

## **DeStress for Success: Improving Student Mental Health with a New Healthy Monday Program**

Mary Kate Lee

College students' mental health is suffering. Over the past decade, rates of depression and suicidal ideation among college students have steadily increased.<sup>1,2</sup> Suicidal ideations have nearly doubled from 5.8% in 2007 to 10.8% in 2016-2017.<sup>1,2</sup> The proportion of college students who are diagnosed with a mental health condition continues to increase as well.<sup>1</sup> Mental illness during the typical college years (ages 17 - 24) can have powerful negative effects on the development of college students. This time period is particularly important developmentally, as college students are transitioning from adolescence to emerging adulthood.<sup>3</sup> During this time, they are establishing autonomy and solidifying their self-identity. Mental health problems can have devastating effects on long term development, relationship quality, and health.<sup>3</sup> They are also a strong predictor of dropping out and poor academic performance among college students. Those who struggle with mental illness are twice as likely to drop out of college, and those who do not drop out report a negative impact on their academic performance.<sup>3</sup> The most common place that college students receive mental health services is on a college campus.<sup>1</sup> This demand strains campus counseling centers and staff. In order to address students' need, we must consider other ways to support students' mental health throughout their college years.

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### **What is DeStress Monday?**

DeStress Monday is an international public health campaign that promotes starting off each week with a positive mindset while reducing stress throughout the week.<sup>4</sup> This campaign offers evidence-based tools based in psychology and positive psychology that can help maintain and improve one's mental and emotional wellbeing. Tools include various mindfulness and meditation practices, ways to express gratitude and kindness, ways to practice self-care, and more.

### **Why Monday?**

Research shows that people view Monday as a day for a fresh start, and they are more likely to start diet and exercise programs, attempt to better manage stress, quit smoking, and schedule doctor's appointments on Monday than any other day.<sup>5</sup> A Monday start helps you carry out your healthy intentions for the week. Giving students an opportunity to intentionally begin their week with a positive mindset can help them stay focused and productive throughout the week. The best part is, Monday is

always around the corner, giving students a chance to recommit to a healthy habit every week. Using Monday as a tool for self-care can help maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

## **Supporting Students' Mental Health with the *DeStress for Success* Program**

The Syracuse University Lerner Center created a six-week *DeStress for Success* workshop series based on the science of positive psychology. *DeStress for Success* is aimed at undergraduate and graduate students to help them gain the necessary skills to thrive while at Syracuse University. The Monday workshops start with an interactive lecture on a specific topic, followed by a break-out activity, with time for questions and personal reflection at the end. Each week features *DeStress Monday* resources and covers a different aspect of positive psychology, including: cultivating resilience through positive emotion, identifying and using your strengths, healthy body and healthy mind, increasing mindfulness and flow states, healthy habit and goal setting, and strengthening relationships through mindful communication.<sup>6</sup> Holding these workshops on Monday set students up for a successful week, arming them with resources to create sustainable habits that support their mental and emotional well-being.

### **Students Empowering Each Other**

The Lerner Center collaborated with the Office of Health Promotion's SAMHEs (Students Advocating for Mental Health Education) Peer Educators to facilitate *DeStress for Success*. This provided SAMHEs with the opportunity to learn in-depth about *DeStress Monday*, the Monday effect, and positive psychology. Each week, SAMHEs led parts of the talk or activity of their choice. Student involvement strengthened the impact of the program because the SAMHEs were able to relate to their peers and provide a comfortable and supportive environment. Overall, *DeStress for Success* serves as another positive resource for Syracuse University students to better their mental health.

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### **Here's what Students are saying about *DeStress for Success***

*"DeStress for Success was a unique experience that was not only a great kick-start to my week, but was very resourceful. As a SAMHE, I assumed DeStress for Success would be a simple workshop in which we sit in a circle and listen to the facilitators speak, but I was pleasantly surprised. DeStress Monday offered a variety of tips and tricks on how to improve our overall wellness. Not only were the workshops something I began to look forward to each week, but I believe these workshops did help me improve my weeks. Monday was a day I usually dreaded, but now I have gained a new perspective and the foundation to view them as a fresh start. I hope to be able to continue not only to help the Lerner Center out with these workshops but start to promote them more to our campus community." - Megan, SAMHE*

*"I loved the program, and I think it helped me regroup a lot mentally with finishing this semester out."*  
- Alyssa, *DeStress for Success* Participant

### **Bring *DeStress for Success* to Your Campus**

If you want to provide a positive resource to promote college student mental health, consider adopting the *DeStress for Success* program on your campus. Here are some steps you can take:

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1. Talk with your campus Student Services, Health & Wellness Services, Counseling Center, and/or Residence Life departments to collaborate on implementing and promoting the program. Determine who will facilitate the sessions. How will you involve students in the development, promotion, and implementation of the program? What are viable promotion strategies?
2. Reserve a space and schedule a time for the program to occur throughout the semester.
3. Spread the word. Share the information on social media, allied departments' websites, via flyers, posters, student newspaper, and word of mouth.
4. Incentivize students with a loyalty program. For example, you might award prizes to students who attend 2, 4, and 6 sessions.
5. Create a brief evaluation of the program to gather feedback. What did students like and dislike? What skills did they take away? Did aspects of their mental health improve? Do they feel equipped to better manage stress?

For more information about *DeStress for Success*, tips for how to implement it on your campus, and curriculum and other materials, contact Mary Kate Lee in SU's Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion ([mlee77@syr.edu](mailto:mlee77@syr.edu)).

#### Endnotes

1. Lipson, S.K., Lattie, E.G., & Eisenberg, D. (2019). Increased rates of mental health service utilization by U.S. college students: 10-year population-level trends (2007-2017). *Psychiatric Services* (70)1, 60-63.
2. Eisenberg, D. (2019). Countering the troubling increase in mental health symptoms among U.S. college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health* (65), 573-574.
3. Cuijpers, P., Auerbach, R.P., Benjet, C., Bruffaerts, R., Ebert, D., Karyotaki, E., & Kessler, R.C. (2018). The world health organization world mental health international college student initiative: An overview. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* (28), 1-6.
4. To learn more about DeStress Monday, visit: <https://www.destressmonday.org/>.
5. Fry, J. & Neff, R. (2010). *Healthy Monday: Two Literature Reviews*. Accessed Nov. 25, 2019 via [https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/\\_pdf/projects/HM/healthymondayreport.pdf](https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/_pdf/projects/HM/healthymondayreport.pdf).
6. To learn more about DeStress for Success, visit: <http://lernercenter.syr.edu/healthy-monday/programs/destress-monday/>.

#### About the Author

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The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.

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