



Supporting students through the pandemic

A practical guide to mental wellbeing for sixth form colleges

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1. Summary

This guide is a practical resource for teachers and senior leaders in sixth form colleges. It contains 12 specific suggestions that you and your colleagues could implement to help students with their mental wellbeing.

These are not intended as replacements for the services that colleges already provide, or comprehensive solutions for students with serious mental health disorders. We've suggested these strategies because they are free, we think they'll be straightforward to implement, and they could help to offset some of the negative wellbeing consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our focus is on helping to tackle three wellbeing challenges that colleges face:



▶ **Helping students to build good wellbeing habits**



▶ **Creating a positive wellbeing culture in college**



▶ **Making sure students have access to help**

Help students to build **good wellbeing habits**

Our habits can have a big impact on our mood, for good or for bad. This section looks at two types of strategies teachers can use to help students develop positive mental wellbeing habits and avoid negative ones.

The first type (*'Personal practices to encourage good mental wellbeing'*) are the good wellbeing practices themselves: mindfulness, gratitude and self-care activities (like exercise and limiting screen time). The second type (*'Approaches to make good wellbeing habits stick'*) are practical techniques, drawn from the science of behaviour change, to help students turn these practices into regular habits. For example, they might find a technique like making a public commitment helpful to turn mindfulness from a good idea into a daily routine.



| # | Strategy |
|--|---|
| <i>Personal practices to encourage good mental wellbeing</i> | |
| 1. | <p>Encourage students to practice mindfulness</p> <p>What? Use mindfulness exercises - exercises to bring awareness to our thoughts and feelings - with your class, and help them to make mindfulness a regular routine.</p> <p>Why? Mindfulness can help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, by allowing us to better manage negative thought patterns.</p> <p>How? Try a version of this short mindful breathing exercise¹ with your class at the beginning of a tutor group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Find a relaxed, comfortable seated position. 2. Take an exaggerated breath: deeply inhale through your nose (3 seconds), hold (2 seconds), and take a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). 3. Repeat this cycle for a couple of minutes. 4. As you do this, your mind might start to wander. Just notice that your mind has wandered and then gently redirect your attention back to the breathing. <p>If students like it, make it a weekly class activity.</p> |
| 2. | <p>Try gratitude exercises</p> <p>What? Use short, written gratitude exercises with students in tutor groups.</p> <p>Why? Writing down the things we are grateful for can boost wellbeing and improve mood.</p> <p>How? Try a short gratitude exercise² with students in a tutor group.</p> <p>Ask them to write down three things that went well for them over the past week, and how they feel about them. These can be really small. Getting a compliment, finding a new TV show, or getting a good mark for a piece of work all count. If it goes well, make it a weekly activity at the beginning of tutor groups.</p> |
| 3. | <p>Highlight the importance of day-to-day self-care</p> <p>What? Encourage students to do self-care practices like limiting screen time, exercising regularly, maintaining good sleep habits and eating healthily.</p> <p>Why? Students might already know about the links between self-care and wellbeing, but teachers have an important role in repeating the message and normalising the idea.</p> <p>How? Spend some time discussing self-care activities with students, for example, using the Anna Freud Centre self-care pack.³ Give practical ideas (like implementation intentions and the other techniques below) about how they could encourage themselves to do these activities regularly, and discuss the reasons why they're important.</p> |
| <i>Approaches to make good wellbeing habits stick</i> | |



4. Use 'implementation intentions'

What? Encourage students to set 'implementation intentions' - a technique in which we specify the where, what, when and how of actions we wish to do.

Why? When we come up with a specific plan for where, when and how we will do something, we are more likely to actually do it.

How? In tutor groups, ask students to think of an activity they'll do for their wellbeing that week. Ask them to write down their plan (*go for a 30 minute walk*), where they'll do it (*in the park near my house*), when they'll do it (*5-6 pm*) and how they'll do it (*put on their trainers/make sure their headphones are charged and get out for that walk!*).

5. Make public commitments about positive wellbeing behaviours

What? Encourage students to publicly commit to a positive mental wellbeing goal.

Why? Commitments are powerful tools to lock us into an action, as we have an impulse for consistency between what we've said we'll do and what we actually do.

How? In a tutor group, introduce your class to the concept of commitments. Suggest that students commit to a goal to boost their wellbeing (e.g. jogging three times a week) and sharing their commitment with friends or back to the class. Do it yourself and share your goal with them.

6. Use phone calendars to help students develop a regular routine

What? Help students to develop a regular routine by putting together a weekly timetable with them on their phones.

Why? As well as their academic benefits, routines have a link to wellbeing. Some research suggests that people find routines to be sources of meaning, comfort and control in their lives.

How? In 1:1 sessions or tutor groups, take some time to check whether students have a written timetable (which outlines how they spend their time outside of college). If they don't, help them put one together there and then. Suggest they block out time for wellbeing activities, as well as time for their academic work.

7. Structure environments to build good habits

What? Give students ideas about how they can use self-control techniques to avoid distraction, particularly social media distraction.

Why? Trying to concentrate but being constantly distracted can be stressful. Structuring our environments to manage distractions might be able to help with this.

How? In a tutor group, encourage students to write down what distracts them day-to-day. Then, ask them to put a plan in place for how they will manage these distractions. For example, if their distraction is social media, their plan might be to switch off their phones or give it to a parent/guardian while they're doing their homework.





Create a positive wellbeing culture in college

Social environments have a big impact on behaviour. We tend to take cues from what the people around us do and say. Changing the culture towards wellbeing in a college can be tough, but there are some simple strategies that can help.

8. Communicate the importance of wellbeing through senior leaders and influential students

What? Involve influential figures at the college in communicating information about mental health services. This could be the head teacher, influential students (e.g. student council leaders) or both.

Why? We have a tendency to act on information from figures of authority, and from people we like and find relatable.

How? Send out a weekly email bulletin, laying out what the college is doing on mental health and wellbeing issues, why, and signposting to the resources you have available.

9. Help students to help one another with peer-led campaigns and peer support programmes

What? Run a student-led mental wellbeing campaign, ideally involving the most influential students at the college.

Why? Peer-led anti-bullying campaigns have been shown to reduce school bullying, especially when they are run by socially influential students. You could apply the same principle to a mental wellbeing campaign in college.

How? Invite a group of influential students to design and run a college mental wellbeing campaign. This might include members of a student council, if you have one.

10. Involve students in decision-making about wellbeing issues

What? Establish a student wellbeing committee or advisory group.

Why? People who are involved in designing the services they use tend to feel more empowered, and user involvement might improve the quality of services too.

How? Once you've established your committee, ensure there is a mechanism to involve them in decision-making in a meaningful way (e.g. as part of an elected student council). They can help set the college's strategy on mental wellbeing issues and give feedback on your existing services.





Make sure students have access to help

Students who would benefit from mental wellbeing support don't always get it. High demand and apprehension about coming forward can mean that some students suffer in silence for extended periods. This section recommends two strategies: the first to improve the experience of waiting for a service, and the second to help identify students who are struggling.

11. Check in with students on counselling waiting lists

What? Set up a system of auto alerts for college counselling staff to check in with students on waiting lists.

Why? A simple acknowledgment and an apology can make a big difference to the frustration of being stuck in a queue. Auto alerts could be an effective way of ensuring students don't feel abandoned.

How? When a student joins the waiting list, set up a regular email alert for the counselling team. The alerts should be reminders to check in with that student, acknowledge their frustrations and signpost to support they could access while they wait.

12. Use checklists to help teachers spot the signs of poor mental wellbeing

What? Create a short, to-the-point checklist for teachers covering key mental wellbeing warning signs, with a clear process for what to do if they identify a cause for concern.

Why? Checklists are a simple but effective tool to improve decision-making as they act as a cognitive aid to remember complex information. They have been effective in many fields, including saving lives by reducing surgical error.

How? Try turning longer guidance or training, like the Anna Freud Centre mental health awareness training⁴, into a checklist. Distribute it to teachers and put in place mechanisms to encourage them to use it, like a tickbox system.



2. Introduction

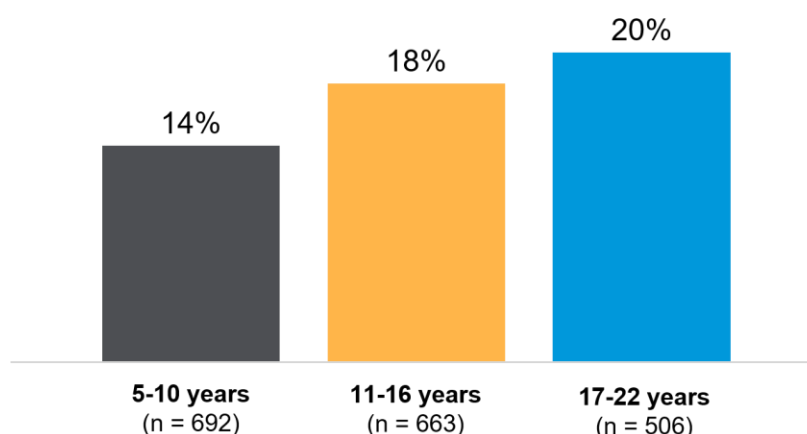
This is a practical guide to mental wellbeing in sixth form colleges. We hope teachers and senior leaders will find it helpful as they think about how to support their students in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ideas you'll read about here are all 'light-touch' suggestions. They are not meant to replace the intensive mental wellbeing support services that many colleges already provide, like counselling. And they are not comprehensive solutions for students with serious mental health disorders. Instead, we hope they can supplement the services that colleges already provide for free and with minimal time costs for teachers.

This is a particularly pressing issue now. Teenage mental wellbeing - already a serious⁵ and worsening⁶ problem - has taken a further hit during the pandemic. College closures have disrupted students' social networks, intensified their worries about academic work and thrown their future plans into jeopardy. And some will have caught the virus themselves, or suffered the trauma of a friend or family member becoming ill or dying.

As the pandemic has gone on, the impact on students' mental wellbeing has become increasingly clear. One study found that the proportion of 16-to-24-year-olds reporting severe mental health symptoms in April 2020 had doubled compared to its pre-existing trend.⁷ Another piece of research, by the NHS, found a trend of deteriorating mental health in every age group of children and young people since 2017. The age group containing college students – 17-to-22-year-olds – had the highest rates of mental health disorder, well above those of younger children.⁸

Figure 1: Proportion of children & young people with a probable mental health disorder



Source: Sadler & colleagues. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020.

The ideas in this guide are designed to help colleges meet this wellbeing challenge. We recognise that there are limits to this. Teachers are not doctors and there's no substitute for the things that we know work, like therapy from a trained therapist.⁹ But there are things that colleges can do to help.

Colleges are where students build their social networks, they can flag up concerns about students who are struggling and in many cases they provide services like counselling in their own right. The government has said that it wants “*schools and colleges [to be] at the heart of our efforts*” to improve prevention for children and young people's wellbeing.¹⁰ This guide is written with that objective in mind.

2.1 How to use this guide

The strategies we've proposed are all things that colleges can do quickly, for free and with a relatively low time burden for teachers. There are lots of structured mental health programmes out there for schools and colleges already which offer students intensive support.¹¹ These programmes are valuable, and we've mentioned some examples of them in the appendix. But with the financial and time pressures of Covid-19, we think there's a need for things that colleges can put in place quickly and easily, to make a difference now.

You may do some of these already, and they won't necessarily work in every situation. Still, we hope that every college can find something useful for their students.

The thinking behind these ideas comes from three main places:

- **What colleges are already doing.** While preparing this guide, we heard from teachers that it would be helpful to know what approaches other colleges use. Some of the best ideas we heard about are included throughout.
- **Existing research on adolescent mental health and wellbeing.** Our knowledge of the causes of poor mental health and wellbeing and approaches to improve them is better now than ever. But we think there's a shortage of resources that translate this research into practical steps for teachers. We've tried to bridge this gap by providing step-by-step guidance on activities that teachers can do straight away.
- **Research in behavioural science.** Behavioural science attempts to explain how people make decisions, form habits and operate in social groups. Since we were founded in 2010, the Behavioural Insights Team has applied these ideas to tackle tough social problems like widening access to university,¹² helping job seekers¹³ find work and improving police diversity.¹⁴ We think that there's lots of room to apply them to mental wellbeing, too.

Further details on our research approach, and a summary of resources we couldn't fit into the main guide, are in an appendix at the end.

3. Help students to build good wellbeing habits

Why it's important

Our habits can have a big impact on our mood, for good or for bad. This section looks at two types of strategy that teachers can use to help students develop positive wellbeing habits and avoid negative ones.



Strategies to try

Personal practices to encourage good mental wellbeing

1. **Encourage students to practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness – bringing awareness to our feelings in the present – can help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, by allowing us to better manage negative thought patterns.
2. **Try gratitude exercises.** Writing down the things we're grateful for can improve mood and reduce anxiety.
3. **Tell students about the importance of day-to-day self-care.** People who limit screen time, exercise regularly, have good sleep habits and eat healthily tend to have a lower risk of depression and anxiety.

Approaches to make good wellbeing habits stick

4. **Use 'implementation intentions'.** Specifying when, where and how we are going to do something makes us more likely to actually do it.
5. **Make public commitments about positive behaviours.** Commitments can 'lock' us into a desired goal, as we have a strong impulse for consistency between what we've said we'll do and what we actually do.
6. **Use phone calendars to help students develop a regular routine.** As well as their academic advantages, routines are linked to wellbeing benefits like greater feelings of meaning in life.
7. **Structure environments to build good habits.** Self-control techniques like social media blockers could help students to manage distractions, which can be stressful and anxiety-inducing.



3.1 Introduction

Many of us have good intentions that we find challenging to put into practice. We tell ourselves that we'll start going to the gym regularly or quit smoking at the start of the year, but we won't necessarily do it. Even when we're genuinely motivated, it's easy to procrastinate and put things off.¹⁵

This applies to wellbeing as well as physical health, because the research suggests a link between our happiness and day-to-day activities like regular exercise. In this section, you'll read about two types of strategies to help students develop positive wellbeing habits and avoid negative ones.

The first type (*'Personal practices to encourage good mental wellbeing'*) are the good wellbeing practices themselves: mindfulness, gratitude self-care. Mindfulness is the practice of deeply focusing on what you see and feel in the present moment, without any judgment. It's usually associated with meditation and breathing exercises. Gratitude exercises involve reflecting on the things we are grateful for in our lives. Self-care means deliberately doing activities that we find helpful for looking after our wellbeing, whether that's going for a jog, getting a good night's sleep or limiting social media use.

All of these have promise as strategies to support students' mental wellbeing (you'll read about the evidence behind them all throughout this section). We think it makes sense for teachers to encourage them in whatever way they feel is appropriate. For example, you could do short mindful breathing exercises at the beginning of your classes (there's an example on the page below), or simply encourage students to practice these activities in their own time.

The second type (*'Approaches to make good wellbeing habits stick'*) are practical techniques, drawn from the science of behaviour change, to help students turn these positive practices into regular habits. This is important because turning an action into a habit is one of the most reliable ways to change our behaviour in the long term. Once an action is a habit we don't have to exert much effort to do it.¹⁶ Some of these techniques are new to the field of mental wellbeing, but we think they have potential to help.





3.2 Strategies to try

Personal practices to encourage good mental wellbeing

1. Encourage students to practice mindfulness

Activity

What? Use mindfulness exercises - exercises to bring awareness to our thoughts and feelings - with your class, and help them to make mindfulness a regular routine.

Why? Mindfulness can help reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and depression, by allowing us to better manage negative thought patterns.

How? Try a version of this [short mindful breathing exercise](#)¹⁷ with your class at the beginning of a tutor group:

1. *Find a relaxed, comfortable seated position.*
2. *Take an exaggerated breath: deeply inhale through your nose (3 seconds), hold (2 seconds), and take a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds).*
3. *Repeat this cycle for a couple of minutes.*
4. *As you do this, your mind might start to wander. Just notice that your mind has wandered and then gently redirect your attention back to the breathing.*

If students like it, make it a weekly class activity.

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing awareness to our thoughts and feelings in the present moment. It is based on the premise that thoughts about the future and the past can be a source of anxiety. We can sometimes fall into repetitive, negative thought patterns about things that have happened or that might happen. Mindfulness teaches us to focus on the present moment and aims to weaken the hold of those thought cycles.¹⁸

The research is not completely clear cut, but it seems that mindfulness can successfully reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and low mood for children and young people.¹⁹ It is often delivered in schools through formal, structured programmes.²⁰ But there are lots of quick mindfulness activities you could use with your students too. These can vary from meditation to quick breathing exercises to taking the time to savour all the sensations of eating a raisin.²¹

Realistically, just because you suggest the idea does not mean that students are likely to do it. That's why we recommend doing it in class time (say, as a short session at the beginning of tutor groups once a week). You could even do it over a video call if students are learning remotely. If it goes well, try pairing it with some of



some of the other techniques in this section to encourage students to make it a habit in their own time.

2. Try gratitude exercises

Activity

What? Use short, written gratitude exercises with students in tutor groups.

Why? Writing down the things we are grateful for can boost wellbeing and improve mood.

How? Try a short [gratitude exercise](#)²² with students in your tutor group.

Ask them to write down three things that went well for them over the past week, and how they feel about them. These can be really small. Getting a compliment, finding a new TV show, or getting a good mark for a piece of work all count. If it goes well, make it a weekly activity at the beginning of tutor groups.

In psychology, gratitude has a more specific meaning than its common-sense definition. It's a habit of deliberately reflecting on and expressing thanks for positive things, even small ones. This can mean writing down things that you are personally grateful for, or writing to someone close to you to express your thanks to them.²³

These activities have been found to boost feelings of psychological wellbeing.²⁴ They can also be easily integrated into the college day as a quick classroom activity.

Students might be sceptical of this kind of exercise, so it's worth thinking about the reasoning for it. Research consistently finds that our experiences - both positive and negative - don't have as much of a long-term impact on our happiness as you'd expect. When we buy a new piece of technology we've been craving, get a new job or even get married, we become happier for a while. But over time, we return to where we were before. In psychology, this is known as the "hedonic treadmill".²⁵

Gratitude exercises aim to interfere with this process. If we focus on the things we already have to be grateful for, we can enjoy the present more and spend less time thinking about what will happen next.

Gratitude exercises aren't going to work for everyone. They can be a bit awkward the first time you do them. And it goes without saying that you should use your judgment about when they would be appropriate. Asking a class to do a gratitude exercise if a student has recently suffered a bereavement might not be the best idea, for example.



3. Highlight the importance of day-to-day self-care

Activity

What? Encourage students to do self-care activities like limiting screen time, regular exercise, good sleep habits and eating healthily.

Why? Students might already know about the links between self-care and wellbeing, but teachers have an important role in repeating the message and normalising the idea.

How? Spend some time in a tutor group discussing self-care activities with students, for example, using the Anna Freud Centre [self-care pack](#).²⁶ Give practical ideas (like implementation intentions and the other techniques below) about how they could encourage themselves to do these activities regularly, and discuss the reasons why they're important.

Self-care activities are the little things we can do to look after our wellbeing.²⁷ There is evidence that our wellbeing is linked to activities like limiting screen time,²⁸ taking regular exercise,²⁹ ensuring good sleep habits (like having set bedtime and wake-up times)³⁰ and eating healthily.³¹ Teachers are in a good position to remind students of these on a regular basis. For example, you could put together a short presentation about self-care activities based on the Anna Freud Centre [self-care pack](#),³² and present it to students in a tutor group.

Self-care advice crops up a lot in wellbeing guidance for teenagers, and so it may not be new to your students. We think there are a few ways in which you can make the message sound fresh in spite of this.

Firstly, don't underestimate the importance of repetition. We are more likely to take a message on board if we hear it more than once.³³ The more you say it, the more you will normalise the concept.

Secondly, you could try modelling the behaviour yourself, by telling students about a self-care activity that you do and how you go about it.

Thirdly, it might help to explain the reasoning and the science behind self-care. It's one thing to hear that limiting screen time is a good idea; it's another to know that young people with a mental health condition are more than twice as likely to spend at least four hours a day on social media as those without a mental health condition.³⁴ Or that people who do aerobic exercise like jogging - even just a few times a week - are less likely to develop depression.³⁵

Finally, you could pair self-care advice with specific habit-building techniques like making public commitments. We'll explain these in more detail on the next page.



Approaches to make good wellbeing habits stick

4. Use 'implementation intentions'

Activity

What? Encourage students to set 'implementation intentions' - a technique in which we specify the where, what, when and how of actions we wish to do.

Why? When we come up with a specific plan for where, when and how we will do something, we are more likely to actually do it.

How? In tutor groups, ask students to think of an activity they'll do for their wellbeing that week. Ask them to write down their plan (*go for a 30 minute walk*) where they'll do it (*in the park near my house*), when they'll do it (*5-6 pm*) and how they'll do it (*put on their trainers/make sure their headphones are charged and get out for that walk!*).

Implementation intentions involve specifying when, where and how we are going to do something we want to achieve. Simply writing the plan down means we are more likely to do it.³⁶

Another type of implementation intention involves making 'if-then' plans which attempt to link a behaviour to a stimulus in everyday life (*"If I start to feel overwhelmed, I'll do this 1-minute mindfulness activity."*) The idea is that by making this link, the behaviour becomes automatic over time.³⁷

These are simple techniques which can have an impact even on significant decisions. Asking people to plan when and how they are going to vote in pre-election phone calls has been shown to substantially increase election day turnout.³⁸ And in an employer-sponsored vaccination campaign, prompting people to write down the time and date they will go for a flu jab substantially increased vaccination rates.³⁹

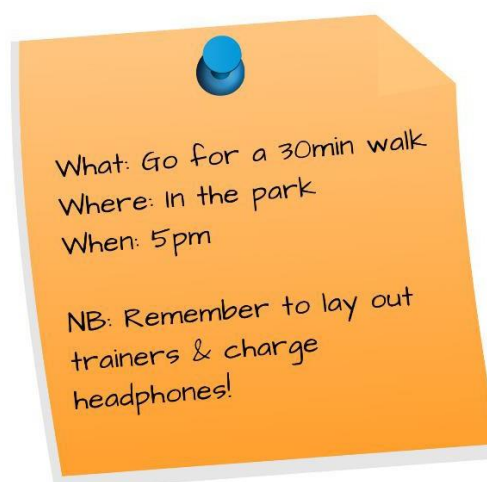
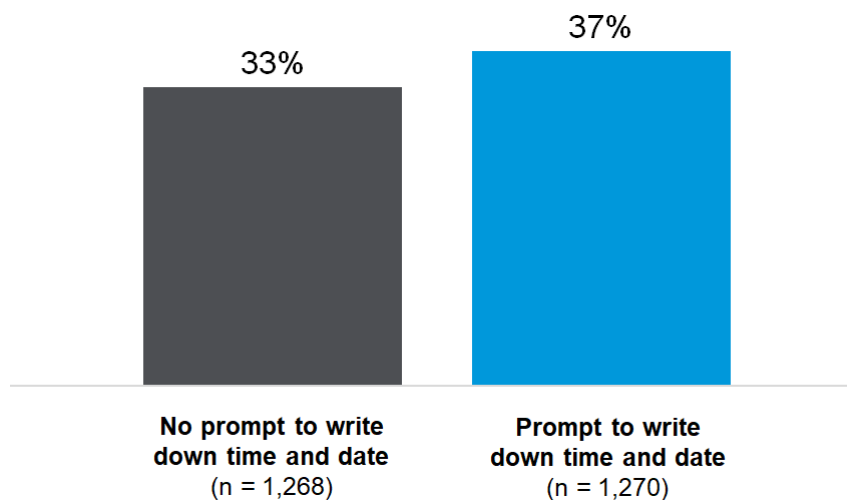




Figure 2: Proportion of employees who got a flu vaccination at work



Source: Milkman & colleagues. Using implementation intentions prompts to enhance influenza vaccination rates.

There are lots of ways these exercises could be applied to promote better student wellbeing. The post-it above gives just one example. Here are a couple of other ideas you could use or adapt:

- Suggest that students create an 'if-then' plan if they feel that they're spending too much time on social media: *"If it's 10pm and I'm still on my phone, I'll turn it off and get ready for bed."*
- Recommend that students who want to try mindfulness make a 'what, when, where and how' plan for it, and put it in their phone calendars (*"Do mindfulness, 8.30pm in my room. Link: shorturl.at/ejDT5"*).

5. Make public commitments about positive wellbeing behaviours

Activity

What? Encourage students to publicly commit to a positive mental wellbeing goal.

Why? Commitments are powerful tools to lock us into an action, as we have an impulse for consistency between what we've said we'll do and what we actually do.

How? In a tutor group, introduce your class to the concept of commitments. Suggest that students commit to a goal to boost their wellbeing (e.g. jogging three times a week) and sharing their commitment with friends or back to the class. Do it yourself and share your goal with them.

Another way to help us achieve the goals we set for ourselves is by turning our plans into public commitments. Students might find this technique helpful to stick to



challenging wellbeing habits like mindfulness or exercise, or simply to keep on top of their academic work.

Commitments can take different forms. They can be ‘hard’ commitment devices with monetary costs, like betting with a friend that you’ll manage to quit smoking this year, and losing the money if you fail. Or they can be ‘soft’ commitment devices where the costs are just psychological. Like telling people you’ll quit smoking and feeling guilty if you don’t.⁴⁰

As you might expect, hard commitments are more powerful. In one study, offering smokers the opportunity to put down their own money on commitment devices substantially improved their chances of quitting.⁴¹ But soft commitments can also be useful tools, especially when they are made publicly. We have a strong impulse for consistency between what we’ve said we’ll do and what we actually do.⁴² One restaurant found that it reduced no-shows from 30% to 10% using this insight. Receptions simply tweaked their request from “please call us if you change your plans” to “will you call us if you change your plans?”⁴³ This small change was enough to lock guests into the behaviour they had verbally committed to.

There are a few different ways you could use these techniques with your students. One option is to do a class activity where students come up with their own wellbeing goals and commit to them with classmates. There are also some online platforms (see the appendix for an example) that offer a structured way to set and monitor commitments which some of your students may want to try.

6. Use phone calendars to help students develop a regular routine

Activity

What? Help students to develop a regular routine by putting together a weekly timetable with them on their phones.

Why? As well as their academic benefits, routines have a link to wellbeing. Some research suggests that people find routines to be sources of meaning, comfort and control in their lives.

How? In 1:1 sessions or tutor groups, take some time to check whether students have a written timetable (which outlines how they spend their time outside of college). If they don’t, help them put one together there and then. Suggest they block out time for wellbeing activities, as well as time for their academic work.

It’s no secret that good study routines are an important part of learning, and we suspect teachers reading this guide have told their students all about this before. What might be less known are the possible wellbeing benefits. People with structured routines report that they find life more meaningful,⁴⁴ and people seem to find routine



activities to be sources of comfort and control.⁴⁵ It's not totally clear why this link exists, but part of it might simply be that routines are an effective way to get things done, and we find the experience of achieving our goals to be satisfying.

For students who are used to the routine and structure of the college day, the Covid-19 lockdown was a major disruption. In the interviews we conducted to prepare this guide, students told us they found this really tough. Without a regular routine, it was easy to become disengaged and bored. Helping students to use calendars to develop a routine has clear academic advantages, and might have indirect effects on their wellbeing too.

Telling your students about the benefits of a routine is one thing, but them actually following through on this is another. We recommend discussing this with them one-to-one or in tutor groups and helping them to create a timetable on their phones. Putting together a routine with them will help to ensure that it's realistic. And repeated prompts in the form of calendar events can help make a behaviour automatic - the secret to forming effective habits.⁴⁶ The calendar below is an illustration of how students could fit quick mental health activities into a daily schedule.

Timetable

September 2021
WEEK 1

| TIME | MON | TUE | WED | THU | FRI |
|------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 8am | | | Travel | | |
| 9am | Sociology | | Politics | Tutorial | Politics homework |
| 10am | | Politics | Politics homework | | English |
| 11am | English | English | Sociology | English | |
| 12pm | | Sociology homework | | | Politics |
| 1pm | | | Lunch | | |
| 2pm | Politics | Sociology | English | Politics | Sociology |
| 3pm | Sociology homework | English homework | | Politics homework | |
| 4pm | Gratitude (10 mins) | Exercise | | Exercise | |
| 5pm | Politics homework | English homework | Football | Sociology homework | Exercise |
| 6pm | | | | | |
| 7pm | | | Dinner | | |
| 8pm | | | | | |
| 9pm | | Mindfulness (10 mins) | | Mindfulness (10 mins) | |
| 10pm | | | | | |
| 11pm | | | | | |



7. Structure environments to promote good habits

Activity

What? Give students ideas about how they can use self-control techniques to avoid distraction, particularly social media distraction.

Why? Trying to concentrate but being constantly distracted can be stressful. Structuring environments to manage distractions might be able to help with this.

How? In a tutor group, encourage students to write down what distracts them day-to-day. Then, ask them to put a plan in place for how they will manage these distractions. For example, if their distraction is social media, their plan might be to switch off their phones or give it to a parent/guardian while they're doing their homework.

Many of us have our own strategies for dealing with temptation or distraction. We ask for snacks to be moved out of sight (and out of mind), or set up our finances so that some money is moved to a savings account before we have time to spend it.

The insight behind these techniques is that adding even a small amount of 'friction' - little things that make a task more effortful - into a process can have a substantial impact on our behaviour.⁴⁷ Turning your phone off while you work does not stop you turning it back on again and distracting yourself. But it might be just enough of a hassle that you don't want to.

Self-control techniques like this are mainly ways of getting more work done and helping us to achieve what we've set out to do. But they could also have a mental wellbeing link. One of the things we heard from students in our interviews was that they found it difficult to focus on the tasks they needed to get done during lockdown. And some research suggests that excessive social media use in particular can contribute to stress and anxiety.⁴⁸ So, by giving students strategies to help them focus, we hope they'll be able to restore the sense of achievement and control they get by completing the tasks they've set for themselves.

Here are some specific techniques you could recommend to your students:

- Find a calm, clean space to work in. This could be at home if you have a space like this, or maybe a library. Clear any clutter away before starting work.
- Turn off your phone when you are revising or doing homework. Better yet, put the turned off phone in another room, or give it to somebody else to keep care of for a few hours (maybe a parent or a sibling).
- Download an app blocker (there are some examples in the appendix) and impose a daily cap on social media use.

4. Create a positive wellbeing culture in college

Why it's important

Social environments have a big impact on behaviour. We tend to take cues from what the people around us do and say. Changing the culture towards wellbeing in a college can be tough, but there are some strategies that can help.



Strategies to try

- 8. Communicate the importance of wellbeing through senior leaders and influential students.** We tend to pay attention to information from authority figures and from people we like and find relatable. Involving head teachers and influential students in communications about wellbeing could help to show that your college takes it seriously.
- 9. Help students to help one another with peer support programmes.** These can help new students bed in, communicate mental health information more accessibly and contribute to a positive mental health college culture.
- 10. Involve students in decision-making about mental health issues.** User involvement is one way of making services more accessible. A mental health committee run by students and short, regular 'pulse' surveys could help.

4.1 Introduction

Social norms are the rules that govern how we behave in groups. They don't have to be written down to have very profound influences on our behaviour. Jumping a queue isn't against the law, for example. But you may get a few dirty glances the next time you try it in Tesco!

Academic research provides plenty of illustrations of the power of social norms. University students' beliefs about how much alcohol their peers drink, whether or not they are accurate, shape how much they drink themselves.⁴⁹ There's even some evidence suggesting that norms can explain behaviour like our tendency to gain weight when other members of our social group do.⁵⁰

In the past decade or so, there's been a massive push to change norms about mental health. Campaigns like [Time to Change](#)⁵¹ have focused on normalising discussions about mental health and tackling stigma.

But clearly there's still a way to go. More than a third of children and young people with mental health problems never get any professional help. Fear of embarrassment



is one big reason for this, as well as low trust in professionals and just not knowing what the symptoms of poor mental health are.⁵²

Colleges have a role in helping to address these problems. Leadership teams can communicate through policy and messaging that wellbeing is taken seriously, and it's good to ask for help if you need it. Involving students themselves makes a difference too. The more that students have a say in how the college treats wellbeing issues, the more effective your services will be.

4.2 Strategies to try

8. Communicate the importance of wellbeing through senior leaders and influential students

Activity

What? Involve influential figures at the college in communicating information about mental health services. This could be the head teacher, influential students (e.g. student council leaders) or both.

Why? We have a tendency to find information more persuasive when it comes from figures of authority, and from people we like and find relatable.

How? Send out a weekly email bulletin, laying out what the college is doing on mental health and wellbeing issues, why, and signposting to the resources you have available.

We don't judge information just by its content. The person communicating it to us matters too. If we don't trust a messenger, we're unlikely to take their message seriously. This is known as the 'messenger effect'.⁵³ It suggests that colleges should think carefully about who communicates wellbeing information if they want to make it as effective as possible.

Of the characteristics affecting how persuasive we find a messenger, we think three are particularly relevant here. The first is similarity. We pay more attention to those we see as relatable in some way. Requests for university donations generate more income from previous students if the request comes from alumni than if it comes from anyone else.⁵⁴ The second is authority. Matched charitable donation requests are more effective when the matching donor is named as a respected philanthropist (Bill and Melinda Gates) than if they are anonymous.⁵⁵ The third is liking. We pay attention to those we feel positively about, and ignore information from people we don't like.⁵⁶

With this in mind, you might wish to try involving the most influential people at college in communicating information about mental wellbeing services. The specific



individuals who will have the biggest impact might vary from college to college. But here are a couple of ideas.

- **Head teachers or principals.** In our interviews for this research, some students were concerned that their college didn't take mental wellbeing seriously enough. They felt that some leaders only pay lip service to the importance of mental wellbeing but rarely take action. Involving the leadership team might help to address this concern and communicate that your college takes it seriously.
- **Influential students.** The Roots anti-bullying programme (discussed in the section just below this) demonstrates how important socially influential students can be.⁵⁷ Colleges could identify and involve those students in communicating mental wellbeing information. This could be the leader of your student council if your college has one, for example.

9. Help students to help one another with peer-led campaigns and peer support programmes

Activity

What? Run a student-led mental wellbeing campaign, ideally involving the most influential students at the college.

Why? Peer-led anti-bullying campaigns have been shown to reduce conflict at school, especially when they are run by socially influential students. You could apply the same principle to a mental wellbeing campaign in college.

How? Invite a group of influential students to design and run a college mental wellbeing campaign. This might include members of a student council, if you have one.

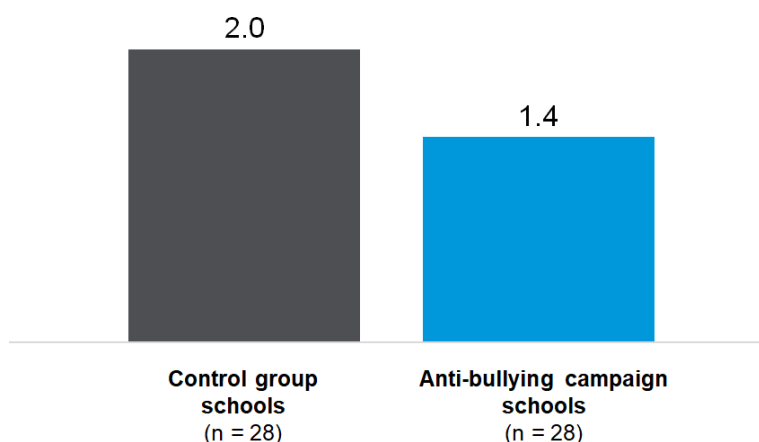
Peer support is an umbrella term and can refer to programmes that are quite different. All peer support services are based on the idea that many teenagers will be reluctant to speak to an adult if they're struggling, and might find it easier to open up to someone their own age instead. This section suggests a few different types of peer support that you could try.

The first involves student 'champions' running college-wide campaigns. An influential study of 56 schools in the United States - the 'Roots' programme - used this approach.⁵⁸ After running a survey to identify 'social influencers', researchers worked with students to establish an anti-bullying campaign in each school. Students designed and promoted the campaign through posters, on Instagram and by wearing wristbands to show their solidarity with those who had experienced bullying or conflict at school. The results suggest that schools using the programme had lower levels of



disciplinary problems (an average 1.4 incidents per 100 students compared to 2 incidents per 100 students in the control group). The schools with higher proportions of 'social influencers' in the anti-bullying groups had the biggest impacts. It seems as though recruiting influential students to the anti-bullying cause helped to transform the norms in schools and made bullying less socially acceptable.

Figure 3: Average number of disciplinary incidents per 100 students



Source: Paluck & colleagues. Changing climates of conflict: A social network experiment in 56 schools.

Colleges could try using a similar approach for a mental wellbeing campaign. Recruiting student champions to design the campaign materials is likely to mean they will be more relatable.

A second form of peer support involves buddying or mentoring services for new students. Starting out at college for the first time is a daunting prospect. Many students will be separated from their secondary school friendship group, and with Covid-19 restrictions, making new friends may be even more challenging. Good quality studies of this kind of programme are hard to come by, but it seems that matching new students with a buddy can help them to settle in.⁵⁹

The way that a matching programme is designed seems to be really important. Matching which is based on shared interests tends to be more successful.⁶⁰ And gender matching is a better bet than mixed-gender pairs.⁶¹

A third peer support option involves training students to deliver a wellbeing curriculum as part of a structured programme. The Mental Health Foundation's Peer Education Project⁶² is an example of how this kind of programme works. Sixth form students go through a structured training programme and then deliver a curriculum of five hour-long wellbeing lessons to Year 7 students. It's been shown to improve understanding of mental health issues,⁶³ although it would need to be adapted for the college context.



10. Involve students in decision-making about wellbeing issues

Activity

What? Establish a student wellbeing committee or advisory group.

Why? People who are involved in designing the services they use tend to feel more empowered, and user involvement might improve the quality of services too.

How? Once you've established your committee, ensure there is a mechanism to involve them in decision-making in a meaningful way (e.g. as part of an elected student council). They can help set the college's strategy on mental wellbeing issues and give feedback on your existing services.

In lots of domains – from healthcare⁶⁴ to homelessness⁶⁵ – there is an effort to involve the people who use services in helping to design them. We think it makes sense for colleges to use this approach for their mental health services, too. One reason is that there can be direct benefits for the individuals who are invited to help, who often report feelings of empowerment and greater self-esteem. And, although this is a new area of research, it seems that user involvement can help to improve service quality too.⁶⁶

One college we spoke to during this research put this insight into action by establishing a mental health position as part of their student council. The mental health representative acted as a voice for students who could meaningfully influence college decision-making.

There are other ways of involving students that you might want to consider. You could send very short, online 'pulse' surveys to regularly gather feedback on the college's mental wellbeing services. Just two or three questions every couple of weeks could let students easily share their thoughts, while being short enough to avoid survey fatigue. Here's an example of what this could look like.



Subject: This week's pulse survey

Welcome to this week's pulse survey!

We want to check in regularly to make sure the college is doing everything it can to help students at a really difficult time. The survey is confidential and should take about 3 minutes.

1. In the last week, how would you rate your overall mental wellbeing?

Excellent - feeling great

Very good - feeling pretty good

Good - but could be better

Okay - struggling a bit

Poor - not very well at all

2. Please share any feedback, positive or negative, on the college's approach to mental wellbeing at the moment.

3. Do you have any suggestions for things that we could do that would have a positive impact on your mood, stress levels and wellbeing right now?



5. Make sure students have access to help

Why it's important

Students who would benefit from mental wellbeing support don't always get it. Not wanting to come forward and high demand for services can get in the way. This section recommends two strategies to address this: the first seeks to improve the experience of waiting for a service, and the second looks to help identify students who are struggling.



Strategies to try

- 11. Check in with students on counselling waiting lists.** We all like having an apology when we are stuck in a queue. Let students on waiting lists know they haven't been forgotten by sending counsellors auto reminders to check in and identify any support they could access in the meantime.
- 12. Use checklists to help teachers spot the signs of poor mental wellbeing.** Checklists are a simple tool to improve decision-making. They could help teachers identify students who don't come forward when they're struggling.

5.1 Introduction

Having the right mental wellbeing services in place is only part of the challenge. There are other obstacles to getting students the help they need. One is that teachers may not realise students need help in the first place. More than a third of children and young people with mental health problems have never got any professional help.⁶⁷ They simply might not speak up. Teachers are on the lookout for clues of poor mental wellbeing, but with so many other demands on their time, it's easy to overlook them.

There's also the problem of waiting lists. On top of the extreme burdens on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), school and college counselling services are often oversubscribed too. Some students have to wait weeks or months before they can see someone. Without help in that time, it's very plausible that some will give up and resort to dealing with their problems themselves.

This section contains two strategies designed to stop students falling through the cracks. The first is about supporting students on waiting lists, and the second focuses on identifying students who are struggling in the first place.



5.2 Strategies to try

11. Check in with students on counselling waiting lists

Activity

What? Set up a system of auto alerts for college counselling staff to check in with students on waiting lists.

Why? A simple acknowledgment and an apology can make a big difference to the frustration of being stuck in a queue. Auto alerts could be an effective way of ensuring students don't feel abandoned.

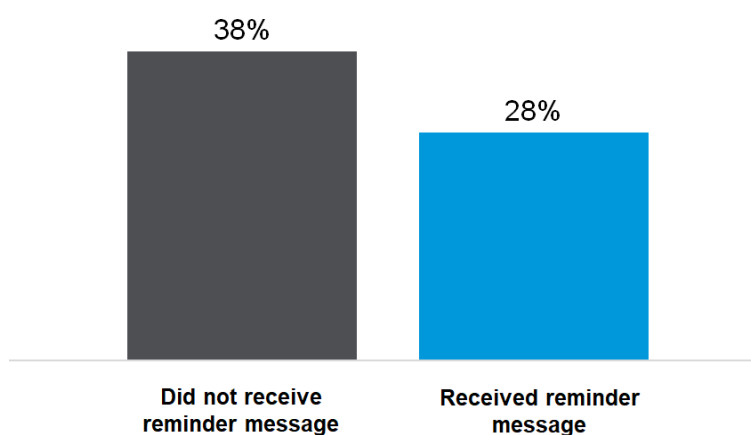
How? When a student joins the waiting list, set up a regular email alert for the counselling team. The alerts should be reminders to check in with that student, acknowledge their frustrations and signpost to support they could access while they wait.

Nobody likes to be stuck in a queue, but there are some things that can improve our experience of waiting. One is an acknowledgment and some information about how much longer we'll have to wait. Another is an apology and some thanks for our patience.⁶⁸ Given that many college counselling services are oversubscribed, we think colleges should provide both of these to students who are on waiting lists. This won't work as a long-term solution, but it could be a helpful stopgap.

Reminding counsellors to check in with students to reassure them they have not been forgotten about could be particularly helpful. Reminders are a simple tool which have proven to be effective at changing behaviour in lots of fields, simply because it is so easy to forget anything which does not immediately occupy our attention.⁶⁹ A study in the United States found that simple text message reminders to appear at court for low level offenses reduced no-shows (and therefore the prospect of being arrested) by a quarter (from 38% to 28%).⁷⁰

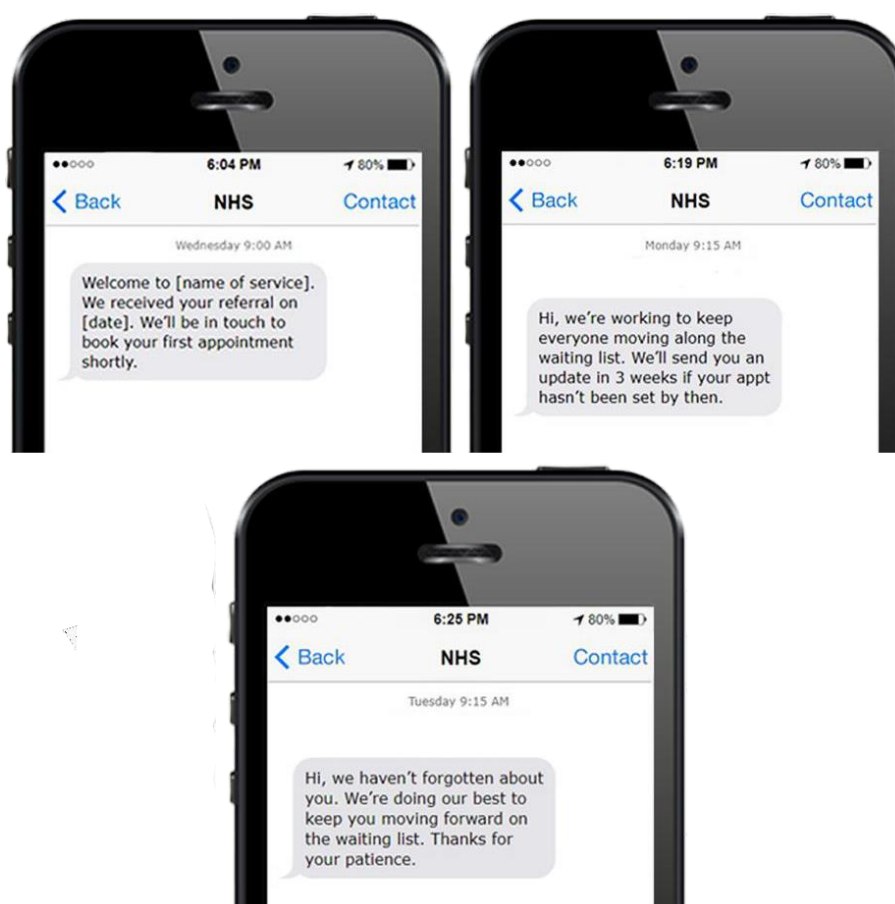


Figure 4: Proportion who failed to appear at court hearing



Source: Cooke & colleagues. Using Behavioral Science to Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes.

An alternative would be to send automated messages directly to students, to reassure them that they have not been forgotten about. This doesn't have quite the same personal touch. But being fully automated at least guarantees that all students will be contacted. Sending a series of messages (examples below) to patients waiting for NHS psychological treatments boosted patient attendance at subsequent appointments, and reduced the number of people who dropped out of the programme.⁷¹ As with auto alerts, it's important to apply this idea with care and think of it as a temporary fix, not a permanent one.





12. Use checklists to help teachers spot the signs of poor mental wellbeing

Activity

What? Create a short, to-the-point checklist for teachers covering key mental wellbeing warning signs, with a clear process for what to do if they identify a cause for concern.

Why? Checklists are a simple but effective tool to improve decision-making as they act as a cognitive aid to remember complex information. They have been effective in many fields, including saving lives by reducing surgical error.

How? Try turning longer guidance or training, like the Anna Freud Centre mental health awareness training⁷², into a checklist. Distribute it to teachers and put in place mechanisms to encourage them to use it, like a tickbox system.

Checklists are a simple tool to improve decision-making and reduce errors in fields including aviation and medicine. The rationale is that even experts can miss basic things when they're under pressure and a process involves multiple steps.⁷³ Despite their simplicity, they are remarkably effective. The introduction of a surgical checklist in eight hospitals around the world reduced major complications by 36% and deaths by 47% (from 1.5% to 0.8% of patients).⁷⁴

Checklists have not yet been widely adopted in education, but we think they have potential to help. One way they could be used is to help identify students who are struggling with mental wellbeing but who don't come forward. Teachers might learn about warning signs in mental health training, but it's easy to forget details when they have so many other things on their plate. Checklists are a good tool to help with this: they condense complex information into an accessible format and help with recall.

An effective checklist is short and simple enough that it will actually be used. Aviation checklists, as an example, are usually five to nine points and a maximum of one A4 page.⁷⁵ The idea is not to include all the steps in a complex process, only those which might easily be overlooked. It's also important that teachers know what they should do if they do identify a concern. We recommend adding a reminder about the college's normal escalation process for mental wellbeing issues to the checklist itself.

Finally, there's the question of how you will encourage teachers to actually use it. Perhaps colleges could institute a tickbox system, where teachers are asked to record that they've looked at the checklist every week. Or it could be something for the head teacher to bring up in regular staff meetings.

6. Conclusion

The ideas in this guide are a supplement, not a substitute. We want them to be used in combination with the great services that many colleges already provide. We think that they have a role to play in helping students to develop positive habits, change wellbeing norms in a positive direction and enable students to get easier and more consistent access to help when they need it. And they are all things that colleges can put in place quickly and at low cost. We hope that you find them useful.

If you would like to share your results from trying any of them out, or would be interested in being involved in any research with the Behavioural Insights Team, we would love to hear from you. Please contact info@bi.team with your feedback or to express interest in setting up a partnership.



7. Appendix

7.1 How we prepared this guide

This work was commissioned by the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA) and conducted by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT).

To feed into the guide, BIT conducted three research activities in the autumn of 2020:

1. A rapid evidence review on teenage mental health and wellbeing.
2. A survey of 69 members of staff (teachers, counsellors and senior leaders) in 30 colleges.
3. Follow-up one-to-one interviews with nine students and three teachers from three colleges who completed the survey.

7.2 Further ideas and resources

If we had included every good idea we heard about from colleges, or read about in the academic literature, this guide would have been 100 pages long.

You can find some further examples of promising ideas and resources below. Where they have been evaluated, we have included a reference to the evaluation.

| Resource | What it involves |
|---|---|
| Structured programmes | |
| Mindfulness in schools project (MISP) | The MISP training course prepares school staff to deliver a set of nine lessons designed to teach secondary school students how they can apply mindfulness to everyday life. It's been shown to reduce depressive symptoms and stress, and improve wellbeing, at least in the short term. ⁷⁶ It is designed for schools and would need adapting for a college context. |
| The Resourceful Adolescent Programme (RAP) | RAP involves nine modules and two booster sessions, each lasting about 50-60 minutes. Sessions are delivered by a trained external facilitator alongside the class teacher. There is some evidence that it can reduce depressive symptoms in young people, although the only UK study so far found it was ineffective. ⁷⁷ Like MISP, it is designed for schools and would need adapting for a college context. |
| Peer Education Project (PEP) | The PEP programme provides training for sixth form students in how to deliver a mental health programme to Year 7s. It's been found to increase understanding of key mental health concepts and readiness to support others. ⁷⁸ All resources are available on the PEP website. |
| Mental health first aid training | Teachers can undergo a two-day training course to become mental health first aiders. During the training, participants learn how to be an effective |

| | |
|--|---|
| | first point of contact for students to discuss issues around mental health. |
| Online services and apps | |
| Kooth | Students can access support, read helpful articles and tips, and start discussions about mental health and wellbeing with other young people, using Kooth's online platform. Access it at: https://www.kooth.com . |
| Togetherall | Togetherall is an online community where students can access resources, such as short courses and self-assessments, to understand and improve their wellbeing. Students can also attend group or 1:1 online therapy. Access it at: https://togetherall.com/en-gb/ . |
| App blockers | Apps which can let users pre-set time limits on social media or other platforms. Include AppBlock (https://www.appblock.app/) and Offtime (https://offtime.app/index.php). |
| Commitment platforms | Online platforms offer users commitment 'contracts' to help them achieve challenging goals. Users can stake money on their goal if they choose (to be sent to a friend or charity if they don't succeed). One platform you could try is StickK: https://www.stickk.com/ . |
| Quick student activities | |
| Gratitude journaling | <p>Giving thanks can help students focus on positive emotions (i.e. gratitude), which can act as a buffer during stressful situations.^{79 80} In practice, students could be encouraged to write down three things that went well for them today, and why they went well. You can find some gratitude exercises here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-minute gratitude journaling activity: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/three_good_things_for_students. • Gratitude letter writing activity: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_letter_for_students. |
| Mindfulness exercises | <p>Short mindfulness exercises can help students to focus on the present and slow their minds down. Here are some activities you could try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raisin meditation: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/raisin_meditation. • 3-minute breathing exercise: shorturl.at/cmwQ1. • 2-minute breathing exercise: shorturl.at/epFVW. • 1-minute breathing exercise: http://bit.ly/2q0YVyP. |
| Expert guidance, training and resources | |
| Anna Freud Centre resources | Includes self-care strategies, a measurement framework and guidance on staff mental health. https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/ . |
| YoungMinds guide to mental health during the pandemic | Practical advice and strategies for working with students during the pandemic, including guidance on helping students work from home. https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/school-resources/supporting-your-pupils-through-the-covid-19-pandemic/ . |

Government mental health guidance for parents

Resources and advice specifically for supporting children's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing>.

Strategies used by individual colleges

'Wellbeing Wednesdays'

A regular email bulletin sent out to students by one of the colleges we spoke to, containing activities, resources and signposting.

The Wellbeing Room

A dedicated wellbeing room containing stress balls, bean bags and other calming items, for students to go when they're feeling anxious or stressed.

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