

College Happiness Clubs Spread Joy and Random Acts of Kindness by Lexi Dwyer

College students often get stereotyped as stressed out and sleep-deprived. But at universities across the country, students are aiming to change that as they join clubs dedicated to a common, joyful purpose: spreading happiness.

Eleanor Collier / Stanford Happiness Collective

The Stanford Happiness Collective was started three years ago "with the goal of doing things to brighten people's days," its president, junior Eleanor Collier told TODAY.

Northwestern University is home to one of the country's oldest college happiness clubs, which began unofficially in 2008 when a group of students handed out hot chocolate outside the library on a cold evening right before finals week. (The group became an official student club in 2010, and the hot-chocolate tradition has continued annually.) This semester the club hosted events like "Bubbles, Bubbles, Bubbles," where children's soap bubbles, bubble wrap and bubble gum were handed out for students' amusement.

Members post encouraging messages on the group's Facebook feed like, "You can make it through this next week...if you're feeling overwhelmed and like you don't know how to get all of your work done, JUST DO IT," as well as photo collections based on topics like "What Makes You Thankful?" and "What Makes You Happy?"

Another group, Stanford University's Happiness Collective, was started three years ago "with the goal of doing things to brighten people's days," its president, junior Eleanor Collier told TODAY. Some ideas are simple, like a recent Sunday-night project that involved members attaching candy and upbeat notes to bikes around campus. "That came out of a meeting where we had talked about the value of writing kind letters, so Monday morning when people tend to be so stressed out, they showed up to a sweet surprise," says Collier.

Other Stanford initiatives are more elaborate, like a recent fair celebrating World Kindness Day that featured a flash mob of musicians playing Coldplay's "Viva La Vida" and booths offering activities like a hug menu (choices included bear, bro grab, armless and pick-me-up) and a station for writing letters of gratitude to loved ones.

Collier said she likes to use meetings to get a sense of what's going on in people's lives. "It's easy to get this idea when you hear 'happiness collective' that it's sort of this froofy thing and you're expected to be happy all the time," she says. She originally asked participants to share one thing from their week that brought them joy, but then started to dig a little deeper.

"I realized that people seemed stressed out, so I invited them to also share one thing they were struggling with, and encouraging them to be vulnerable," she said. "A teacher of mine had said in class, 'we are not human doings but human beings,' and that idea, of how people were being, just resonated with me," she added.

Eleanor Collier / Stanford Happiness Collective

On World Kindness Day, the Stanford Happiness Collective came up with creative ways to inspire joy.

Junior Andrea Ocampo, the vice president of the Happiness Collective, said she thought the club was especially welcome given the academic pressure at Stanford. "It is so important to life at Stanford because in such a high stress and high achieving environment, it's amazing what simple random acts of kindness can do to lighten the burdens placed on students," she told TODAY.

Stanford's Happiness Collective is planning to work with The Happiness Challenge, a project originally developed by Leslie Rith-Najarian when she was an undergraduate psychology major at Harvard. Students are invited to register for the 10-week online program, which consists of "8 weekly challenges designed to educate and empower participants to build happier habits."

Each week, participants are asked to focus on a different self-care habit such as exercising, getting enough sleep, improving negative thought patterns or managing time. Rith-Najarian, now a psychology PhD candidate at UCLA, partnered with fellow former Harvard Happiness Club members Emily Lowe and Cindy Shih to bring the challenge to six different universities, including Emory and Yale, and plans to expand to more schools and organizations over the next few years.

Rith-Najarian said that unlike traditional mental-health resources, which still might have a stigma for some students, the Happiness Challenge was about changing habits. "People are very much like, 'Oh yeah, I want to have better habits, I'll try that,'" she told TODAY. But the challenge can be customized for each school to "funnel students towards other campus resources," such as wellness centers or mental-health counselors.

The Happiness Challenge may have deeper implications, especially since the federal agency SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) has reported that when compared to older adults, members of the 18 to 24 age demographic are the least likely to seek help for mental-health-related issues. Rith-Najarian also added that she'd seen many students say they were going to put off taking proper care of themselves "just until graduation" or "when they get to their real lives." But she stressed that this mindset could be detrimental. "College is life, it's this time of independence when you're building your way of interacting with the world and you really are forming your habits, and the ones you make during that time will be tricky to reverse after you graduate," she said.

Collier also said that the "attitude of valuing achievement over well being," was, in her opinion, counterproductive. "It's very backwards because research shows that happier people succeed better, but there is a mindset that in order to succeed, we have to sacrifice sleep, self-compassion and relationships with other people. Ultimately, this is 'wellness activism,' and we want to change the messages that people hear," she said.