

# Emotions Calendar Project Results Summary

The **Emotions Calendar Project** addressed four research questions to better understand the service needs of university students.

## QUESTION 1:

**WHO IS DISTRESSED &  
WHEN ARE THEY  
DISTRESSED?**

STUDY 1

**Risk Patterns**

## QUESTION 2:

**WHAT ARE STUDENTS  
DISTRESSED ABOUT?**

STUDY 2

**Stressors: *It's More than Academics***

STUDY 3

**Stressors: *Never Enough Time***

## QUESTION 3:

**WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO  
RESILIENCE?**

STUDY 4

**Resilience: *Assets & Resources***

STUDY 5

**Resilience: *Purpose & Meaning***

## QUESTION 4:

**HOW CAN WE HELP  
STUDENTS SEEK HELP?**

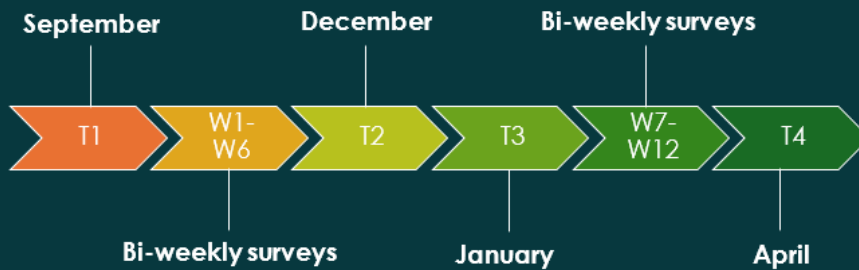
STUDY 6

**Seeking Help**

## Samples

**Cohort 01** In September 2020, recruitment emails were sent on the first day of class to a random sample of undergraduate students enrolled at Concordia University, stratified by year of study and faculty. **1,004 participants completed the baseline survey.**

- Age ranged from 18 to 67 years ( $M = 23.16$ ,  $SD = 5.61$ );
- 61% identified as women, 36% as men, and 3% self-identified with a gender minority;
- 36% self-identified as belonging to one or more visible minority groups
- 16% were international students;
- Evenly distributed across years of study and faculties.

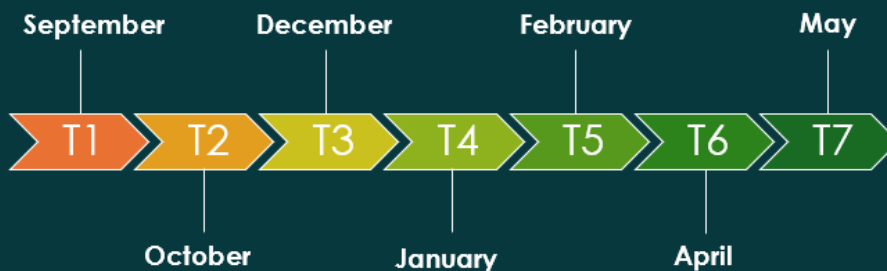


**Cohort 02** In September 2021, recruitment emails were once again sent to a random sample of undergraduate students at Concordia University, stratified by year of study and faculty. **1,030 participants completed the baseline survey.**

They were asked to complete surveys at the same timepoints as Cohort 1.

- Age ranged from 18 to 65 years ( $M = 22.52$ ,  $SD = 4.80$ );
- 62% identified as women, 34% as men, and 4% self-identified with a gender minority;
- 36% self-identified as belonging to one or more visible minority groups;
- 18% were international students;
- Evenly distributed across years of study and faculties.

**Cohort 03** In September 2022, recruitment emails were sent to a random sample of undergraduate students stratified by year of study and faculty. **562 participants completed the baseline survey.** Half of the sample received a help-seeking intervention embedded in the fall surveys. The whole sample received the intervention in the winter surveys.



### Control Group (N = 278)

- Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years;
- 57% identified as women, 35% as men, and 7% self-identified with a gender minority;
- 37% self-identified as belonging to one or more visible minority groups and 21% were international students;
- Evenly distributed across years of study and faculties.

### Intervention Group (N = 284)

- Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years;
- 52% identified as women, 36% as men, and 10% self-identified with a gender minority;
- 38% self-identified as belonging to one or more visible minority groups and 18% were international students;
- Evenly distributed across years of study and faculties.



## 1

## Trajectories of and Risk Factors for University Students' Emotional Well-Being and Distress Across the Academic Year

Students' emotional well-being and distress fluctuates across the academic year. When people experience challenges or difficult life experiences they tend to experience more distress. Identifying points in the academic year when distress is elevated and identifying students who experience greater distress can inform the timing and targets of campus programming efforts.

### KEY QUESTIONS

**Question 1:** When in the academic year are students most distressed?

**Question 2:** Who experiences the most distress?



### PARTICIPANTS





Cohort 1

### MEASURES

Emotional well-being and distress  
Demographic & contextual risk factors

## RESULTS

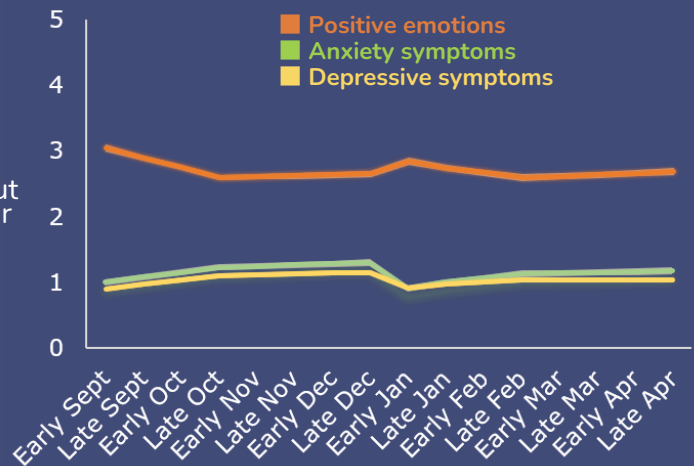
### Observed cyclical patterns:

-  Distress was higher overall in the fall semester.
-  The fastest rate of increase in distress occurred across the first 6 weeks of the semester.
-  Distress remained high until the end of the semester.
-  Over the winter break, well-being rebounded, but distress increased again at the start of the winter semester.

### Elevated baseline distress in September associated with:



- Previous mental health diagnosis, stressful life events
- Demographic factors
- Socioeconomic conditions



## IMPLICATIONS



Early and continued support across the academic year is critical. Students with previous mental health challenges, difficult life experiences, or those from specific demographic groups (e.g., younger students, gender and sexual minorities, visible minorities) may benefit from tailored resources available consistently across the semester.



**2 More than Academics: Time Use and Friendship Stress also Covary with Canadian University Students' Mental Health Symptoms Across the Academic Year**

Academic stressors are commonly experienced and rated as stressful, but personal and interpersonal stressors can also cause distress for students.

**KEY QUESTIONS**

1. What stressors are commonly experienced by university students throughout the academic year?
2. What is the relationship between stressors and distress?

**PARTICIPANTS**

Cohort 2



**MEASURES**

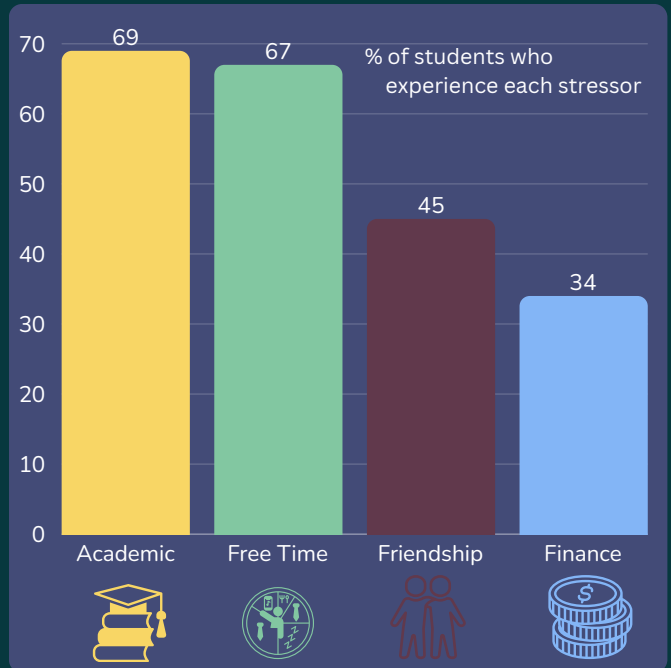
Negative life events  
Psychological distress

**RESULTS**

The most common stressors were Academics, Managing Free Time, Friendships, and Finances.



Across the academic year, in weeks students reported greater academic stress, more friendship stress, and engaging in fewer recreational activities than usual, they also reported more depression and anxiety symptoms.



**IMPLICATIONS**



University students experience a full range of stressors that extend beyond academics and that occur throughout the academic year.



Interventions should address personal and interpersonal stressors in addition to academics to maximally support well-being.



## 3

### “Never enough time”: The common thread linking college students’ experiences of stress across domains

#### KEY QUESTION:

Why do post-secondary students find academic, free time, financial, and social stressors stressful, and what common and unique themes underlie these experiences?





### PARTICIPANTS

Cohort 3

### MEASURES

Negative life events

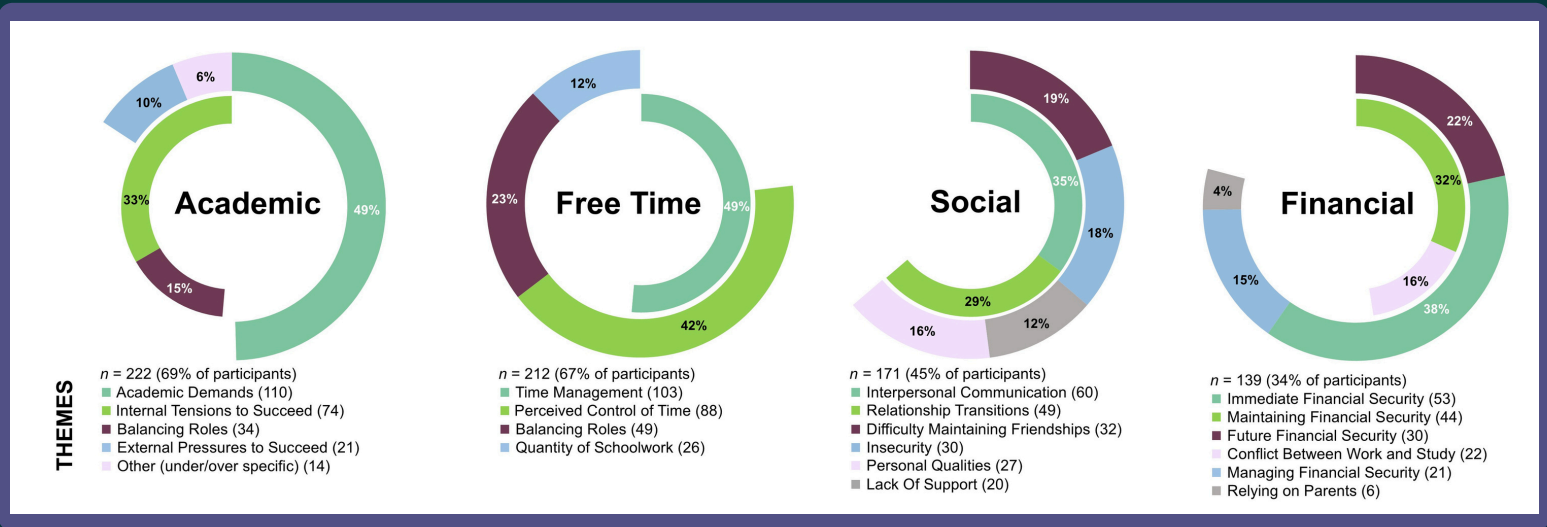
### METHOD

Participants who rated one of the four stressors (academics, free time, social, financial) as slightly or very stressful answered a follow-up question about why the stressor was stressful for them.

Coders identified unique and common themes.

## RESULTS

“Can you tell us more about why this was stressful for you?”



## IMPLICATIONS



Across stressors, balancing multiple roles was a shared theme. Managing multiple stressors leads to role strain, which can impact students' mental and physical health.



Holistic interventions that help students manage multiple domains of life may be especially beneficial to well-being.



4 Resilience, Stress, and Mental Health Among University Students: A Test of The Resilience Portfolio Model

**KEY QUESTION** What factors buffer stress to protect well-being?



**RESILIENCE  
PORTFOLIO  
MODEL**

Proposed by \*Grych et al. (2015), this model provides a strength-based framework to understand the various ways individuals adapt to stress and trauma.

**PARTICIPANTS**

Cohort 1



**MEASURES**

- Internal Psychological Assets
- External Social Resources
- Academic Stress
- Psychological Distress
- Subjective Well-being

**RESULTS**

Strengths in emotion regulation, supportive social networks, and sense of belonging predicted lower academic stress across the year, and in turn, lower psychological distress and higher well-being at the end of the year.



**IMPLICATIONS**



Internal assets (emotion regulation) and external resources (social support and belonging) help reduce academic stress, promoting healthy functioning in university students.



Institutional efforts to create an inclusive community can lower academic stress, psychological distress, and enhance well-being among students.

Fang, S., Barker, E. T., Arasaratnam, G., Lane, V., Rabinovich, D., Panaccio, A., O'Connor, R., Nguyen, C. T., & Doucerain, M. (2024). Resilience, Stress, and Mental Health Among University Students: A Test of The Resilience Portfolio Model. *Stress & Health*, 41 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3508>

\*Grych, J., Hamby, S., & Banyard, V. (2015). The resilience portfolio model: Understanding healthy adaptation in victims of violence. *Psychology of violence*, 5(4), 343.



5

## Meaning Making in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Effects of Purpose in Life, Positive Reframing, Acceptance, and Event Appraisal

### MEANING MAKING MODEL



According to \*Park's Meaning Making Model (2010) having a global sense of meaning (e.g., purpose, life direction) promotes adaptive meaning making (e.g., coping) when stressful life experience are encountered. In turn adaptive meaning making sustains or restores global meaning as a resilience resource for the future.

### KEY QUESTION ?

Did having a global sense of purpose in life contribute to adaptive meaning-making for university students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### PARTICIPANTS

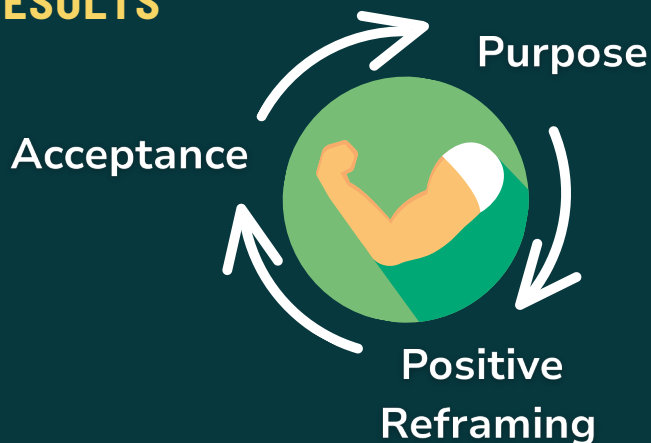
Cohort 1



### MEASURES

Meaning making  
Coping  
Purpose in life  
Psychological distress

### RESULTS



In the Fall of 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, students who reported having a stronger global sense of purpose in life reported greater use of acceptance and positive reframing coping to manage stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They also reported less distress. Looking forward, acceptance and positive reframing coping predicted greater purpose in life at the end the Fall 2020 semester, under stricter social distancing rules, and acceptance predicted sustained purpose in life into January 2021, at the peak of the second wave of the pandemic.

### IMPLICATIONS



Interventions that strengthen global sense of purpose in life and coping skills that promote positive meaning making may benefit students as they cope with a full range of life stressors.

Karbainova, D., Fang, S., & Barker, E. T. (2025). Meaning making in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: Effects of purpose in life, positive reframing, acceptance, and event appraisal. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2025.2510282>

\*Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: an integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological bulletin*, 136(2), 257.



## 6 Evaluating a Self-Reflection Intervention to Promote Help-Seeking in Distressed Undergraduate Students

Despite the fact that many university students are distressed, relatively few seek help. Some students may be enacting resilience strategies but others may not know how to get help. A full range of programs and services exist on campus that can meet students' needs if they know about them and use them.

### KEY QUESTION

Will a low-intensity intervention that promotes self-reflection and delivers information about campus resources matched to students' sources of stress promote help-seeking for mental health?

### PARTICIPANTS

Cohort 3



### METHOD

The intervention was embedded in the survey at the:

**Start of the Year:** To reach students with elevated initial distress.

**Mid-Semester:** Addressing the rapid increase in distress observed in the first half of the semester.

**End of Semester:** Supporting students before exams and ahead of the winter break.

### INTERVENTION

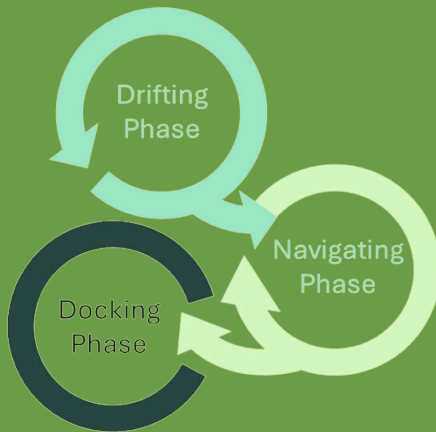
**Step 1:** Self-reflection on current levels of distressed.

**Step 2:** Self-reflection on sources of stress.

**Step 3:** Presentation of resources matched to self-identified sources of stress.

### INTEGRATED YOUTH BARRIERS AND PROCESS MODEL

Four help-seeking groups:



1. **Low need:** low distress scores, not subjectively stressed, not seeking help.
2. **Drifters:** elevated distress scores, not subjectively stressed, not seeking help.
3. **Navigators:** subjectively stressed, not seeking help.
4. **Dockers:** subjectively stressed, seeking help.

Model Based on: Westberg, K.H., Nyholm, M., Nygren, J.M., & Svedberg, P. (2022). Mental Health Problems among Young People—A Scoping Review of Help-Seeking. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19. Radez, J., Reardon, T., Creswell, C., Lawrence, P. J., Evdoka-Burton, G., & Waite, P. (2021). Why do children and adolescents (not) seek and access professional help for their mental health problems? A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 30(2), 183–211.

### RESULTS

Participants were classified into four groups based on their distress levels, perceived stress and helpseeking, aligned with the integrated youth barriers and process help-seeking model.

**Overall, there was greater movement between the help-seeking groups when participants received the intervention.**

### IMPLICATIONS



To promote the greatest uptake in services on post-secondary campuses, communication tools should target multiple youth-specific barriers to help-seeking in an integrated fashion.

# Conclusions

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As a group, students report high levels of distress.

Results from the **Emotions Calendar Project** demonstrate that students' levels of distress vary as function of complex interactions between personal characteristics and circumstances, the academic cycle and associated demands, their relationships, and their ability to manage competing demands.

Beyond academics and career preparation, universities must address the broader challenges students face to support well-being now and into the future.

Universities are well-positioned to promote well-being and resilience because many services and programs already exist.

Campus programming is typically comprehensive, but delivery is often not integrated.

If students do not know about campus supports, do not know how to access them, or are reluctant to access them, they will not serve their intended purpose.

Our results suggest that post-secondary institutions should approach student well-being with an integrated holistic view of student life.



# Acknowledgements

The Emotions Calendar Project is a research collaboration initiated by Gaya Arasaratnam, former director of Campus Wellness and Support Services at Concordia University, current director of Wellbeing and Accessibility Services at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, and led by Dr. Erin Barker from the Department of Psychology at Concordia University.

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*We acknowledge that Concordia University is located on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters where this research was conducted. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today, it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We respect the continued connections with the past, present and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.*