

Green space vital to student well-being during COVID-19 pandemic, finds study

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Credit: Helena Lopes from Pexels

Access to green space played an important part in protecting the mental well-being of students when the country was in its third national lockdown due to COVID-19.

Research [published](#) in the *British Education Research Journal* found that green space facilitated [physical activity](#) and socializing when indoor mixing was prohibited but outdoor gatherings of up to six people were allowed.

As the seasons changed and restrictions on socializing indoors eased, green spaces were used less by students and became less important to their well-being. Instead, membership of groups played a bigger role in promoting well-being once national restrictions allowed for more participation in groups, clubs and societies.

This is the first study to explore how green space supported [student](#) well-being during the pandemic.

"Different factors were important to student mental well-being at different times, but [social support](#) was critical throughout the pandemic," says Dr. Emma Palmer-Cooper from the University of Southampton, who co-authored the study.

"Well-being measures and messaging should be tailored to mitigate the untended consequences of pandemic restrictions. When closure of social settings and social distancing leads to isolation, there should be a change in emphasis to encourage the use of outdoor spaces as locations for distanced socializing and physical activity."

Dr. Anaïs Lemyre from the University of Oxford, who led the study, adds, "At points during the pandemic, access to some parks and natural spaces was intermittently restricted. Our evidence suggests more should be done to ensure access to greenspace in times of social isolation as it contributes to mental well-being."

Researchers from the University of Oxford and the University of Southampton surveyed 161 students from four universities to understand

how changes in the pandemic and associated restrictions influenced the lifestyles and mental well-being of students. They asked the students about their lifestyles, mental well-being, and experiences of COVID-19 at two time periods during the pandemic.

The first was from April to May 2021. At this time, vaccination had just begun for 18- to 29-year-olds and England was in the tail end of the third national lockdown, with indoor mixing prohibited and students encouraged to limit contact with those outside of their households.

The second was six months later, from November to December 2021. By this time, 65% of 18- to 34-year-olds had received at least one dose of the vaccine and most social distancing measures were removed. At universities, face-to-face teaching had resumed but students were encouraged to wear masks in classrooms and social settings.

During the Spring, 37.9% of students said they visited a green space at least four times a week. This dropped to 19.2% by the autumn. Group membership rose from 75.2% in Spring to 83% in autumn. Mental well-being improved significantly between the two time periods, as students adapted to the easing of pandemic restrictions.

Dr. Palmer-Copper added, "Our results indicate that over time students adjusted as restrictions eased and suggests that the long-term mental well-being impact on students may be less severe than previously feared."

Students were also asked about their lifestyles before the pandemic. Of students surveyed, 62% reported using [green space](#) more during the [pandemic](#) than before. A high proportion also reported doing less physical activity, sleeping less, drinking less alcohol, and using social media more.

More information: Anaïs Lemyre et al, Mental wellbeing among

higher education students in England during the pandemic: A longitudinal study of COVID-19 experiences, social connectedness and greenspace use, *British Educational Research Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/berj.3976](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3976)

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