LET'S EXPRESS OUR STRESS!

SCI 3900/HONOR 3990
BEING A HUMAN IN STEM

University of Utah | Spring 2024
INTRODUCTIONS

Maren (she/her)  
BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING, 2026

Alayna (she/her)  
BIOLOGY, 2025

Marynn (she/her)  
UNDECIDED, 2027

Bailey (he/him)  
BIOLOGY, 2024

Elizabeth (she/her)  
CHEMICAL ENGINEERING, 2027
Being a student is hard!

• The college “experience”
  ◦ Discovery, novelty, growth
  ◦ Academic and financial struggles

• The experience in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)
  ◦ Rigorous coursework
  ◦ Competitive culture

• The mental health culture in STEM
  ◦ “It’s supposed to be hard”
  ◦ Discourages proper mental health hygiene

• What needs to change?
Students Struggle

- College students are more likely to be depressed and anxious than the average adult
  
  - "College students are often viewed as a privileged population, but they are not immune to the suffering and disability associated with mental illness"
  
  - “41% of students showing signs of anxiety and 39% moderate to severe depression"

Evans, Bira, Et al. Nature Biotechnology (2018)
STEM Students Struggle

- STEM students are more likely to be depressed than other college students
  - Students in STEM majors are a distinctive group of college students who face unique risks for developing mental health issues

Kalkbrenner, M. T., James, C., & Pérez-Rojas, A. E. (2022)
STEM students aren't talking about it

- STEM students are less likely to seek mental health support when they are struggling
  - “When compared to their non-STEM counterparts, STEM students are less likely to recognize warning signs of mental distress, and they access mental health support services at lower rates than their peers”

Kalkbrenner, Miceli, The Professional Counselor, Volume 12, Issue 3, Pages 249–261
What We Did

Goal: Get people talking!

• Hold events during the semester aimed at increasing mental health dialogue between STEM students
• Conduct a survey to assess the mental health climate on our campus
Another Motivation

• Gabe Brown spoke to our class
  • Introduced us to some helpful anxiety tips
  • Shared some statistics across campus about mental health

Gabe Brown, Social Work Intern
University Counseling Center
Just Dance It Out!

- Fun environment for students to dance out their stress
- Warhead test anxiety strategy
Warheads
To Help STRESS?!
Have you ever felt so overwhelmed you can’t think?
They have helped me!
The sour takes your mind off your stressors and helps you ground yourself.

Take One and Just Dance!
Just Dance It Out: Takeaways

What went well:
• Students said they felt less stressed after dancing
• Students connected
• New test anxiety strategy

What we learned:
• Better advertisement
• Room location is important
• Dancing can be intimidating!
Pizza & Personal Health

- Free pizza
- Opportunity for students to discuss their mental health with each other
- Mental health survey
Pizza & Personal Health: Takeaways

What went well:
- Pizza!
- Lots of student engagement
- Students felt supported by their peers
- Data collection via survey

What was lacking:
- Engagement/support from experts
- Hesitancy for students to engage in discussion
Survey Results

103 total respondents

Responses by Major

- Biology: 40%
- Non-STEM: 15%
- Math: 4%
- Chemistry: 5%
- Biomed Engineering: 6%
- Biochem: 8%
- Physics: 12%
- Engineering: 11%
The Mental Health Climate at the U

78% of survey respondents reported being at least somewhat concerned about their mental health during the 2023-24 academic year.
Where are people seeking support?

17% of survey respondents reported seeking resources on campus.

Most commonly utilized:

• Counseling Center (UCC)
• MH1 (Mental Health First Responders)
• Women’s Resource Center (WRC)
• Center for Disability & Access (CDA)
• Student Success Coaches
Peer-to-Peer Dialogue

Half of survey respondents reported not always feeling comfortable discussing mental health with their peers.

8/10 respondents reported that there should be more opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue about mental health.
Future Directions

- Decompression Spaces
- Integrating mental health education/awareness into course content
- More mental health focused events
- Reducing steps to get access to resources
Conclusions

• Our project shows that students in STEM struggle to talk about their mental health

• Our campus would greatly benefit from a culture shift that promotes dialogue surrounding mental health
We’re all human. We all struggle. Let’s talk about it!

References: