

Well-being of students starts to decline from the moment they enter secondary school

July 9 2019, by Jolanta Burke



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Across the world, schools are introducing programmes aimed at enhancing the well-being of students and [helping them flourish](#). Such programmes [aim to teach](#) students how to cultivate positive emotions and relationships, find meaning and feel a sense of achievement in their work—as well as look after their [physical and mental health](#).

But despite this progress, [recent research](#) conducted in the Republic of Ireland has found that the well-being of students steadily declines as they progress through [secondary school](#), up to their [final exams](#). And the decline is sharper for girls than for boys.

For the research, my colleague and I surveyed nearly 3,000 students, aged between 12 and 19. We divided them into three groups. Junior years were aged 12 to 13, and had just started secondary education. Middle years (14- to 16-year-olds) were either well-established in secondary school, or opting for a [transition year](#) (a non-compulsory programme where students take time out from academic aspects of their education and focus on work experience or community service activities). Senior years (17- to 19-year-olds) were busy preparing for their final school examinations—the gateway to studying at university.

Traditionally, students' well-being [has been evaluated](#) by measuring a *lack* of mental health problems like depression or anxiety. But more [recent research](#) has shown that having higher levels of well-being can help people cope better with adversities—so for our study, we sought to measure levels of well-being, as well as mental health issues.

Our results indicated a small but steady decrease in well-being from junior, through to the middle and senior groups. Perhaps predictably, we also found age-related increases in measures of negative emotions and loneliness. In comparison to boys, girls reported [lower levels](#) of well-being across the board, and higher levels of negative emotions and loneliness.

Cause and effect

We can only speculate about the reasons for this decline in well-being. Previous studies [have shown](#) that bullying and cyberbullying is thriving in secondary schools—this could be one factor.

Hormonal changes during puberty also [play a significant role](#) in the way teenagers experience stress, and ongoing brain development [affects their behaviour](#). This could certainly have contributed to the lower well-being scores among the middle and senior years.

And, of course, exam stress during the middle and final years can also have [a very negative effect](#) on the mental and physical health of secondary school students.

Coping with stress

There are some tried and tested ways to help control stress. According to [some researchers](#), spending time with dogs reduces how stressed students feel during their exams. Evidence also suggests that progressive muscle relaxation—where a person contracts certain muscles then progressively releases them to achieve a state of peace – [has a positive effect](#) on anxiety levels (though this research was carried out with university students).

But our study also found that the biggest predictor of lower levels of well-being was when students did not regularly use their greatest strengths of character. Strengths of character can be measured using a survey like [this one by VIA](#). The survey identifies teenagers' top strengths that they can use during their daily lives.

But just because someone's top strengths might be honesty, prudence and perseverance, does not mean that they use these strengths frequently. Those who scored the highest for using their strengths daily, also had the highest scores on their levels of well-being. Therefore, using character strengths every day could help secondary school pupils to maintain higher levels of well-being.

Our results suggest that parents and educators could help school students

boost their levels of well-being by encouraging young people to identify what strengths they have, and use them. When asked, one in three adults are unable to name their own strengths—so this could well be the same among school students. Showing students how they can apply their strengths may be a great help to them, especially when it comes to assessment and exam preparation.

Clearly, there is a need for parents and educators to do something, rather than allowing students' levels of well-being to deteriorate as they progress through secondary [school](#). This change will only happen if we make it.

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