



We acknowledge that UW-Eau Claire occupies the sacred and ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples. We honor the land of the Ojibwe and Dakota Nations.

# How Adverse Childhood Experiences Affect the Mental Health and Academic Performance of College Students

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## Introduction

Our research utilized the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey as a starting point to find how a student's mental health may be influenced by the number of ACEs they report, and the affects that may have on academic performance. We modeled our questions utilizing the 10 different ACEs a person could experience between 0 – 18 years of age, as defined by a study published by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, et al, 1998). These 10 childhood traumas include:

- physical abuse,
- emotional abuse,
- sexual abuse;
- physical neglect,
- emotional neglect;
- mental illness of a household member, an incarcerated household member, mother treated violently,
- household member with substance abuse, or
- divorce.

## Methods

The survey was sent to five course sections of social work 100, which has a broad enrollment across disciplines.

The survey was also uploaded to SONA. Many students enrolled in psychology classes at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire are given the opportunity to receive extra credit by participating in surveys on SONA. Students' self select which research surveys they would like to complete. All participants answered a 19-question survey. The project received 105 responses. All responses were self-report.

## Impact on Academics

Participants self-reported ways their mental health impacted their academic performance throughout college. Responses were coded by single words based on external and internal factors. Participants used 26 words to describe external factors. Internal factors were also sorted as negative, positive, and other. The word **Unmotivated** was used 19 times by individual participants, being the most common negative, internal factor. **Nervous/Anxious** was used 18 times and the word **Stress** 17 times. Participants utilized 32 unique words coded in each category of positive or other but utilized 148 different words to describe negative internal factors.

## Impact on Relationships

Participants reported the impact their mental health had on relationships with friends, professors, and classmates. The responses were divided into two categories- external and internal factors. Internal factors again were coded as negative, positive, and other. **Self-Isolation** was used 19 times with **Detached from Others** being used 12 times. In the category of other, participants reported **Feeling Like a Burden** the most. A phrase mentioned the most often in the external factors was **Open About Mental Health with Friends**.

## Campus Opportunities

Participants also reported what resources and/or activities they take part in. Counseling services was the campus opportunity most mentioned at 19 times, while the Writing Center was mentioned by 12 participants. When asked what opportunities could be added to further assist students, participants stated having emotional support animals more available, having mental health days/breaks from school, and meditation or yoga classes available.

## Relationship to Diagnosis

Participants reported their ACE score out of 10. In follow up questions, participants reported if they have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression, and if so at what age. The average age for an anxiety diagnosis was 13, and the average age for a diagnosis of depression was 14.

Diagnosis	Average ACE Score
No Depression or Anxiety	2.75
Both Depression and Anxiety	3.92
Only Anxiety	5.6
Only Depression	6

Figure 2. Average ACE score with diagnoses.

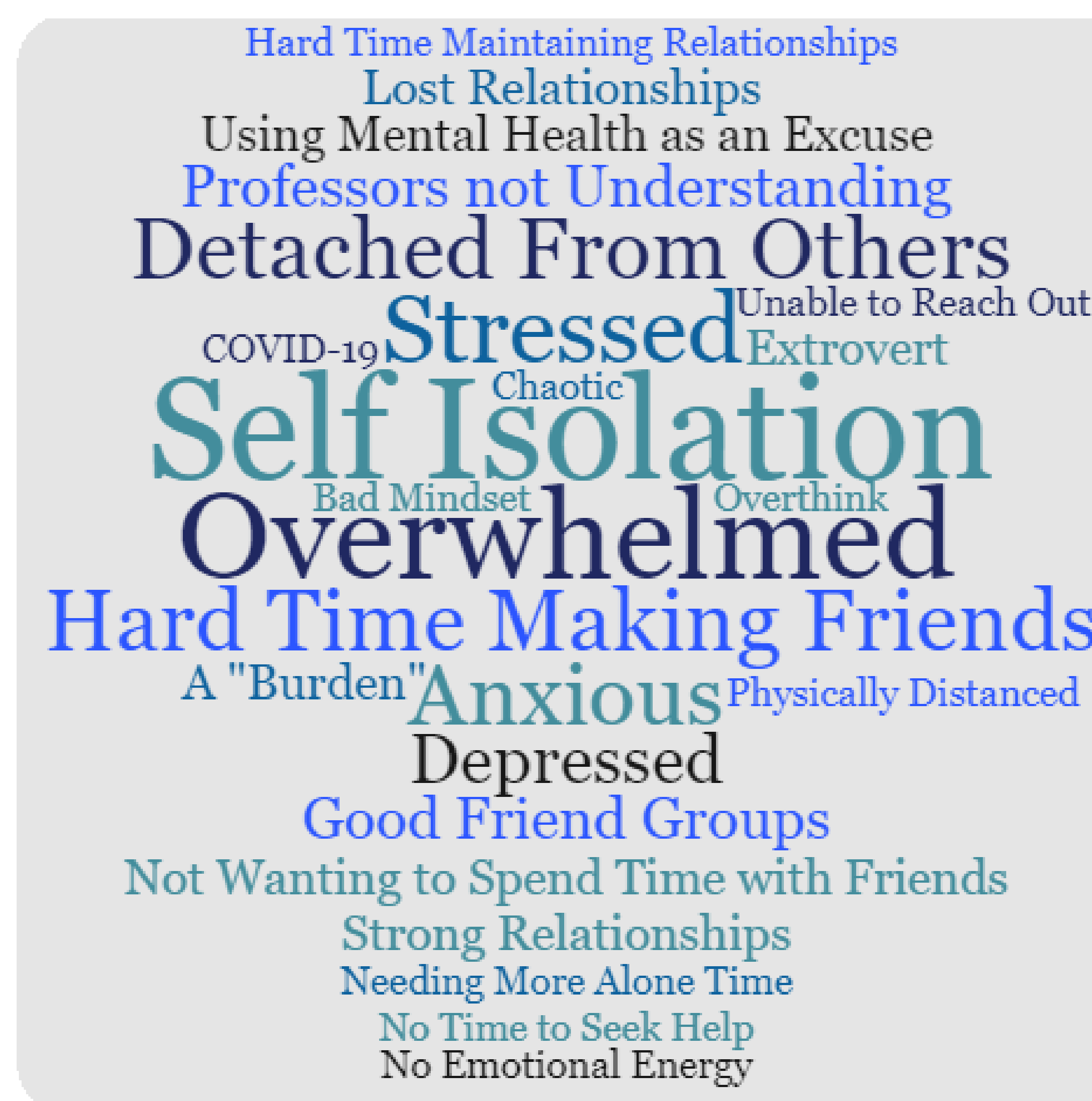


Figure 1. Has the responses from the question asking how mental health impacts relationships.

## Conclusion

Higher ACE scores have been seen to be directly associated with negative mental health outcomes, and a lower well being overall (Chamberlain, 2020). When taking this information into account, our data also showed that college students reporting mental health challenges have more negative experiences, and more problems with professors, peers, and friends. This could also mean that having a higher ACE score would lead to having a negative impact on academics and relationships. When looking at the impact mental health has on student academics, we could see from the data that many students felt their mental health made them unmotivated, anxious, and stressed. With their relationships, it shows that their mental health made them isolate themselves, feel detached from others, and even feel like a burden to professors and peers.

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## References

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