

INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE STRESS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A REVIEW AND META-ANALYSIS

C. Regehr¹, D. Glancy², A. Pitts³

¹Office of the Provost, University of Toronto, Toronto, ²Chemistry, Queen's University, Kingston, ³Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Background: Of late, highly publicized reports have revealed that approximately half of university students report moderate levels of stress-related mental health concerns including anxiety and depression. Other research reveals that university health services are only providing services to a small percentage of these students. Universities must therefore consider the use of accessible programs that address student stress and reduce resultant anxiety and depression.

Method: A systematic review of the literature and meta-analysis was conducted to examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing stress in university students. Studies were eligible for inclusion if the assignment of study participants to experimental or control groups was by random allocation or parallel cohort design.

Results: Twenty-four studies, involving 1431 students were included in the meta-analysis. The findings suggest that cognitive, behavioral and mindfulness-based interventions focused on stress reduction significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety. Further, despite variations in approaches in terms of length of intervention and specific components of the intervention (including such aspects as cognitive restructuring, relaxation and meditation) with students in different programs and in different countries, these results are remarkably consistent. Secondary outcomes included lower levels of depression and cortisol.

Conclusion: This review and meta-analysis provides strong support that cognitive, behavioral and mindfulness-based approaches are effective in reducing the effects of stress on university students. Given the high rates of stress-related mental health problems reported by university students, universities are advised to examine means to provide opportunities for larger numbers of students to access these interventions.