# Evidence shows universal mental health lessons in schools may do more harm than good



It’s a Saturday afternoon, and a five-year-old child lies on the living room floor, fully engaged in a mindfulness exercise with her class, where they practice a body scan by focusing on different parts of their bodies. Although she is unaware of the implications, for someone like me—a psychologist who researches mental-health education—the scenario raises significant concerns. While the initial idea of teaching mental-health lessons in schools appears beneficial, especially in light of today’s rising mental health challenges among youth, the reality suggests these interventions may not be as effective as hoped.

The premise of integrating mental health education into the school curriculum grew from a palpable urgency: young people are facing increasing rates of mental health issues, and conventional one-on-one treatment options often remain out of reach. Advocates believed that universal interventions could reach all students, addressing the needs of those who might not otherwise seek help. This approach could serve not only as a preventative measure against future mental health problems but also as a means of fostering greater understanding of mental well-being among young people.

However, mounting evidence challenges these assumptions. Comprehensive reviews and high-quality studies have consistently revealed a lack of significant improvement in mental health outcomes from these universal initiatives. In fact, some findings indicate that such interventions could even exacerbate existing mental health issues, rather than alleviate them. Numerous studies illustrate that students, particularly those already grappling with mental health struggles, often require more tailored, one-on-one support rather than broad classroom lessons that fail to resonate with their experiences.

Indeed, research indicates that many children do not find value in universal mental health lessons. For some, participating in mindfulness exercises becomes a source of stress rather than relief, and certain groups—such as neurodivergent students—may struggle to engage with the material adequately. Additionally, the classroom environment itself may act as a barrier; children facing bullying or social anxiety may not feel safe enough to engage fully in mental health exercises. These factors suggest that such universal programs can unintentionally harm rather than help; they might serve as reminders of their distress rather than constructive tools for coping.

Support for targeted approaches is gaining traction. Evidence points towards the effectiveness of focused mental health support for those in need, particularly one-on-one or small group interventions. Studies reveal that providing tailored assistance in school settings can yield positive short-term outcomes, particularly when the support builds trust and addresses the unique needs of individual students.

Nevertheless, the call for a reevaluation of universal mental health lessons does not imply that mental health discussions have no place in schools. It instead proposes a shift in strategy, prioritising the provision of clear pathways for students to seek help when needed, while reserving more intensive interventions for those who are genuinely struggling. The existing framework, as it stands, appears more fitted to generating awareness than effecting meaningful change—a costly and ineffective reliance on broad strategies in the face of a nuanced and diverse mental health landscape.

As calls for reform grow louder, it remains critical that educational institutions heed both the qualitative experiences of students and the quantitative evidence from research studies. The implications are profound: if mental health lessons do not have the desired impact, continuing to allocate time and resources toward them not only raises ethical concerns but also diverts attention from initiatives that could genuinely enhance the well-being of vulnerable populations.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all approach to mental health education is unlikely to succeed. The evidence suggests that a more nuanced strategy, focusing on tailored support and clear guidance on accessing help, ensures that we centre the needs of young people in our efforts to foster a healthier future.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-2: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness)
2. Paragraphs 3-4: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness), [[2]](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925614/full)
3. Paragraphs 5-6: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness), [[3]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36003110/), [[4]](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10597-023-01090-5)
4. Paragraphs 7-8: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness), [[5]](https://bmcpsychology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40359-018-0242-3)
5. Paragraphs 9-10: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness), [[6]](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1228269/full), [[7]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32253540/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/mental-health-lessons-school-dont-work-mindfulness> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925614/full> - This study evaluates the effectiveness of the PROMEHS program, a universal school-based mental health initiative implemented across six European countries. The findings indicate that the program positively impacted students' social and emotional competence, prosocial behavior, and reduced internalizing and externalizing problems. However, no significant effects were observed on academic outcomes. The study emphasizes the importance of adequately trained teachers and suggests that longer program durations may enhance effectiveness. It also highlights the need for further research to assess the long-term impact of such interventions.
3. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36003110/> - This article discusses the evaluation of a school-based, universal mental health promotion program developed for the European context. The program aims to promote social and emotional learning and resilience, and prevent social, emotional, and behavioral problems in children and adolescents. The study found that the experimental group showed significant improvements in social and emotional competence and prosocial behavior, and a decrease in mental health issues compared to the control group. However, no significant impact was found on academic outcomes, suggesting the need for further research in this area.
4. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10597-023-01090-5> - This study evaluates the equity of outcomes of the universal, school-based mental health coaching intervention, Building Resilience for Healthy Kids, among racially and ethnically diverse youth. The intervention involved sixth-grade students attending six weekly sessions with a health coach discussing goal setting and other resilience strategies. The results indicated that racial minority students exhibited greater improvements in personal and total resilience compared to White students, controlling for baseline scores. This suggests that universal, school-based mental health programs can yield equitable outcomes across diverse populations.
5. <https://bmcpsychology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40359-018-0242-3> - This systematic review examines the implementation and evaluation of universal, resilience-focused mental health promotion programs in primary schools. The review included 11 reports on evaluations of seven school-based mental health promotion programs. The findings suggest that such programs have positive impacts on students' ability to manage daily stressors. However, the review also notes that few long-term sustained effects were recorded following program completion, indicating the need for further research to assess the long-term effectiveness of these interventions.
6. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1228269/full> - This meta-analytic review assesses the effectiveness of universal school-based social-emotional learning programs in promoting social-emotional skills, attitudes towards self and others, positive social behaviors, and improving emotional and conduct problems among Japanese children. The review found that such programs are effective in enhancing social-emotional skills and positive behaviors, and in reducing emotional and conduct problems. The study emphasizes the importance of implementing these programs in school settings to support children's social and emotional development.
7. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32253540/> - This cluster randomized control trial evaluates the effects of a school-based mental health program combining mental health literacy and dialectical behavior skills on protective factors related to resilience for students with developmental disabilities. The study found large effect sizes for the program on self-concept, coping skills, and social support measures. The results suggest that universal school-based mental health programming can be effective in enhancing resilience among students with developmental disabilities, highlighting the importance of such interventions in supporting diverse student populations.