way for college students to relieve anxiety and stress. ”

- Tom Gimbel, Co-Founder of Hi, How Are You Project

Maintaining Mental Wellness

When asked how they maintain mental wellness, students said the ways are:

| | | |
|---|--|---|
|  <p>Getting a full night's sleep</p> |  <p>Staying connected with friends and family</p> |  <p>Eating Healthy</p> |
|---|--|---|

Which of these are important activities for maintaining your mental health?

| | |
|--|-----|
| Getting a Full Night’s Sleep | 82% |
| Staying Connected with Friends and Family | 81% |
| Eating Healthy | 80% |
| Exercising Regularly | 69% |
| Focusing on the Positives to Change Perspective | 69% |
| Practicing Mindfulness | 59% |
| Committing Acts of Kindness to Help Others and Your Community | 53% |
| Getting Creative | 52% |
| Seeking Inspiration by Learning Something New | 42% |
| Focusing on Good Posture to Release Stress and Boost Self Esteem | 38% |

Students are Ready to Socialize "IRL"

Socializing with friends and others (80%) ranked highest by far when students were asked what they were looking forward to the most when they returned to campus this fall. **64%** said they are looking forward to **attending events on and off-campus** and **48%** chose attending **university sporting events**.

The data clearly reveals that **learning with others** is what students are wanting as **in class instruction (60%), in class discussion (36%)** and **hands-on learning (43%)** were popular choices among the survey respondents.



What are you looking forward to the most in returning this fall?

| | |
|--|-----|
| Socializing with My Friends, Others | 80% |
| Attending Events On-Campus and Off-Campus | 64% |
| In Class Instruction | 60% |
| Attending University Sporting Events (Football, Basketball, etc.) | 48% |
| Easily Accessible On-Campus Resources | 45% |
| Hands on Learning (Science Labs, Music Practice, Art Classes, etc) | 43% |
| In Class Discussion | 36% |
| Participating in Community Service Events/Outreach | 26% |
| Having Study Lunches | 26% |
| Participating in Intramural or Club Sports | 22% |
| Greek Life or Other Club Activities | 20% |

When asked how they prefer to connect with their residential community, the respondents' popular choice was **in person resident events at 60%** followed by **Instagram at 56%**.

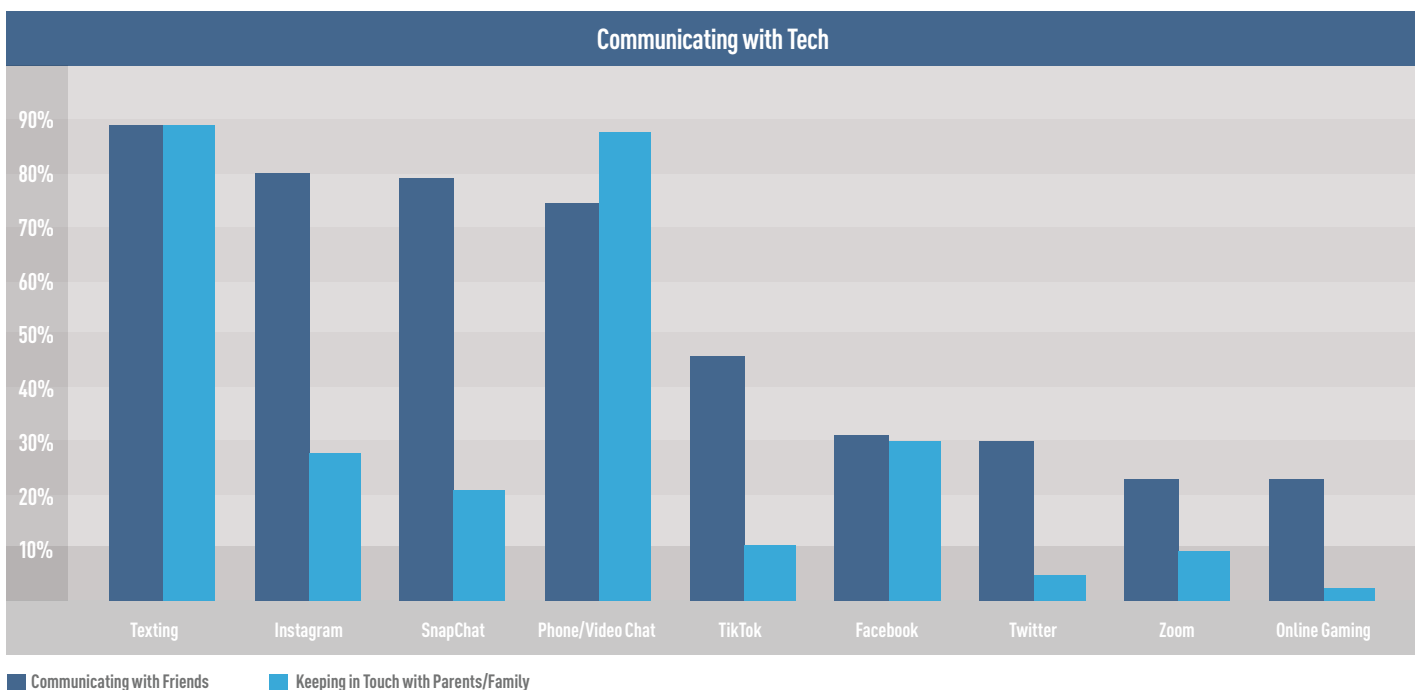
Another proof point that students value in person interaction is that some said they felt very connected with their residential community or that it is their "home away from home," citing the **direct and/or in-person interaction with staff and with other residents** as the top two reasons why, both at **60%**.



How to Check in & Keep in Touch When not "IRL"

"Shoot me a text or DM me."

Whether communicating with friends or keeping in touch with parents, texting is the top choice for both. The use of the same social media platforms continue to hold steady when compared to last year. Top choices include:



“ Embracing technology is key to being present in our children’s lives and to getting a window into their mental health when they are away at college. A text dialogue, for example, can be a lifeline for a student who is feeling isolated or just introverted and lonely. Seeing what is going on via video chats—even checking out the background—also helps tell a bigger story about how your child is doing.”

- Anne Vilen, mother of two college graduate students, author and expert on social and emotional learning

The Proliferation of Social Media & Its Impact

More than **90%** of survey respondents say they are on **social media platforms multiple times per week**.

It seems social media is not overly negatively impacting respondents’ **stress and anxiety levels** as **68%** of respondents say it has **either no impact or a somewhat or strong positive impact** on their stress and anxiety levels.

COVID Has Been a Mental Wellness Eye-Opener

67% agree or strongly agree that COVID-19 has forced them to take a closer look at their mental health as a key component of their overall health. This is on par with the same question posed last year when **66%** of respondents of the 2020 survey agreed.



There is still concern over COVID-19 contagion among those surveyed as **48%** say they are **somewhat (37%) or very worried (11%)** about the possibility of being exposed to or contracting COVID-19 or a new variant of it. It is encouraging to see that **18%** said they are **not worried at all**, which is a **4%** increase over last year. **34%** said they are **not too worried**.

To help ease concerns, ACC has continued to implement its [programs](#) to mitigate the spread of the virus. The ACC message to residents has been collaborative, promoting solidarity in helping to curb the spread of COVID-19. The company has also continued working with its universities, health departments, and other governmental authorities to help coordinate outreach, education and mitigation efforts.

Talking About Mental Health

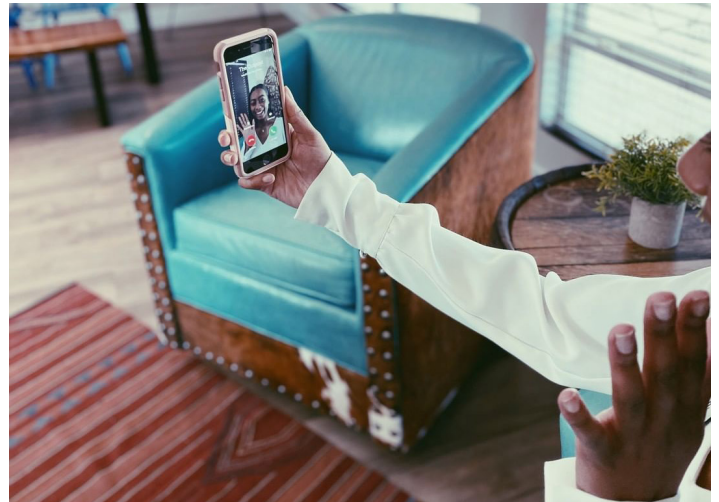
The majority of college students (**78%**) are okay with **checking in on others about their mental wellbeing starting with asking “Hi, How Are You?”**. When asked, **49%** of respondents said they **sometimes feel comfortable checking in on others** and **29%** said they **always feel comfortable**.

Where to Turn

- **73%** of those surveyed say they feel comfortable talking about the topic of mental health and wellbeing with their **close friends**.
- **Turning to family** was the second most popular choice at **52%**, followed by **doctors or mental health experts not associated with the university** at **46%**.
- **29%** say they feel comfortable speaking with a university staff/faculty (counseling center, advisor, etc.)

When it comes to **knowing where to turn for help**, there is always more awareness needed among college students. Last year **28%** of those surveyed said they are **not familiar with any organizations**, which has slightly improved this year with the numbers coming in at **27%**.

- **53%** of the students surveyed they know about the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- **42%** say they are familiar with their university’s counseling department or center
- **28%** are familiar with the Hi, How Are You Project
- **13%** are familiar with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
- **11%** know about their local community organizations or resource



To learn more about **supporting mental health and wellbeing**, respondents say they turn to the following resources:

- Simple resources they can reference to recognize warning signs of mental health issues or concerns - **69%**
- Simple resources they can reference to understand better ways to be of support to others - **56%**
- Information on how to access university support services - **38%**
- Infographics and stats related to mental health and wellbeing - **33%**
- Articles or publication related to mental health and wellbeing - **27%**

“It is refreshing to see that students still very much view mental health as a key component of their overall wellbeing, and that they remain open to having healthy dialogues about it and feel very comfortable checking in on others. However, there is still meaningful work we can all do. Together with our community partners, universities, parents, and the students themselves, we are committed to helping further the dialogue and promoting mental wellness resources to college students across the nation.”

- Lonnie Ledbetter, Chief Purpose & Inclusion Officer, American Campus Communities



Moving the Mission Forward

ACC and the Hi, How Are You Project will continue to facilitate peer-to-peer trainings to:

- Equip ACC community assistants and other team members with the tools to create activities to help reduce stress.
- Recognize and understand warning signs and empower ACC's teams to start a conversation and provide resources related to mental health and wellness.
- Provide the framework for programs and events for college students to continue to encourage open dialogue on mental wellbeing.

In addition to conducting trainings, ACC and Hi, How Are You Project team up to increase awareness about the importance of mental wellness each year for:

- Hi, How Are You Day every January 22
- Mental Health Awareness Month in May
- National Suicide Prevention Week in September
- World Mental Health Day Events every October 10



Thanks to the responses from such a robust sample of college students, ACC and Hi, How Are You Project can better understand how to effectively communicate with college students while providing them with information and tools to help make a difference in the growing number of mental wellness challenges across campuses nationwide.

Additional Resources

- ACC's podcast, [College Talk](#), features an episode about mental wellness entitled Mental Health on College Campuses, which can be found here and on popular streaming platforms including [Acast](#), [Amazon](#), [Audible](#), [Spotify](#), and [SoundCloud](#).
- The [Hi, How Are You Project](#) has various resources on its website and on its [YouTube channel](#). The non-profit is also launching a mental wellness podcast in 2022.
- [The National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#), the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

“ Learning remotely along with everything else that was going on really pushed me to fight through the stigma about seeking help for my anxiety. And it's working. Now that we are back to in-person learning, my confidence is thriving. Being able to engage again has made me feel less isolated, given me motivation, and has allowed me to use my free time effectively to decompress. ”

- Emaline, University of New Hampshire student

