

## PHD STUDENTS' WELL-BEING: EVIDENCE FROM SELF-CARE AND STRESS-MANAGEMENT WORKSHOPS

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### Abstract

Mental health is defined as an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Within the University context, particularly among PhD students, addressing mental health has become increasingly important to safeguard psychological functioning. As part of the Health Mode On project, within the PRO-BEN initiative, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University developed a set of strategies to promote well-being among University Students and particular PhD Students. A pilot well-being intervention initiative and protocol was implemented, focusing on the promotion of self-care routines, mindfulness and time and stress management. The same set of activities will be administered to the study sample, consisting of PhD students enrolled at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University. To evaluate potential changes in doctoral students' perceived well-being, following participation in the workshops, the SInAPSi academic engagement scale (SAES) will be administered at both pre- and post-intervention time and focus groups will be implemented to describe well-being changes in PhD Students. Preliminary reports from the pilot study implemented in the undergraduate population, encompasses focus groups and qualitative reports indicated a reduction in perceived stress levels after the above-mentioned intervention. These results, together with existing evidence in the literature, provided the rationale for extending the initiative to the PhD student population, reducing stress and fostering psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** *Well-being, mental health, PhD students, stress-management, self-care.*

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### 1. Introduction

One in five adults currently lives with moderate-severe mental health conditions (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2023). Well-being enables individuals to sustain daily functioning, maintain social relationships, and pursue personal and professional goals (Hammoudi Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj & Malki, 2023). Within University settings, safeguarding mental health has become increasingly crucial, as students must manage academic pressure while maintaining psychological well-being. Several contextual factors contribute to distress, including academic workload, organizational demands, and mismatches between personal resources and external expectations (Martinez-Garcia, De Witte, Garcia-Martinez & Cano-Garcia, 2024). Transitions in lifestyle and exposure to demanding or unfamiliar environments further heighten psychological vulnerability (Freda, De Luca Picione & Testa, 2024). Evidence identifies several tools to promote well-being: supportive academic relationships, mindfulness, healthy nutrition, and balancing academic responsibilities with personal interests (Ruihua, Hassan, Qiuxia, Sha & Jingyi, 2025; Medlicott et al., 2021; Terzi, Isik, Inan, Akyildiz & Ustun, 2024). Literature also indicates that academic belonging also serves as key protective factors, associated with lower psychological distress, more adaptive coping, and greater academic engagement (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). The Italian Ministry of University and Research launched the national PRO-BEN initiative ("Health Mode On" [HMO]), funded between 2023 and 2025, with the aim of supporting Italian Universities in assessing mental health burdens and related challenges, identifying explicit and implicit needs within academic communities, and developing, implementing, and monitoring targeted interventions (Italian Ministry of University and Research, 2024). As part of the HMO project, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University has implemented a stepped, multidisciplinary intervention model that includes an online survey assessing academic conditions and contexts, group-based activities for both undergraduate and PhD students, and an integrated counseling program.

## 2. Design

This research employed a pilot study design implemented within a single academic center; the main study is longitudinal with a survey pre-post intervention.

## 3. Objectives

The intervention aims to enhance students' psychological and social well-being by strengthening social affiliation, self-awareness, and institutional support. At the individual level, the program supports autonomy, competence, and interpersonal skills, cultivates emotional regulation and addresses changeable habits, through workshops and activities. At the interpersonal and mesosystemic levels, it improves horizontal and vertical support, through peers and academic organization. The study's hypothesis is that workshop participation will yield increased well-being and awareness among students.

## 4. Methods

In a previous pilot study, the University of Vita-Salute San Raffaele invited a heterogeneous cohort of 100 first-year students across all degree programs to participate in pre-semester initiatives. The intervention comprised three workshops, both in Italian and English, aimed at promoting psychological well-being and sharing positive self-care routines. The activities targeted mindfulness, mindful eating, and time and stress management. The mindfulness workshop guided students through a brief Body Scan meditation. The mindful eating activity encouraged students to explore the sensory experience of eating a selection of foods—dried blueberries, milk chocolate, dark chocolate, and chips—reflecting on texture, taste, aroma, and sound. The time and stress management session included strategies for organizing time and cognitive approaches to managing stress. Participants engaged in a small-group exercise to design a hypothetical weekly schedule. Participation required online pre-registration and voluntary feedback was collected to assess the perceived impact of the activities on well-being and stress reduction. The same program will be offered to PhD students at the University, with an expected participation rate of 30%. The study sample will undergo pre- and post-intervention focus groups and assessments to evaluate social and academic affiliation and potential improvements resulting from the combined effects of the training activities and ongoing counseling, freely available throughout their academic program. Social affiliation will be measured using the SInAPSi Academic Engagement Scale (SAES; Freda et al., 2023), which captures university students' engagement as a multidimensional, relational, and dynamic construct. The SAES, part of the SInAPSi project (“Services for Active Participation and Inclusion of University Students”), assesses attitudes, motivation, and relational involvement in the academic context. The final SAES includes six dimensions: University Value & Sense of Belonging; Perceived Ability to Persist in University Choice; Value of University Course; Engagement with Professors; Engagement with Peers; and Relationships between University and Relational Network.

## 5. Results

The pilot study, conducted on a sample of 100 undergraduate students, indicated a reduction in perceived stress levels, as indicated by qualitative evaluations collected through workshop feedback. Across evaluations, participants consistently reported enhanced time management skills and a greater perceived ability to regulate stress. These findings, together with evidence from the literature on the topics, served as the rationale for offering the intervention to the target sample of PhD students. The intervention is expected to yield positive outcomes within the population of PhD students. The study hypothesizes positive associations between well-being and academic affiliation. Pre-post comparisons are expected to reveal improvements in students' reported well-being. These results would indicate that the intervention enhances psychological functioning among PhD students.

## 6. Discussion

This study contributes to the expanding literature on psychological well-being in university contexts by examining a multidisciplinary intervention aimed at improving self-awareness, stress management, and adaptive academic habits among PhD students. Consistent with previous evidence, initial findings indicate that mindfulness-based strategies and time management training can enhance well-being, particularly by strengthening self-awareness and perceived daily functioning (Medlicott et al., 2021; Terzi et al., 2024). PhD students are exposed to substantial psychological strain, including excessive workload, impaired work-life balance, economic and contractual instability, and, at times, unsupportive academic

climates. These factors jointly undermine emotional, psychological, and social well-being, key components for sustaining motivation, relational functioning, and academic engagement (Martínez-García et al., 2024; Freda et al., 2024). The intervention addressed these challenges by promoting autonomy, competence, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. A central focus was the enhancement of social affiliation, recognized as a protective factor for mental and physical health. Strengthening students' sense of belonging may buffer academic stress and promote resilience (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Preliminary indications suggest that group-based activities centred on awareness can foster relational engagement within the academic environment, underlining the contextual nature of well-being. Participants also reported improvements in time management abilities and mindful awareness, both essential for balancing intensive academic demands with restorative activities. These effects align with evidence showing that interventions integrating emotional regulation, healthy routines, and organizational skills can reduce perceived stress and promote more sustainable academic functioning (Medlicott et al., 2021; Terzi et al., 2024). The pilot underscores the value of embedding multilevel well-being interventions within university systems, with integrated monitoring tools in a stepped-care framework supporting targeted prevention strategies. The findings show that PhD student well-being is a dynamic, multidimensional construct shaped by individual, relational, and institutional factors. Multilevel interventions may therefore contribute to more supportive academic environments and sustained student resilience.

## 7. Conclusions

This study provides preliminary evidence that mindfulness-based practices, time management training, and social affiliation activities can enhance psychological well-being among PhD students. The intervention targeted key stressors by promoting self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relational engagement. Results indicate that even brief, structured programs may reduce perceived stress and support healthier academic functioning. Findings also underscore the multidimensional nature of well-being and the value of multilevel interventions within university settings. Further research with larger, diverse samples is needed to confirm and extend these outcomes.

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