



REAP IMPACT REPORT

Mindfulness Is Needed More Than Ever

Promoting Mental Health for University Students in China through Mindfulness



Around the world, the leading cause of death among adolescents, from middle school through college, is usually accidents: car crashes, falls, or other unforeseen events. In China, however, suicide ranks among the top causes, particularly for older adolescents and university students. As we began developing a mindfulness program for Chinese college students, we held interviews with students at some of China's top universities, asking about their experiences with mental health and their views on mindfulness practices. As part of these conversations, we included a question about suicide: had they ever known someone who had either died by suicide or attempted it, whether a classmate, a

friend, or a friend of a friend? After just 20 interviews, we were stunned. More than 80% of the students said yes, describing peers who had taken their own lives or come close. We had been aware that student mental health was an increasingly urgent issue in China, but we hadn't realized how widespread, personal, and immediate it had become. Today, the problem is so sensitive that media coverage of student suicides is often restricted or discouraged.

But suicide is only the most extreme outcome of a much broader crisis: the steady, rising tide of mental health challenges facing students across China. From elementary school through high school and into college, the pressure builds. Research has shown that the environment students grow up in, and that college students, in particular, are navigating today, is filled with stress. Economic uncertainty, job market anxiety, academic demands, and relentless competition have created a climate of chronic strain. These young people have lived under this pressure for years, and for many, it only intensifies with time.

The consequences are alarming. Nearly 30% of university students in China show symptoms of depression, and about 20% experience anxiety. A major meta-analysis found that more than 11% — over a million college students — have seriously considered suicide. Yet despite the scale of the problem, few receive the support they need. The stigma surrounding mental illness remains strong, and many students are hesitant to speak openly about their struggles. Even when they do, mental health services on campus are often limited, understaffed, or unavailable. As a result, a generation of students is facing these challenges largely on their own.

REAP's Mindfulness Initiative

Would a course centered on mindfulness help students manage stress and prevent mental health problems from worsening? Could a Mindfulness-Based Program (MBP) offer a space where students begin to make sense of their anxiety and depression, or at least feel less alone in facing it? These were the questions we asked when we began this work. They are still the questions that guide us now.



The goal of our Mindfulness-Based Program is to promote emotional well-being among university students in China and to prevent mental health challenges from becoming overwhelming. To reach that goal, we are building a curriculum that is engaging, relevant, and accessible. We are also evaluating how well it works, how best to deliver it, and what makes it more or less successful in different settings.



Big Steps Already Taken

Over the past several months, our Stanford team has been working closely with students at two pilot universities, one in Beijing and one in Shanghai, to develop and test our Mindfulness-Based Program. This pilot is more than a trial run. It is a full implementation in miniature, complete with structured courses, trained instructors, and pre- and post-intervention surveys to measure outcomes. Our sessions have been completed, and early feedback has already helped us refine the program. Through this process, we've learned a great deal about student needs, how to build trust and engagement, and what makes mindfulness resonate in the Chinese university context. What we are building is creative, student-centered, and grounded in the realities of campus life.

One key takeaway from the pilot is the importance of awareness. Many students who stand to benefit from mindfulness simply don't know what it is. So we've focused on visibility and curiosity, hosting informal events, student-led talks, and discussions. We've also experimented with different outreach strategies, from student mentor networks to WeChat accounts to department channels. We provide small incentives for students to try something new.

We've also seen clearly what makes a mindfulness course work. The content must speak to the daily experiences of college students. Passive lectures fall flat, engagement matters, and in-person interaction adds something that online materials alone can't replicate. We've incorporated mindfulness after-session practice: brief exercises lasting 15 to 30 minutes, such as meditation or a gratitude journal. Our program encourages students to apply what they learn in class while maintaining a low-pressure experience.

What Comes Next

Through the spring of 2025, our instructors have been trained and the pilot is nearly complete. Post-program surveys and interviews will follow soon. Over the summer, we will run additional trainings and continue refining the curriculum. In the 2025 to 2026 academic year, the Mindfulness-Based Program will launch in eight universities, reaching 500 students through a large-scale randomized controlled trial.



Stay Mindful

This program was built in response to what students told us, about stress, isolation, and the need for something more. By helping students manage anxiety and emotional pain, we hope to intervene early, before these struggles turn into something more severe. We're looking forward to sharing what comes next.