

## Summarising the research

The most effective strategies to promote the mental wellbeing of university students are:

- Sustainable and integrated - so that solutions are accessible and embedded across the whole university
- Curricula-based - so that all students have the opportunity to develop valuable life skills and resilience to support their mental wellbeing
- Embedded within the institution's policies and practices - so that the promotion of mental health and wellbeing becomes a part of a university's culture and everyday processes
- Informed by the most recent research, and updated to reflect changes in evidence.



### What is Healthy Sydney University?

Healthy Sydney University is a university-wide initiative that aims to promote and improve the health and wellbeing of our community at the University of Sydney. We work to find evidence-informed ways to create healthy, sustainable and vibrant campuses. Our focus is on bringing staff and students together and using existing resources to support wellbeing for the whole University community.

Healthy Sydney University believes the best outcomes for health and wellbeing come from:

- Supporting healthy people
- Building healthy places
- Developing healthy policies and practices.

1. Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K. R., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62, 593-602.  
2. ABS (2008), National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results 2007, p.9, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4326.0>.  
3. Stallman, H.M. (2010), Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, 45: 249-257.  
4. Renner, P., O'Dea, B., Sheehan, J. and Tebbutt, J. (2015), Days out of role in university students: The association of demographics, binge drinking, and psychological risk factors. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 67: 157-165.

### For more information

+61 2 9036 7891  
healthy.uni@sydney.edu.au  
sydney.edu.au/healthy-sydney-university

### Like to know more?

If you would like to discuss these findings and recommendations in greater detail, or for a copy of the full report, please contact [healthy.uni@sydney.edu.au](mailto:healthy.uni@sydney.edu.au).

**Mental wellbeing. Put your mind to it.**



## A blueprint for student mental wellbeing in universities



Key evidence compiled by the Healthy Sydney University Mental Wellbeing working group

## Things to keep in mind about mental health

- Young people in universities are a high risk group for experiencing mental ill health, as it is estimated that up to 75% of adult mental health conditions emerge by age 24<sup>1</sup>
- One in four young Australians has some form of mental health condition<sup>2</sup>
- University can be a challenging environment for young people; rates of anxiety-mood disorders of university students in Australia are significantly higher than that of the general population<sup>3</sup>
- Poor mental wellbeing and high levels of psychological distress can result in students being unable to meet their academic and other day-to-day commitments<sup>4</sup>
- Mental ill health can be managed well with early treatment and help; encouraging young people to seek help early is therefore a key way to support students to flourish at university.

“This review has provided a timely opportunity for Healthy Sydney University to consider the research on student mental wellbeing within a university setting. We will use this research to support further collaborations with students and staff so that we can implement some of these evidence-informed strategies at the University of Sydney.”

**Dr Marie Leech**  
Chair, Mental Wellbeing Working Group  
Healthy Sydney University

## Great minds don't always think alike

Universities are dynamic and high achieving environments. But university life can present challenges that may affect the mental wellbeing of any student at any time:

- Academic pressures
- Transition from high school to university
- Financial worries
- Moving away from home
- Social isolation and loneliness.

**The question:** What are the most effective strategies and approaches that universities can implement to promote the mental wellbeing of their students?

To find the answer, a review of the literature was conducted, starting with an initial list of over 18,000 journal papers. Twenty-nine papers met our criteria in relation to student mental wellbeing and were reviewed. These papers:

- Focused on the setting or environment of a university
- Looked at ideas applicable to the whole university community rather than only targeting individual health behaviours
- Evaluated programs designed to improve mental health and/or wellbeing
- Measured outcomes relating to student mental health or wellbeing.



## From the evidence Four ways a university can support the mental wellbeing of its students

According to the research, a university that supports and promotes student mental health includes some or all of these strategies:

### 1. Considering alternate academic strategies

Strategies that improve the academic environment of a degree or course can have a significant impact on student mental wellbeing. For example, students in a pass/fail grading system reported less stress and a greater sense of wellbeing than those in a five grade system. Breaking long courses into smaller segments also could have a positive effect.

### 3. Developing and promoting the use of eHealth technologies

eHealth technologies and resources can be effective at improving mental wellbeing, as they can be personalised and accessible to a large number of people at any time. Universities should increase access to emerging evidence-based apps and e-tools, and support their further research and development.

### 2. Infusing mental health knowledge and skills in the curriculum

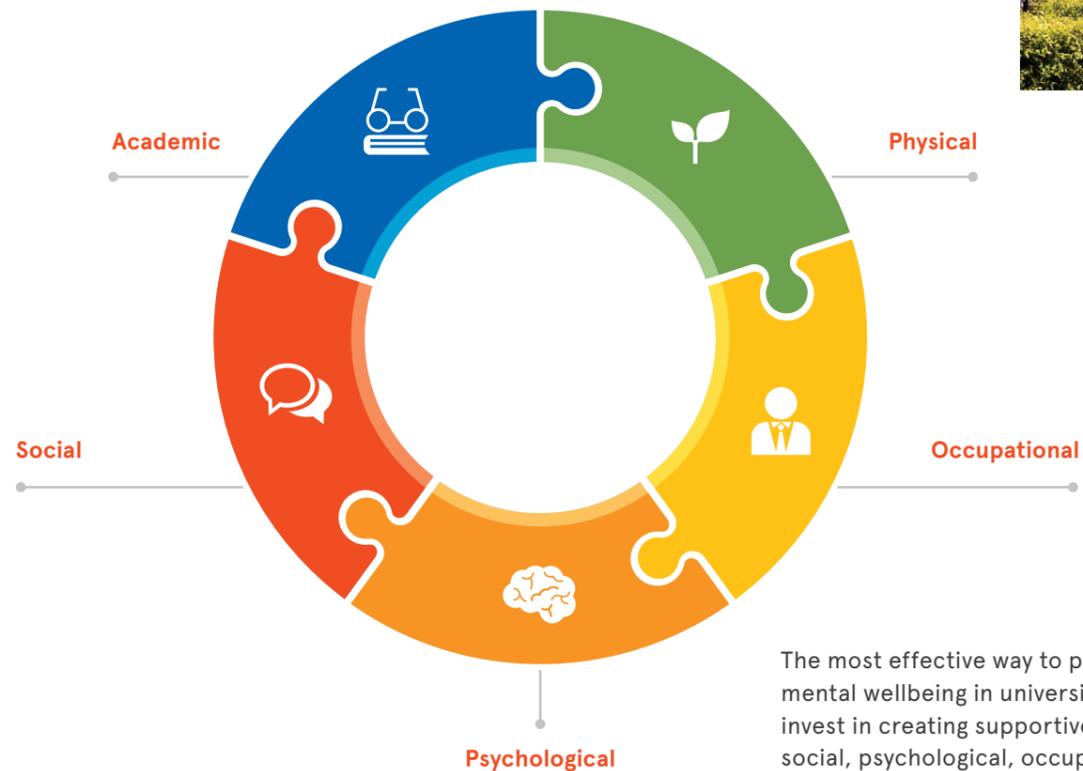
Courses that promote mental wellbeing and the development of resilience are effective at support student mental wellbeing when embedded or infused as part of the academic curricula. For example, creating opportunities in the classroom to discuss how to reduce stress and build resilience through physical activity and mindfulness or meditation-based programs.

### 4. Building healthy physical environments

The physical (built and natural) environment of a university can enhance mental wellbeing through the provision of natural light, green spaces, and relaxation areas. Even a window giving a view to the outside landscape can positively impact on the mental wellbeing of students in that room.



## Putting the mental wellbeing pieces together



The most effective way to promote mental wellbeing in universities is to invest in creating supportive academic, social, psychological, occupational and physical environments for both students and staff.

### What doesn't work?

One thing that is clear from the research: providing standard education and marketing information about mental health is the least effective way to promote mental wellbeing. While these approaches may increase knowledge, there is little to no impact on mental health outcomes or an individual's health behaviours.

