



**Mental Health Supports for
Post-Secondary Students-
Focus on Animal-Assisted
Wellness and
Trauma-Informed Practices**

**Anna Rissanen, PhD,
MEd, MC**

Assistant Professor

**MacEwan University, Edmonton,
Canada**

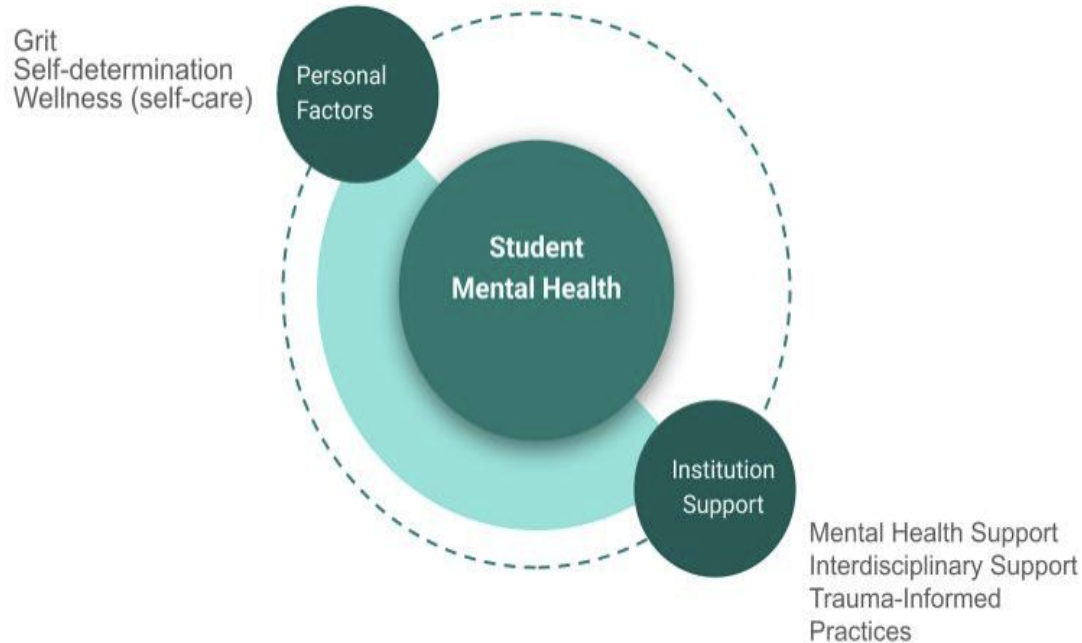
Background



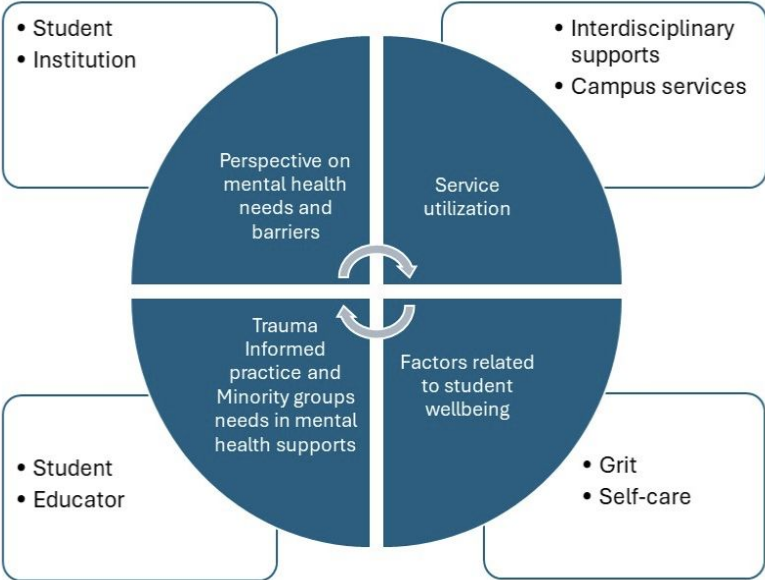
Mental health-related problems, increased stress and symptoms of mental illness have been increasing in Canadian postsecondary students. We need also focus on low barrier access interdisciplinary campus services that help students, such as animal-assisted therapy on campus (Ecclestone et al., 2023).

A SYNTHESIS OF THE CURRENT FINDINGS

Mental Health in Higher Education Students



A DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS



FINDINGS

- Postsecondary students struggle with mental health, and institutions can align services better to meet students' specific needs by gathering feedback from students.
- Students prefer asking for help from within their close circles, thus educators need more preparation, especially in trauma-informed approaches.
- Minoritized students struggle more, especially when they have experienced adversity, and they can benefit from targeted mental health advertisements and services by the institutions.
- Students welcome more social activities, other than direct mental health counselling to enhance well-being and social connections, such as organized peer groups and activities such as exercise and animal-assisted wellness programs, and training in grit skills.
- Students want access to psychoeducation in coping mechanisms and peer-support groups. Students ask for more psychoeducation, starting in high school to prepare themselves for postsecondary mental health challenges.
- Lowering stigma and improving mental health attitudes on campus by campaigns by the institutions can lower barriers for seeking help along with advertising the services with emphasis on the quality of services.



- A new etiology model related to ACEs and discrimination effects on young peoples' mental health (Helminen et al., 2022).
- When students seek counselling, the therapist can use ACEs scoring and discrimination experiences to assess stress vulnerability (Helminen et al., 2022).
- Furthermore, as research indicates that positive social interactions and experiences can alleviate ACEs related mental health challenges, it is recommended to add targeted peer supports and activity groups to campuses (Clement et al., 2024).
- Students recommend easier, low stigmatized access to the campus in-person services.
- Campus counseling centers with stepped care, flexible care, and access and consultation and triage approaches, dding stepped care and more group psychotherapy could lower access barriers (Walls et al., 2023).
- A targeted advertisement to minoritized students with high ACEs, or students with antisocial and anxiety could possibly lead to better mental health outcomes (Bourdon et al., 2020).



Clinical Recommendations Based on Findings

Recommendations	Implementation strategies
1. Promoting grit and self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop programs for cultivating grit skills among students.• Incorporate grit-related interventions into university programming to positively impact academic success.
2. Utilization of campus services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add mental health services to address specific needs such as stress, loneliness, and exhaustion identified by students.• Implement outreach programs, especially for minoritized students, students living with anxiety and antisocial behaviors, to improve service utilization.
3. Barriers to help-seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote a healthy discourse about psychological distress to create a positive campus climate for mental health discussions.• Address barriers such as perceived stigma and beliefs about service effectiveness by advertising services and enhancing social connections and peer support.

4. Needs of minority groups

5. Trauma-informed practices

6. Interdisciplinary wellness approaches

7. Overall campus support

- Increase awareness and support for mental health services tailored to the needs of minoritized student groups.
- Provide training for educators in trauma-informed practices to better identify and support students in need of trauma-related support.
- Incorporate psychoeducation about the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma, focusing on socially isolated students.
- Conduct further research, including longitudinal and randomized clinical trials, to assess the effectiveness of such programs in diverse student populations.
- Foster a culture of open communication about mental health, reducing stigma, and promoting well-being for all students.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- How culture, and being a member of subgroups affect feelings of healthy independence, development of identity, and belongingness to social networks?
- A sense of belonging contributes to academic performance and students in minoritized groups might not have a keen sense of belongingness (Watt et al., 2023).
- Cultural belongingness relates to for example if students see other students and faculty who are like them or have similar backgrounds and experiences.
- How to increase training in grit, self-determination and self-care, and further research about how to incorporate these skills into the curriculum as they also promote well-being and life satisfaction (Duckworth & Gross, 2014)?
- How to educate about self-care, such as de-stressing and taking on pleasurable activities, as it is known to increase self-compassion, and life satisfaction and even decrease distress thus also could be incorporated in postsecondary education (Colman et al., 2016).
- Interdisciplinary supports



PAWSS

Pets Assisting with Student Success - PAWSS at MacEwan University

The benefit of studying and understanding the effectiveness of the PAWSS program is that the animals are helping students in different groups who also might be experiencing oppression, discrimination, social loneliness, and other forms of distress having a compounding effect on their mental health (Helminen et al., 2022).



PAWSS Results

Qualitative Survey Study



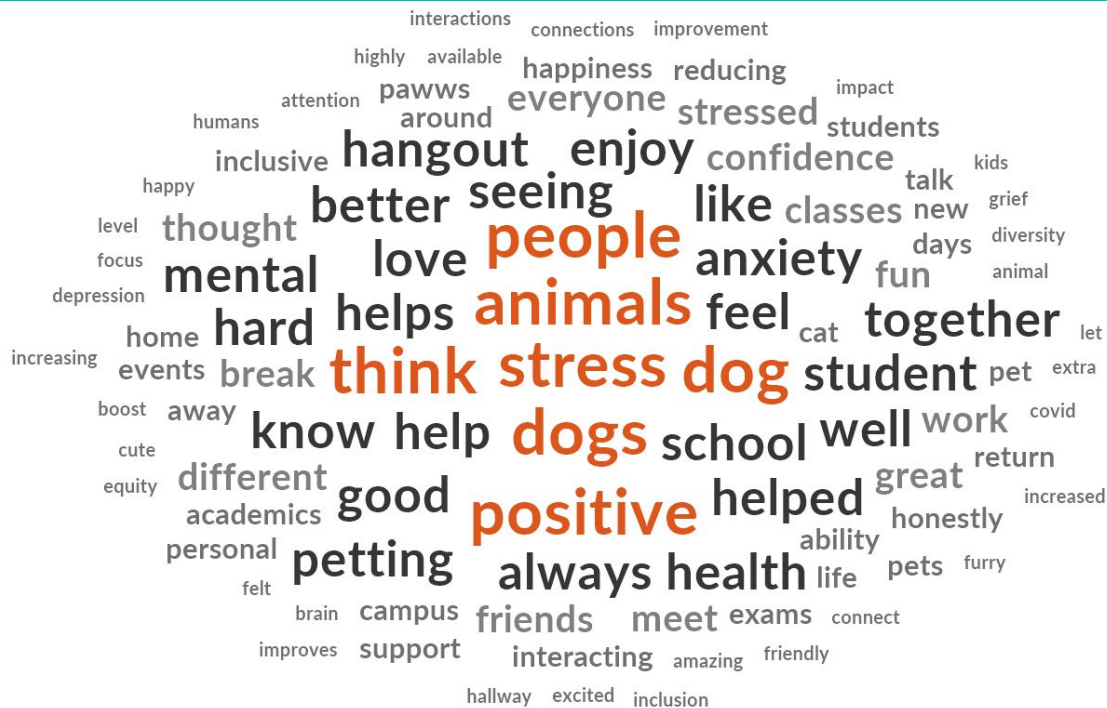
Participants (n=18) reported decreased anxiety and daily stress after participating in a PAWSS event due to increased social interactions and connection to animals. Also, participants highlighted that they meet new, different peers and maintain those connections.

Future Improvements

What else would you like to share that helps the researcher to understand your experience better?

- “more PAWSS capacity”
- “more dogs please”
- “great program”
- “posters around the schools to educate others, with photos of volunteers”
- “post pet's photos”
- “more advertisement”

PAWSS Thematic Analysis



Trauma-Informed Services on Campus

Qualitative Survey Study



Trauma-Informed Services on Campus Recommendations

- Walk in appointments when symptoms come up and more appointments
- Workshops, and other than mental health activities (exercise groups)
- Barriers to access services
 - Waitlist
 - Culture and language barriers
 - Shame
 - Stigma
 - Need psychoeducation and advertisement of services
- Instructors:
 - Being understanding, extensions to deadlines/grading
 - "Not their responsibility as they teach"
 - Provide resources or links to where to go to get help

Self-Reflection



The complexity of mental health challenges in the postsecondary student population is a challenge and richness for administrators.

Students struggle with stress and can benefit from study technique tutoring, and healthy discourse about mental health with their faculty and administrators.

Students benefit from having their opinions heard. This confirms my experiences teaching for almost 20 years; they seek connections and we as faculty and administrators can help them by creating meaningful connections, and by hearing their feedback and incorporating it into the programming.

References

- Aragón, K. M., Mullin, A. C., Felix, E. D., Appel, O., & Sharkey, J. D. (2024). Identifying what educators need to support trauma-informed practices in the schools: A community needs assessment. *School Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000621>
- Bourdon, J. L., Moore, A. A., Long, E. C., Kendler, K. S., & Dick, D. M. (2020). The relationship between on-campus service utilization and common mental health concerns in undergraduate college students. *Psychological Services, 17*(1), 118–126. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000296>
- Canadian Psychological Association. (2017). *Canadian code of ethics for psychologists* (4th ed.).
- Clement, D. N., Appleseth, H. S., Armstrong, C. M., Cole, A. B., Wingate, L. R., & Leffingwell, T. R. (2024). Minoritized graduate student identity, well-being, and mental health risks for suicidality. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000555>
- Colman, D. E., Echon, R., Lemay, M. S., McDonald, J., Smith, K. R., Spencer, J., & Swift, J. K. (2016). The efficacy of self-care for graduate students in professional psychology: A meta-analysis. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 10*(4), 188–197. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000130>
- Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1087–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087>
- Duckworth, A., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Self-control and grit: Related but separable determinants of success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*(5), 319–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414541462>
- Ecclestone, A., Linden, B., Monaghan, C., & Zheng, S. (2023). Canada's Student Mental Health Network: Protocol for a Comprehensive Program Evaluation. *JMIR Research Protocols, 12*, e41521. <https://doi.org/10.2196/41521>
- Helminen, E. C., Scheer, J. R., Edwards, K. M., & Felver, J. C. (2022). Adverse childhood experiences exacerbate the association between day-to-day discrimination and mental health symptomatology in undergraduate students. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 297*, 338–347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.10.058>
- Parbery-Clark, C., Lubamba, M., Tanner, L., McColl, E. (2021). Animal-assisted interventions for the improvement of mental health outcomes in higher education students: a systematic review of randomised controlled trials. *International Journal in Environmental Research Public Health 18*, 10768. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182010768>
- Rissanen A. (2024). *Mental Health Supports for Postsecondary Students: What Students Need and What Institutions Provide*. City University Seattle.
- Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, & Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics, 129*(1), e232–e246. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.20112663>
- Walls, K. L. (2023). Navigating a new model for therapy at a university counseling center: A case example. *Psychological Services, 20*(4), 952–961.
- Watt, T. T., Hartfield, K., Kim, S., & Ceballos, N. (2023). Adverse childhood experiences contribute to race/ethnic differences in post-secondary academic performance among college students. *Journal of American College Health, 1–9*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1947838>