

HARVARD CHAN MENTAL STUDENT ALLIANCE

Mental Wellness of Students at Harvard Chan

SPRING 2018 SURVEY

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Executive Summary

SURVEY OBJECTIVES

The Harvard Chan Mental Health Student Alliance (MHSA) is a student group whose mission includes the promotion of a positive and inclusive environment for student mental health. To advance this mission, last spring MHSA conducted Harvard Chan's first-ever student mental wellness survey. Based on the recommendations from those findings, our follow-up survey this year had three objectives:

1. Continue to assess overall student mental wellness
2. Identify where students access information about mental wellness resources at Harvard
3. Understand what resources students need to succeed at Harvard Chan

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

About 15% of the current student body participated in the survey. Since the survey was voluntary, these results only represent the views of the respondents and not all Harvard Chan students. Respondents were 82% female and 17% male; 77% were domestic and 23% were international students; and 47% identified as White, 30% as Asian, 7% as more than one race, 6% as Black or African American, 4% as Hispanic or Latino, and 6% identified as other or did not respond.

CURRENT STATE OF MENTAL WELLNESS

Overall, self-assessments of mental health were split, with about half of student respondents reporting good to excellent mental health and about half reporting poor to fair mental health. Additionally, the majority of respondents indicated that they experienced positive and/or negative changes in their mental wellness since starting Harvard Chan (94% attributing changes to coursework or degree programs, and 87% attributing changes to the greater Harvard Chan environment).

CHALLENGES AND PEER RECOMMENDATIONS

Students reported a number of challenges during their time at Harvard Chan. They also provided recommendations for addressing these challenges. The most endorsed challenge (72%) was maintaining healthy habits (e.g., nutrition, exercise, sleep), and the most common peer recommendation was the importance of building in routines to sustain healthy habits. Additional challenges related to schoolwork included managing research and/or practice (67%), finding places to study or work (62%), and managing academic stressors more broadly (62%). Peer recommendations acknowledged the structural causes of these stresses, but also encouraged their peers to create strong organizational systems, get off campus to work, take time to stay socially connected (including with people outside of Harvard), and take time to invest in oneself (including taking breaks and taking time off).

NEXT STEPS

This report coincides with a recent study published in Nature Biotechnology of a convenience sample of graduate students (primarily PhD candidates) across 234 institutes in 26 countries that suggests there is a the mental health "crisis" in graduate education, with over a third of students in that study experiencing moderate-to-severe anxiety (41%) and depression (39%), which is six times the rates of the general population.^[1] At Harvard, the recent Report of the Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging endorsed a focus on resources to enhance mental health services in support of well-being as one of its 3 high-impact first steps. Clearly, there is an urgency for continued action to promote mental wellness at Harvard Chan as part of these larger contexts.

We know that simply providing resources is not enough, and that there is still much left to be done in targeting the structural factors (e.g., financial stresses, inflexible policies and deadlines, poor interactions with faculty) about our school that cause students to need these resources in the first place. In light of this, our recommendations following this survey are:

- **Promote a culture of wellness at Harvard Chan to prioritize healthy habits including exercise, sleep, nutrition, and social ties.**
- **Openly discuss and plan strategies to address structural factors that contribute to day-to-day distress.**
- **Speak to students to understand why they would or would not use current resources and to identify which resources are most useful to them, ensuring inclusion of targeted outreach to students of color.**
- **Institutionalize surveillance and combine it with meaningful change.**

Overview of Results

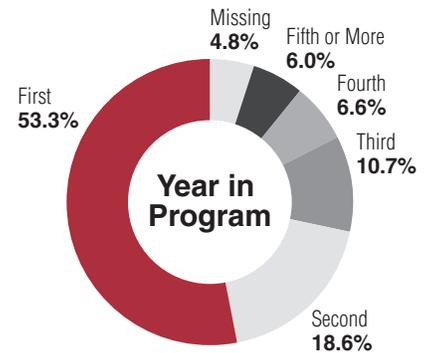
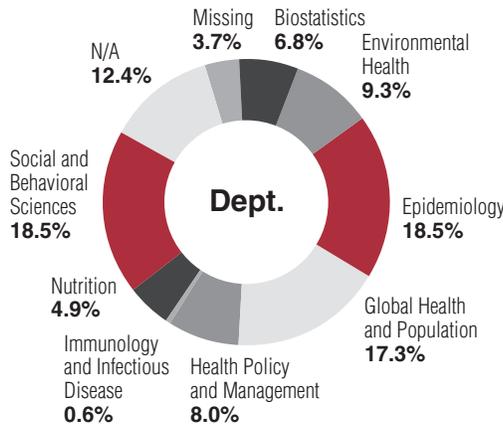
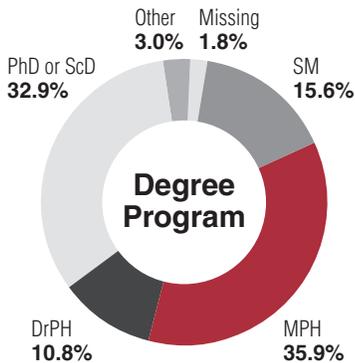
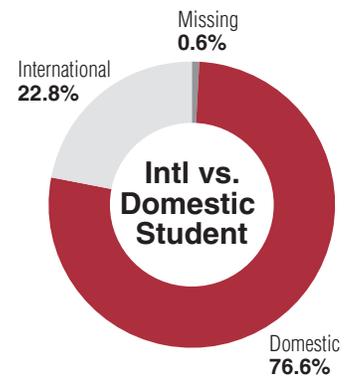
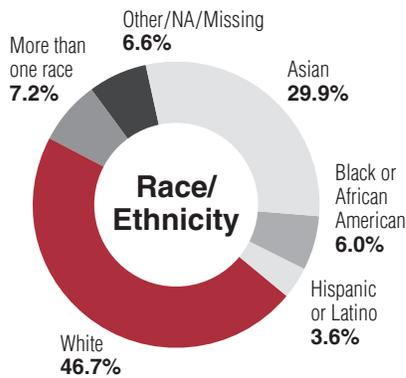
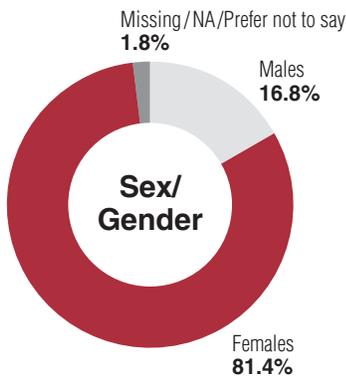
Survey Respondents

Our survey was completely voluntary; therefore the results represent the views of only the respondents and do not necessarily reflect the thoughts and feelings of all Harvard Chan students. Interpretation of all results should take this into account.

167 / 1,130
TOTAL RESPONDENTS

APPROXIMATELY
15%
OF THE CURRENT STUDENT BODY

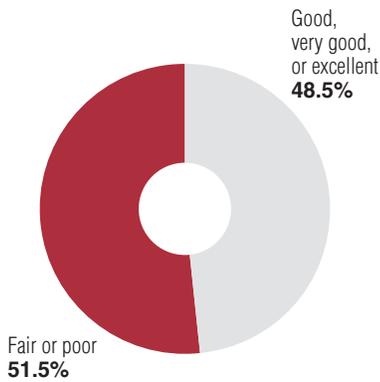
(**22-49**)
AGE RANGE
MEAN AGE **28**



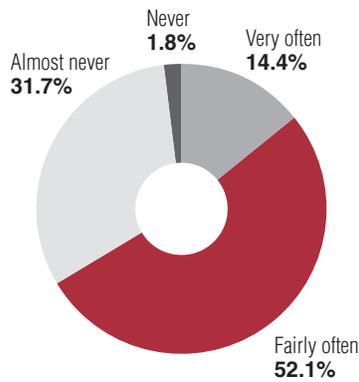
All groups have the same denominator = 167 (the total respondents)

Current State of Mental Wellness

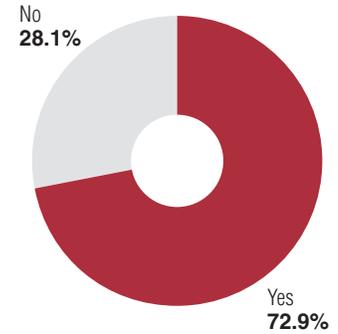
OVERALL MENTAL HEALTH:



Current Overall Mental Health
(among 167 respondents)



How often has your mental health had a negative effect on your quality of life in the past 2 months?



If you were experiencing a mental health issue, would you know where to turn to for help?

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

There were no significant differences in overall mental health by degree program, year in degree program, department, gender, race/ethnicity, or international student status (all $p > 0.05$).

However, racial and ethnic minorities were more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to report that their mental health had a negative effect on their quality of life over the past two months (Chi-Square p -value = 0.09 [marginal significance]).

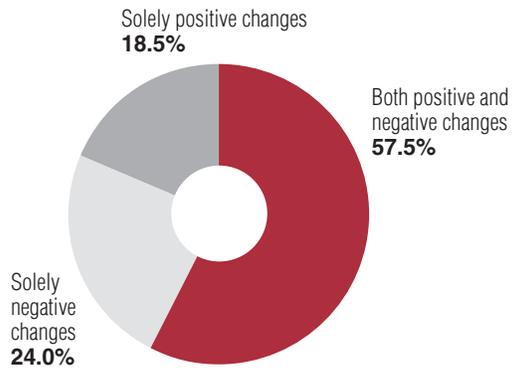
There were also differences by gender and race/ethnicity on whether respondents knew where to turn for help if they were experiencing a mental health issue. Male respondents were less likely than female respondents to know where to turn for help (Chi-Square p -value = 0.02). There were differences by race/ethnicity, with Asian individuals reporting the lowest likelihood of knowing where to turn to for help relative to other ethnic minority students and non-Hispanic white students (Chi-Square p -value < 0.0001). However, responses did not differ by degree program, department or international student status.

From write-in responses, we also know that some students might feel especially excluded or isolated and could use additional efforts for inclusion or support, including older students, married students, and low-income students.

HOW HAS MENTAL WELLNESS CHANGED SINCE COMING TO HARVARD CHAN:

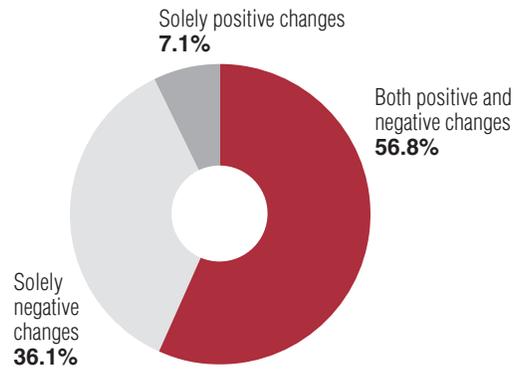
Over 94% of respondents indicated changes in mental wellness since starting at Harvard Chan that can be attributed to **coursework or degree programs**.

About 87% of respondents indicated that changes in mental wellness since starting Harvard Chan could be attributed to the **greater Harvard Chan environment**.



Coursework/Degree Programs

Of those who indicated changes in mental wellness...



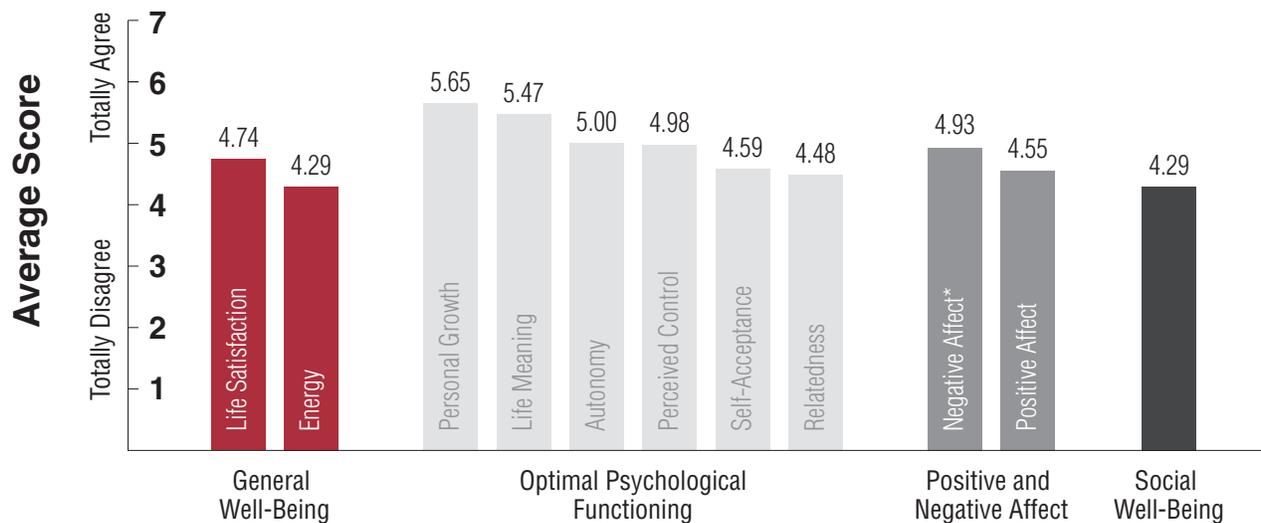
Greater Harvard Chan Environment

Of those who indicated changes in mental wellness...

PERCEIVED WELL-BEING:

We adapted the Pemberton Happiness Index^[2] as a well-validated, multi-dimensional measure of both general well-being (retrospective well-being over the course of one’s life) and recent well-being (momentary well-being in the past week). This measure considers aspects such as optimal psychological functioning, life satisfaction, social well-being, and positive and negative affect.

In general: Respondents scored highest on items related to the subscale about optimal psychological functioning, which includes measures of personal growth, life meaning, a sense of autonomy, perceived control, and self-acceptance. Respondents also scored in the same range for a measure of general well-being based on life satisfaction. However, scores were the lowest on positive and negative affective experiences on a day-to-day basis (e.g., both enjoying a lot of little things every day and also having a lot of bad moments in daily life).



Domains of General Well-Being

(among 167 respondents)

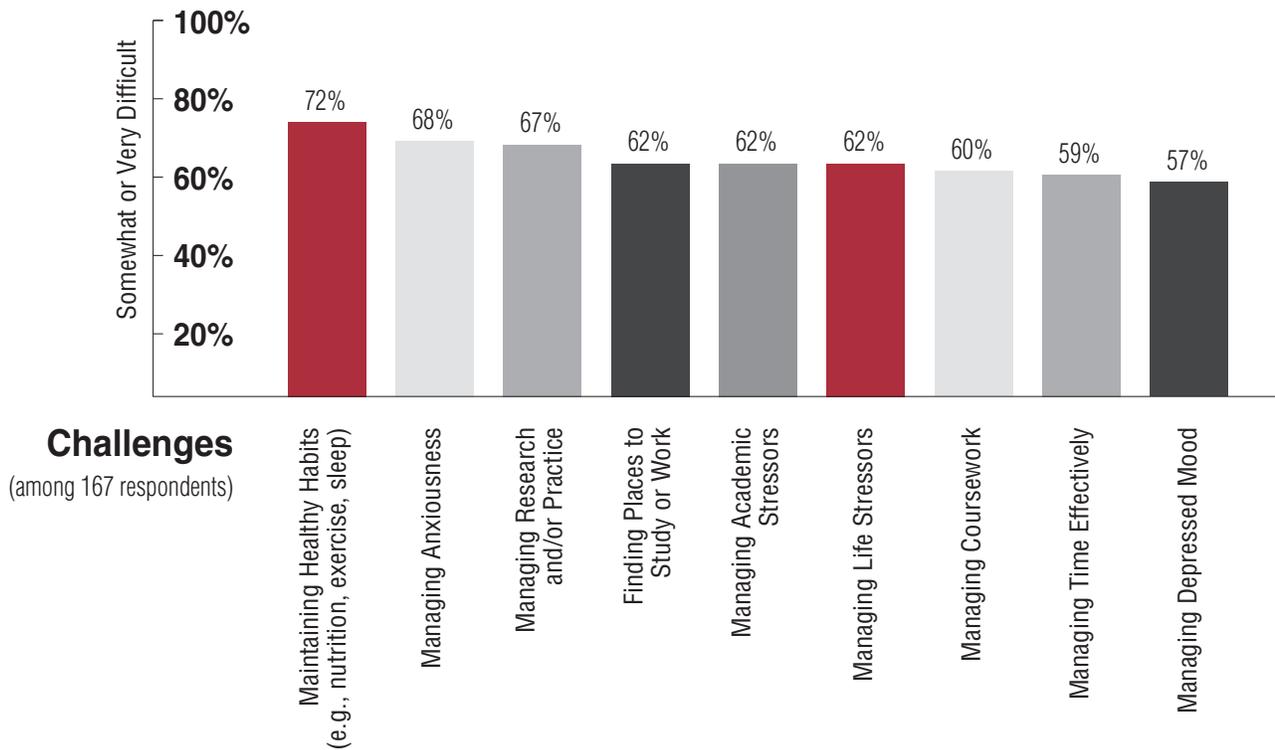
*Note: Negative affect is reverse coded

In the past week: On average, respondents reported more positive than negative satisfaction for the past week, with the highest positive endorsements for learning something interesting (88%), doing something that made them proud (80%), and doing something fun (90%). However, students also reported negative experiences including feeling disrespected (47%), worrying about personal matters (86%), and feeling overwhelmed (93%).

Overall: Together, these data suggest Harvard Chan students do have a strong sense of positive well-being in terms of purpose in life and seeking our experiences to meet those needs, even as they also experience negative well-being from suboptimal experiences in their day-to-day lives.

Mental Wellness Challenges at Harvard Chan

Respondents were asked to indicate how easy or difficult the following things were since coming to Harvard Chan:



Together, these data remind us of the importance of using a holistic approach to address students' needs at Harvard Chan. The school must provide the infrastructure and support necessary for students to maintain their healthy habits and manage both external life stressors and school-related stressors.

Overall: The most endorsed challenge (72%) was maintaining healthy habits, and there were total of 9 challenges that were endorsed by more than 50% of respondents as somewhat or very difficult to do since coming to Harvard Chan.

Peer Recommendations to Promote Mental Wellness

Of the 167 respondents, 125 respondents (75%) included recommendations for their peers on their strategies to maintain mental wellness.

Several themes emerged including recommendations for how to take advantage of school resources and manage one's expectations around school work, the critical importance of healthy habits (especially exercise and sleep), the value of staying socially connected to friends and family, the benefits of regular counseling or therapy, and the need for investing time in yourself. We plan to continue to share more specific suggestions across media including on the OSA website, on the screens around campus, in Student News, and in MHSA programming.

WHILE AT SCHOOL:



OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL:



Recommendations For Next Steps

In addition to the survey data, qualitative analysis of the write-in responses emphasize the importance of integrating mental health across the institution. As people who study and practice public health, we need to have more discussions about mental health and more opportunities and supports to take care of ourselves. Respondents also reminded us that an emphasis on available resources does not address the root of the problem, ignoring the larger structural factors that contribute to stress in the first place. Given this, surveys are important but they are not helpful if they do not ask the right questions or are not linked to tangible changes. With this in mind, our recommendations for next steps are:

- **Promote a culture of wellness at Harvard Chan to prioritize healthy habits including exercise, sleep, nutrition, and social ties.** This is the #1 challenge that respondents found difficult to keep doing, and #1 recommendation they had for peers.
- **Openly discuss and plan strategies to address structural factors that contribute to day-to-day distress.** Students want to feel recognized that their concerns are real. Research indicates that when students perceive campuses as more supportive, they are more likely to reach out.^[3]
- **Speak to students to understand why they would or would not use current resources and to identify which resources are most useful to them, ensuring inclusion of targeted outreach to students of color.** We must expand our notion of resources to broader aspects of the school from department and program specific policies and procedures to financial aid and career advancement. Additionally, work must be done to ensure accessibility to resources as well as to identify resources that are high quality and appropriate for all students, including those of color.
- **Institutionalize surveillance and combine it with meaningful change.** 96% of respondents thought a recurrent annual survey about student mental wellness was important (70% said very important). We strongly endorse instituting the HUHS survey, as had been implemented at other Harvard schools, as an external and consistent monitor of student mental wellness. This can provide insights on a more representative sample of Harvard Chan students and also assess structural barriers, while student groups like MHSA will be better positioned to advocate for the more particular and granular details of what students want and need.

Survey Background and Methodology

SURVEY BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Harvard Chan Mental Health Student Alliance (MHSA) is a student group whose mission includes the promotion of a positive and inclusive environment for student mental health.

To advance this mission, last spring MHSA conducted Harvard Chan's first-ever student mental wellness survey. This survey indicated that, for many students, the school environment negatively affects their mental wellness, that the school has a responsibility to promote mental wellness, and that we want and need institutional changes, not quick fixes. Check out the full report for last year's results and our recommendations for next steps. <http://bit.ly/mhsa2017>

Two of the five recommendations were to improve navigation of mental health resources and to train faculty and staff to respond better to student distress. This year, we decided to combine those two objectives by advocating for the creation of a centralized resource portal, and to use this portal as a teaching tool to train faculty and staff on both school-based mental stressors and strategies to support students. A group of students came together to volunteer their time and create a template for the content that would like to see for themselves and their peers. **We are proud to announce that based on this hard work, we will be partnering with the Office of Student Affairs this summer to create this portal.**

In light of this, our follow-up survey this year had three objectives:

1. Continue to assess overall student mental wellness
2. Identify where students access information about mental wellness resources at Harvard
3. Understand what resources students need to succeed at Harvard Chan

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Survey Development: The needs assessment was developed over several months by a team of students across degree programs and departments who chose to volunteer their time. Since the project is intended for internal quality improvement, it did not require IRB approval.

Data Confidentiality: To ensure all data were de-identified, the data was split into four separate files for analysis and the original data file was destroyed.

Survey Response: There was different numbers of missing values depending on the question, therefore total respondents for each section are noted. Total enrollment data for 2017-18 is based on: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/about/key-facts/enrollment-degrees/>

Statistical Note: All reported p-values are based on Chi-Square statistics or Fisher exact tests (when cell sizes are low) comparing proportions by groups. In some cases, we are likely underpowered to detect differences between subgroups.

We would like to thank David Abramson, MD, Karestan Koenen, PhD, and David Williams, PhD, MPH for their scientific guidance; Meredith Rosenthal, Nancy Turnbull, and the Office of Student Affairs for their continued support; Ruijia Chen and Ayesha McAdams-Mahmoud for reviewing early drafts of the survey; and Danielle Nishimi for the design of the current report.

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If you would like to learn more or have any questions or comments, contact MHSA at hsph.mhsa@gmail.com or visit us at <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/mental-health-so/>

^[1] Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature biotechnology*, 36(3), 282.

^[2] Hervás, G., & Vázquez, C. (2013). Construction and validation of a measure of integrative well-being in seven languages: The Pemberton Happiness Index. *Health and quality of life outcomes*, 11(1), 66.

^[3] Stein, Bradley D., Lisa Sontag-Padilla, J. Scott Ashwood, Michelle W. Woodbridge, Nicole K. Eberhart, Libby May, Rachana Seelam, Brian Briscoe, Joshua Mendelsohn, Elizabeth J. D'Amico, Karen Chan Osilla, Lisa H. Jaycox, and M. Audrey Burnam, *Campus Climate Matters: Changing the Mental Health Climate on College Campuses Improves Student Outcomes and Benefits Society*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9904.html.