

Health and Well-being Tips for Distance Learning University Students

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Abstract: According to the World Health Organization, the well-being of university students is essential for students' collective and individual ability to think, perceive emotions, cooperate with each other, earn a living and experience the joy of life. From this point of view, both the protection and restoration of mental health and the development of the student's well-being should be of fundamental interest not only to individuals, but especially to communities and societies around the world. The paper presents the possible ways to actively support the health and well-being of students during distance learning at Czech universities and colleges, as specific institutions; comprehensively, beyond a circumscribed focus on student academics (e.g. student motivation), to the systematic development of the academic well-being of all students (e.g. building up well-being through the adoption of the principles of a healthy lifestyle). The paper presents methodological recommendations that are aimed at actively supporting the health and well-being of university students during distance learning. Specific recommendations are provided for each context with reference to nine routes to well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, physical health, environment, mindset, and economic security.

Key words: academic well-being, university student, distance learning, methodological recommendations, theory of well-being, potential, mental health, building well-being.

The new era of learning

As the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) spread across the world, many local authorities imposed “lock-downs” or “stay at home” orders. Such measures restricted university students' presence on campus, precluding contact education and thus preventing students'

interaction and socialisation with other students and teachers.

Such provisions are known to be effective for protecting public health by slowing viral spread. But such provisions can also be expected to come with great costs to students' well-being (Quezada et al., 2020; Amirkhan et al., 2020; Garvis et al., 2020; Amponsah et al., 2020; Baloran

et al., 2020; Arribathi et al., 2020; Biber et al., 2020; Bolumole et al., 2020; Cahapay et al., 2020; Cleofas et al., 2020; Kibbey et al., 2020; Lui et al., 2020; Mohlman et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2020; Pascoe et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2020 & Scotta et al., 2020).

In the last two decades, a number of medical pandemics have yielded insights into the mental health impact of these events. Based on these experiences and given the magnitude of the current pandemic, rates of mental health disorders increased. Negative mental well-being consequences have been reported, not only among the general public but among students at all levels, including university students who, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were the first to leave in-person contact and the last to return.

The concept of traditional education has changed radically within the last decade and, considering what the emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, we can safely state that online and distance learning are at least part of the future of education (Adedoyin et al., 2020; Bryson et al., 2020; Carrillo et al., 2020; Donista et al., 2020; Firat et al., 2020; Firat et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Majumdar et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Sangster et al.).

Both the COVID-19 crisis itself as well as the resulting health and mental well-being crisis are global problems that may require global solutions. Health and well-being education and mental health inter-

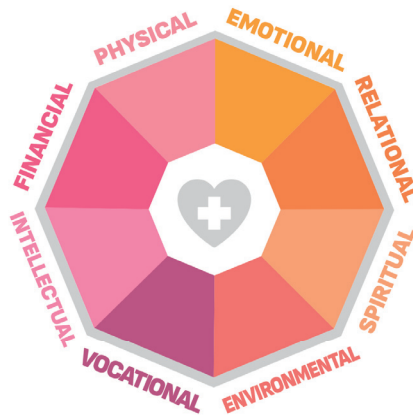
ventions are not only urgently needed to minimise the psychological sequelae of the COVID-19 world pandemic but we have also learned how crucial health and well-being education will be for future distance learning settings (Harvard University, 2021; Kelly-Ann et al., 2020; Rossen et al., 2020; Batchelor et al., 2020; Cage et al., 2020; Lazarevis et al., 2021; Luciano et al., 2020; Ramlo et al., 2021; Salimi et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Wey et al., 2020 & Yusuf et al., 2020). We need to equip distance learning students, who don't have the luxury of regular face-to-face social support from other students and teachers (in contrast to contact education), in order to help them study effectively with high levels of health and well-being.

Various health and mental well-being interventions have been developed for distance learning, and research on their effectiveness is increasing. Systematic scientific research on the well-being and performance of university students offers recommendations for making online education as effective as possible.

Distance learning and overall health

One in three university students experiences mental health problems during their study. A similar percentage leaves higher education without obtaining the degree for which they enrolled (Dekker et al., 2020).

Figure 1. Multidimensionality of well-being based on Harvard & the David S. Rosenthal Center (redesigned by Kočí & Donaldson; 2021)



Not only does the first year of university come with a relatively high risk of not succeeding academically, but it also puts a lot of pressure on students. It is, in addition, a period with a higher risk of mental health-related issues and, subsequently, low levels of well-being (Hunt et al., 2010; Auerbach et al., 2018; Bruffaerts et al., 2018 & Choi et al., 2018). Mental health and well-being are related and contribute to a decline in students' academic performance (in the current studies, defined in terms of student retention, grade point average and obtained credits) (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Research shows that university students with mental health problems are twice as likely to drop out (Kessler et al., 1995 & Hartley et al., 2010), and

depression and suicidal thoughts relate to a poorer academic performance (Mortier et al., 2015; De Luca et al., 2016 & Godmen et al., 2013). Studies on stress and the coping mechanisms of university students have revealed a negative effect of stress overload and avoidance coping on college performance (Amirkan et al., 2020). Mental health and academic performance are thus very much interrelated (Dekker et al., 2020).

It has been widely accepted that well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon (Figure 1). In other words, well-being is a dynamic and fluid continuum influenced by many interconnected dimensions. The World Health Organization⁵² propounds three dimensions of well-being: physical well-being, mental well-being

and social well-being. Another example is the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University, which frames well-being in eight dimensions. These dimensions are: physical well-being, emotional well-being, relational well-being, spiritual well-being, environmental well-being, vocational well-being, intellectual well-being, and financial well-being (Harvard University, 2021). These above-mentioned composites provide a holistic approach to health and well-being by breaking down the abstract concepts of well-being into specific proportions. The challenge each of us experiences is finding the balance that works throughout the many seasons of our lives, especially through the years spent at university, including distance learning. Key ingredients are appreciating the eight dimensions of well-being below, and learning what works best for you while studying at home.

The well-being framework and practical tips for university students on how to actively support their mental well-being during distance learning

One of the biggest barriers to effective learning in recent years has been managing mental discomfort, and it is one of the most significant challenges we face in the modern university environment. The majority of universities worldwide

are transitioning partially to a distance learning environment, following not only the recent circumstances of the pandemic but also general educational trends. Thus, the overall health of university students, including mental health management during distance learning, has become a main target for improving academic well-being.

One study⁵⁴ assessed life satisfaction and perceived stress among undergraduate university students in Barbados. The findings indicated that higher levels of perceived stress were associated with lower levels of satisfaction with life. The major predictors of students' life satisfaction were their living environment, campus facilities, and perceived stress.

Let science help you to manage your health and well-being while distance learning, dear students. Learn about the components of well-being and improve your health and performance immediately, using the tips and activities presented below!

Practical tips for strengthening well-being addressed to university students

Emotional well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework, emotional well-being involves the recognition and acceptance of all of our thoughts and feelings, whether

positive or negative. This awareness and acceptance of our emotions is necessary in cultivating balance and resilience and supports us in developing and nurturing relationships and friendships (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your emotional well-being with these tips, based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Take time to quiet your mind and reflect on your day, including your study activities.
- Share your thoughts and feelings (including those related to your studies) with someone you trust, and listen to others' emotions too, whether it is your friend, family member, classmate or counselling psychologist.
- Take care of your body. Eat well, exercise, and sleep soundly - your emotional and physical health are interconnected, and both are very important for your ability to learn.
- Laugh! Don't take life so seriously, even though studying can be very challenging sometimes. Humour is sometimes the best medicine!
- Spend time outdoors in the fresh air before, in between or after your online classes.
- We are our own harshest critics. Be kind to yourself and do not beat yourself up for university failure or not being in line with your study group.

Potential Benefits

- A clearer mind for learning and absorbing new information.
- A better overall mood.
- Enhanced self-esteem, not only in a university environment.
- Better communication skills you can use to your advantage in your study.

Relational well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework (Figure 1), relational health focuses on establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships with yourself, individuals around you, as well as groups and communities. Relational health develops from our interactions and connections with others. Having a network grounded in supportive relationships in our life, as well as in our university environment, can help create feelings of satisfaction and security (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your relational well-being with these tips, based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Take time to get to know yourself better, think about your beliefs, values and how they are connected to your studies.
- Join a club or organisation at your university.
- Participate in study groups actively.

- Make an effort to stay in touch with family, friends, classmates and mentors.
- Volunteer in the community when possible.
- Maintain balance between study and social time!

Potential Benefits:

- Feelings of inclusion and belonging.
- Support during times of need, in life as well as at university.
- Personal growth & confidence – becoming more comfortable with who you are.
- Increased communication skills that can be advantageous for your studies.
- Conflict management.

Intellectual well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework, intellectual well-being has nothing to do with testing your intelligence and grades but instead relates to concepts like intellectual transformation and new ways of knowing. As with your physical and emotional health, your intellect needs nourishment, too. Intellectual well-being consists of critical thinking, constructive thinking, visualisation, stimulating curiosity, problem solving, and creativity. Intellectual well-being isn't confined to the classroom, but instead requires lifelong sustainment and cultivation (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your intellectual well-being with these tips, which are based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Take a class outside of your field or focus of study!
- Read for pleasure – don't focus only on scientific literature. Read some drama, fantasy, fiction, history book or anything you are in the mood for.
- Check out a seminar or conference on something you're unfamiliar with!
- Attend a play, museum exhibition or poetry reading.
- Debate with someone in your class (respectfully) or outside of the university.
- Try to learn another language.
- Do crossword puzzles for fun.
- Engage in research opportunities when possible.

Potential Benefits:

- Improved cognition.
- Experience of a more stimulating life.
- Development of personal values and opinions!
- Open-mindedness and respect toward different opinions.
- Clearer thinking.
- Improved concentration and memory, which can be advantageous for your studies.

Spiritual well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework (Figure 1), spiritual well-being can stem from beliefs, faith, hope, values, ethics or moral principles that provide purpose and meaning in our lives. It can be nurtured or cultivated through prayer, meditation, time in the natural world, deep listening and, very importantly, thorough self-reflection (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your spiritual well-being with these tips, which are based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Keep a journal and write about your experiences from your personal and university life.
- Spend time in nature as much as possible and reflect. Enjoy your time away from screens.
- Explore meditation and mindfulness.
- Attend religious services if interested.

Potential Benefits:

- Sense of purpose and meaning in your studies and personal life.
- Resilience to university and personal life stresses.
- Clear values to live by!

Financial well-being

As a key component of the well-being fra-

mework (Figure 1), financial well-being means being mindful of your **financial decision making**. Supporting financial health can look like differentiating between **needs and wants** and living within your means, and managing short-term and long-term financial goals you set for yourself in both your personal life and in your student life (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your financial well-being with these tips, which are based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Track and review your spending by monitoring your bank account and keeping a list of all your purchases in one week. Get creative, track your spending in notes on your phone or write it down every evening – it may be more helpful than you think.
- Start with small changes that will add up over time (i.e. making your own coffee rather than buying it at the university cafeteria, bringing snacks from home or preparing your lunch at home between online classes).
- Check what you have at home before you go shopping. Write a list of groceries you actually need and set a budget for yourself before going shopping.
- Ask yourself “do I really need this?” before an unplanned purchase.

- Start a savings account – add a small monthly automatic payment if possible or whatever is affordable as a student.
- Do not be shy to ask for student discounts!

Potential Benefits

- Achieve personal financial goals.
- Reduce debt.
- Decrease financial stress, which can be so unhealthy for students.
- Feel in control of and secure in your finances!
- Increase savings for tomorrow!

Vocational well-being

For most of us, discovering our vocation is a journey of education, decisions, experiences, and being mindful of them. As a key component of the well-being framework (Figure 1), vocational well-being consists of having an occupation that aligns with our skills and values, challenges us, lets us grow and gives us a sense of fulfilment in our everyday lives. Important components consist of goals and ambition, job satisfaction, and a feeling of meaning and purpose (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your vocational well-being with these tips, which are based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Reflect often – where do you find joy and meaning in your life? Is it somehow related to your studies? How?
- Explore different career and/or volunteer opportunities that arise in order to explore whether you actually enjoy doing it or not!
- Keep an open mind and try many different activities at university!
- Participate in internships or research opportunities. Check what possibilities your university offers!
- Take advantage of career service resources at your university!

Potential Benefits

- Foster university/work and life balance.
- Be mindful - feel a sense of satisfaction and stimulation!
- Open doors to new opportunities, not only at university!
- Discover new skills and interests!
- Experience a feeling of worth and value mindfully. Ask yourself what activities let you experience such feelings. How are they related to your studies?

Environmental well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework (Figure 1), environmental well-being means leading a lifestyle that values the relationship between us, our community, and the environment around

us, either our personal environment or the university environment. Individual well-being is affected by the environments we live in and we, as individuals, also have a significant impact on these environments. Cultivating environmental well-being requires us to recognise our responsibility to protect the earth and promote lifestyle practices that serve to sustain the natural environment and its resources (Harvard University, 2021).

Foster your environmental well-being with these tips, which are based on the advice of the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

- Recycle – take advantage of waste sorting bins in the university halls!
- Bike or walk when you can. Your regular physical activity will help to reduce your emissions and is also good for your cognitive performance.
- Use reusable bags and water bottles whenever you can.
- Be mindful of your water use!
- Go to the farmers' market, choose locally sourced food and support local farmers and growers!
- Turn off lights and electronics when not in use and have your classmates do so as well.
- Unplug devices when you are not working on your university preparation.
- Donate unwanted clothing.

Potential Benefits

- Reduce your carbon footprint on the earth.
- Small changes add to big changes in preserving our environment.
- Save money, which counts especially for students!
- Feel good about your practices and live as a good example for your classmates.
- Locally grown food is fresher and more nutritious.

Physical well-being

As a key component of the well-being framework (Figure 1), physical well-being is an essential component of overall well-being that directly affects not only long-term health but also how we feel from moment to moment. Important aspects of physical health include exercise, nutrition, sleep, sexual health, and making healthy decisions around substance use. Remember – fostering your physical well-being and tuning in to your body's needs not only promotes your physical health, but can benefit your emotional, intellectual and relational well-being, too (Amirkhan et al., 2020).

Foster your physical well-being with these tips, which are based on advice from the David S. Rosenthal Center for Wellness and Health Promotion at Harvard University Health Services and adapted for the lifestyle of students (Kočí & Donaldson, 2021):

Exercise

Students especially tend to sit for long hours studying and working on computers. But do your body and brain a favor and make moving your body a priority! The best way to develop and sustain a movement routine is to find something that you enjoy! Explore different types of exercise and movement practices and see what works for you (Harvard University, 2021).

Potential Benefits

- Reduce overall stress and stress related to university!
- Increase energy for living and studying.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Improve memory, focus & productivity, not only in studying!
- Sleep better, which leads to a better study day.
- Improve mood & self-esteem, which can be used as an advantage for many study activities!

Nutrition

Students sometimes tend to save time for learning and studying by cutting down on food preparation time. Students often eat in a rush, which mostly leads to unhealthy food choices. Your body deserves nutritious fuel to enable you to perform your best! Focus on foods that nourish your body, and approach nutrition with a mindset of satisfaction,

connection, and abundance. Be mindful, and keep in mind that making healthy choices around food means discovering what works best for your body.² The food we eat not only affects our physical health, but also our emotional and mental health. A well-balanced diet can support successful performance in the classroom (Harvard University, 2021).

Potential Benefits

- Increase energy to study and enjoy life!
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Improve skin, nails and prevent hair loss!
- Reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer.
- Increase productivity for your studies.
- Improve your mood & self-esteem.

Sleep

Studying and learning can really drain our energy. Recharge your body and mind with quality sleep every night! Making time for a good night's rest is a wise investment, not only for students. A pattern of seven to eight hours of sleep will keep you feeling sharp and ready to tackle a productive day (Harvard University, 2021).

Potential Benefits

- Increase energy for any university activities you need to do.

- Improve memory, focus & decision-making!
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Improve productivity, which can be a great advantage for your studies.
- Reduce stress and help to prevent it.
- Improve your mood, which is always a good thing for students!

To see more tips please visit www.rdvsv.cz.

Conclusion

Academic well-being has lately garnered increased attention as a major factor in a university student's health. Constantly increasing student mental health issues, poor academic achievement and rising dropout rates call for effective positive psychology interventions that support well-being in students' everyday lives. University students are looking for a way to improve their personal well-being, as well as their academic achievements. There has been strong evidence for a correlation between well-being and the good academic performance of university students. The evidence accumulated by Positive Psychology over the past two decades strongly supports the existence of a link between well-being and a student's academic performance and the belief that such a link could effectively be developed through interventions promoting students' well-being. PERMA+4

might be used as one framework to guide future efforts to build an evidence base for the science of Positive Psychology. It could also be used as a framework to guide educational efforts at universities, in students' healthy lifestyle consulting and in well-being coaching protocols. Building up the well-being of students is meaningful and can be very effective. Positive university education can focus on both academic learning, delivering the traditional outcomes of education, as well as on building up students' well-being.

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