



A Report on Stress and Mental Health at AUC

A collaboration between *Wicked Challenges in Health* and the *AUC Student Council*

3 July 2023

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1. Introduction

This report began as a group project for the 300-level theme course *Wicked Challenges in Health*. It is made in collaboration with the Amsterdam University College (AUC) Student Council.

The subject of excessive stress and poor mental health in today's society is truly a “wicked problem”. It has no clear formulation, no all-encompassing solution, and existing interventions have no clear metric of success; all of which are criteria of Rittel and Webber's original conception of the term¹.

The choice of tackling the struggle with mental health at AUC was highly relevant. This topic holds a paradoxical state at the university. Though it is often highlighted through the presence of organizational structures (Well-being Team, mentioned in AUC Student Handbook) and students have relatively high knowledge of mental health, psychological well-being remains a large struggle for a wide proportion of students. This seems inevitable, as wicked challenges in health, by their nature, are complex and do not benefit from clear-cut solutions. As they are multidimensional, their resolution is hindered by a diverse set of obstacles, ranging from social, ethical, economic, political, and environmental. Approaching this topic specifically at AUC allowed for a more hands-on confrontation with the problem of mental health, and would hopefully result in concrete adoption of strategies to improve the situation.

Throughout this academic year, the Student Council has also encountered the challenges inherent in addressing this problem. Despite the first point of our Policy Plan being Mental Health and Well-being, a feasible improvement or even a common understanding of the problem remains elusive. The following questions, among many others, have repeatedly arisen: *Are there insufficient resources for Mental Health, or are the existing resources simply insufficiently publicized? Have the resources been insufficiently publicized, or are students just reluctant to reach out for support? Should we attempt to mitigate stress for students, or should we only teach them how to build resilience in response to it? At what point does AUC's responsibility for offering resources end?*

The goal of this report is to provide the materials for a debate about current resources at AUC. How do students perceive the existing resources available to them? What are the potential

¹ Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01405730>



gaps of the current system, according to students and the Well-being Team? The makers of this report have collected data in the form of a survey sent to students, as well as a series of interviews to the Student Life Officers (SLOs) and Peer Support. The UvA-based student initiative All Ears was also interviewed for this project. The report concludes with subsequent recommendations based on the research.

2. Survey Results

The survey consisted of four parts: Stress and Academic Workload, Personal Experience with Mental Health, Dutch Mental Healthcare System, and Support Systems for AUC Students. These categories were deemed the most important elements of the wicked challenge investigated. The results are shown below.

Stress and Academic Workload

Statement	Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree
Thinking about my school work stresses me out.	76.2%
I am constantly thinking about my school work throughout the day.	61.4%
I am constantly running out of 'free time' because of my school work.	58.4%
It is impossible to catch up on my school work, if I get behind.	50.6%
I believe that the amount of school work I receive in a week is too much.	40.5%
I am not getting enough sleep because of my school work.	28.6%

Table 1



Personal Experience with Mental Health

Question	Percentage of respondents who answered yes
Have you ever experienced struggles with mental health or had significant psychological stress that negatively impacted your daily life during your time at AUC?	84.5%
Have you ever reached out for help to cope with such difficulties, including institutional ways (ex: psychotherapy) and personal ways (ex: self-help literature, meditation)?	71.1%

Table 2

Many students shared their experiences with mental health in a separate question. The majority of respondents who shared their experiences referenced anxiety or depression. Some mentioned ADHD, disordered eating, and a few spoke about the impact of COVID on their mental health.

The most popular form of help people sought was medical (either through psychiatrist, GP, or psychotherapy) or self-help. Many also sought help within AUC, with SLOs or their tutors.

Dutch Mental Healthcare System

Issues Encountered with Mental Healthcare at GP or GGZ	
Long waiting times	39.1%
Issues with insurance coverage	27.5%
Difficulties understanding the Dutch Healthcare system	29%
Complications in the bureaucratic processes in the Dutch Healthcare system	24.6%
Financial difficulties	17.4%
Difficulties in obtaining a diagnosis	10.1%
No issues	7.2%
No experience (N/A)	40.6%

Table 3



Support Systems for AUC Students

When asked whether they agree with the statement “I feel supported by AUC in regards to any mental health issues I have/could have in the future,” 32.1% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 29.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 38.1% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Structure	Percentage of respondents aware of this structure	Percentage of respondents who have used this structure
Peer Support	97.6%	29.5%
SLOs	95.2%	68.2%
Mental Health Guide	47%	22.7%
UvA Psychologists	79.5%	20.5%
UvA Mental Health Workshops	26.5%	9.1%

Table 4

The open answer responses were quite mixed. Many students found the support systems useful, but many also did not find the help they needed. Most expressed appreciation for the existing systems even if they were dissatisfied with the limits of the support itself. See appendix for full responses.

3. Well-being team interviews

3.1 Peer Support

Our main goal for this interview with Peer Support was to find out which challenges the organization runs into when trying to provide mental support to AUC students. Thus, we spoke to three members, including one of the chairs of Peer Support.

Although Peer Support is an organization trained in active listening to help students, they do run into a few issues, all of which concern accessibility. They feel that many students who struggle with their mental health do not reach out for help, whether that be in the form of Peer



Support or someplace else. Peer Support raised several issues that could play a role in the high threshold for reaching out:

- A) Many people are unaware of what Peer Support can help them with, what they are trained to do, and how to reach out to them. Some people might not even consider them as an option at all or are unaware that they have actual training for counseling people.
- B) There is also a substantial group of people who find that they have to ‘fix it’ themselves. Going to someone for help might feel like you are admitting defeat of some sort or showing weakness. These people also might not consider their problems worthy of seeking help, because they may seem small to them (i.e. “other people have it worse”), even though Peer Support has stated many times that they are open to anyone, even if they just need to vent about their day. They also give the option to talk with them on instagram, to make the threshold even lower.
- C) Being a Peer Supporter can feel like a “double-edged sword”. Although they understand the everyday struggles and stressors of AUC life and can be more approachable than an actual psychologist, they also feel like being a peer hinders them. Everyone lives in the same environment (school, housing, community), which can result in the feeling that the conversations are less private than some would want. Peer Support members also felt like people didn’t take them as seriously as other organizations in the Well-being Team, precisely because they are peers: being seen as an equal can have both advantages and disadvantages.
- D) There are some differences in culture that might make it harder for people from cultural backgrounds that have very different ways of dealing with/talking about mental health to reach out to services like Peer Support.

In addition to this, members of Peer Support told us that efforts they took to improve their organization, like open discussion meetings or a suggestion box, weren't successful in engaging people either. This is understandably quite frustrating to them since they do not receive suggestions from the community about how to solve the issues above this way.

Finally, we asked the people we interviewed whether they had any ideas for improvement, to which they suggested more involvement of tutors and/or lecturers. It might be helpful if these groups of people were trained in referring struggling students to Peer Support or the SLOs and/or how to deal with urgent mental health situations.



3.2 Student Life Officer (SLO)

On April 18th, an interview was conducted with Lisa van Berkel, a staff member at the Student Life Officers (SLOs). The interview aimed to gain insights into the SLO's role in supporting students who are struggling with mental health issues. Lisa explained the role of SLOs as a low threshold option for AUC students to come to and discuss their problems, as having access to mental healthcare can be a struggle for some students. Additionally, she mentioned that SLOs also offer help in finding and signing up for general practitioners (GPs), as well as explaining the Dutch (mental) healthcare system. This can be particularly useful for international students who may be unfamiliar with the Dutch healthcare system.

Lisa then shared her experience working with students, acknowledging that many of the students who came for help often didn't know what to expect. The lack of recognition seems to be a big challenge for SLOs, as there is a knowledge gap amongst students about what the SLOs do, and Lisa explained that they have been struggling to solve this issue. For instance, she explained that many students tend to not know that SLOs don't just offer a single meeting, but in fact, you can have multiple follow-up counseling sessions, which can benefit some students.

4. Analysis

The results from the survey reveal some positivity with respect to the AUC support systems. Most students are aware of the support systems which exist, especially Peer Support and the SLOs, and many students use these resources. While the survey results do not communicate an absence of issues within the support system, it is important to recognize that some systems are working and do help students.

Among the more concerning findings from the survey are the vast majority of students who have experienced mental health issues. While mental health issues are loosely defined in the survey, 84.5% of respondents reporting having experienced them is quite concerning. While it is still positive that 71.1% of respondents have attempted to improve their situation, attention to mental health is still needed.

The issues Peer Support faces according to the interviews, especially with lack of students reaching out, are not surprising considering the survey responses. While Peer Support had the most visibility compared to other AUC support structures, of the students who were aware of it, a smaller percentage made use of it than the SLOs, Mental Health Guide, of UvA Mental Health Workshops.



This could be in part due to how students may define “using” Peer Support, as much of what they do is organize calming or community-building events which offer support in less individualized ways. This could also have to do with students not knowing that Peer Support can meet with students individually and is trained in active listening.

The Student Life Officers faced a separate issue. While 95% of respondents are aware of them, and 68% have reached out to them, they still report struggling with a lack of recognition. This lack of recognition can be interpreted as a lack of understanding rather than awareness, as Lisa shares that people often don’t understand the scope of support SLOs can offer. This is consistent with some written survey responses which show SLOs not being able to help “in the long run.” However, many respondents who reported dissatisfaction with the level of support SLOs can offer share that they already met with the SLOs. Many respondents share that the SLOs were kind but they still needed long-term psychological support, and thus did not seek further support with the SLOs.

It was also notable that while only 47% of respondents were aware of the Mental Health Guide, almost half of them (22.7%) reported making use of it. Thus, it is a heavily undervalued resource, and also can be helpful for students who do not find what they are looking for in commonly-advertised support structures such as the SLOs as it offers a variety of ways people can seek help.

A recurring topic in the survey recommendations sections concerned the possibility of having an AUC psychologist. This was thoroughly discussed throughout the project, as well as during the various interviews. The main counterpoint to this was that AUC previously had a psychologist, but students did not make use of them and would not show up to appointments. Conversations with the coordinator of All Ears provided insight into why that might be the case, despite the apparent need of AUC students for consultations. All Ears emphasizes the complexity of dealing with mental health and how difficult it can be to reach out, which is why they aim to provide very low threshold options to students, including anonymous calls and online chatting. They were therefore not surprised when we mentioned the lack of participation of students in support systems at AUC. The high threshold dimension of the systems currently in place should be acknowledged and understood as a limiting factor in tackling mental health at AUC. We wish to therefore emphasize that lack of participation from students is not inherently caused by reluctance, unwillingness or even idleness in reaching out, as was further demonstrated by the survey results (71.1% of respondents attempted to improve their situation).



5. Recommendations

In light of our research, we stress that new strategies to improve stress and mental health at AUC are still needed. We also challenge the commonly-held assumption that further interventions necessitate large mobilization of resources extending beyond our capability. Thus, we base our recommendations on novel perspectives and encourage creative ways to address mental health issues.

5.1 Increasing awareness and recognition

A major concern that arose during this project was the lack of awareness and knowledge of students about what exactly they should expect from the current support structures at AUC. This became apparent throughout interviews with Peer Support and the SLOs and could explain the decreasing student engagement with these structures, thus warranting better and more far-reaching communication practices. We base our recommendation on the current model adopted by various committees at UvA, as detailed to us by All Ears. We advise the SLOs and Peer Support to create infographic slides that lecturers could project during class breaks. This allows for increased awareness and reminders to students, all while ensuring lecturers do not have to sacrifice class-time. Such initiatives were shown to significantly enhance student engagement at UvA, which shows promise for AUC.

An additional point to consider is the initial presentation of support systems at AUC. The current sessions on health, stress and emergencies presented by the SLOs during Introweek provide an introductory overview of the existing support systems at AUC and path of actions students can follow to reach out when struggling. In addition to these, we recommend similar workshops to be held later in the semester, for instance before stressful periods such as exam weeks. Such workshops would serve as a reminder for students, so as to ensure that crucial information not to be lost amidst the rest of announcements from Introweek. These sessions could require attendance, however without penalizing absent students.

These workshops could also be reinstated for second and third year students.

5.2 Further Training Options for Peer Support

The interview with All Ears reveals how much less training Peer Supporters receive compared to the volunteers working at the UvA-based student initiative. We wish to emphasize



the relevance of a collaboration between All Ears and Peer Support, which could provide deeper understanding of active listening, as well as training exercises and rigorous protocols to follow before meeting with students one-on-one. While Peer Support does have some training, they manifested a desire for more options. We highly recommend pursuing this, which would benefit both the Peer Supporters and the students. Moreover, emphasizing these trainings through proper means of communication to the student body would likely increase student participation, as many are unaware of the qualifications of Peer Support.

Another initiative organized with the Wicked Challenges in Health students involves the upcoming collaboration of Peer Support with a retired psychiatric nurse volunteering at an institution promoting mental health (September of the next academic year). She is willing to provide training to some of the Peer Supporters over several periods, free of charge, which is an exciting prospect for Peer Support.

5.3 Strengthening Community

A recurring hypothesis when we discussed low student engagement in university-led initiatives was the decreasing sense of community felt at AUC, especially post-COVID. Research furthermore states that community building is a crucial aspect concerning mental health: “Well-being research in social and community psychology has identified ‘sense of community’ as one aspect of a person’s social relationships that is consequential for well-being”.² Sense of community has thus been found to relieve stress, increase social support and reduce feelings of isolation.

Current initiatives that bring students together can be course-related, such as the language song contest, or involve committee events. International day was a successful example, with high participation rates as a result of collaboration between multiple committees, was easily accessible and interactive. We suggest emphasizing community-promoting events and initiatives (perhaps providing a suggestion box for a novel event), that provide students with a break from stressful environments.³ Rekindling a sense of community would therefore contribute in tackling mental health struggles at AUC.

² Jorgensen, B. S., Jamieson, R. D., & Martin, J. F. (2010). Income, sense of community and subjective well-being: Combining economic and psychological variables. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 31(4), 614. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2010.04.002>

³ We entertained the idea of silly initiatives, for example a day where students can dress as their professors, or a day where third-years dress for the job they want after AUC, etc. Something like this could be fun for students and staff and is a low-threshold way to (re-)build a student-staff community.



6. Appendix

Experiences with AUC support structures (33 responses)

“Didn't change anything, just helps make your problem known to the hierarchy of AUC (can excuse extensions etc).”

“Never went”

“Very positive, I think they are really qualified but they only deal with a stupidly specific niche of 'study stress', which is a bit odd because for most people that combines with other elements”

“The SLO was very nice and gave me good advice, however the waiting times for the UvA psychologist (what they recommended) were so long that I ended up not going through with their advice.”

“I like how Peer Support organizes events and I try to participate in them, but I reached out to them once through Instagram and they were very friendly and nice. I also talked with an SLO which clarified my options and made me feel like there could be some solutions to what I was experiencing”

“Aino is just a sweetheart and she helped me a lot. She kinda always had an open ear. Peer Support is also great but I personally didn't want to share my problems in much detail... The UvA psychologist basically understood me directly which was a very odd feeling but the metaphors she gave really help and I still remember and think back to the meeting with her :)”

“Bad because the SLO was not helpful and UvA psychologists are too hard to book and only offer 4 sessions”

“SLO: It was a one-time meeting, I didn't need much more support than that though. Neutral experience. UvA Mental Health Workshops: This is going well, I think the workshop structure and being with other students is really helpful. Positive experience.”

“Peer Support was really useful because I was able to talk to someone about issues I had, that they had coincidentally also faced, so that was very good for me.”

“I've been seeing the Student Life Officer since my first year at AUC, at times it has been very beneficial and other times not so much. It has been mainly beneficial for me to get support in



how I manage uni work next to my mental health problems, not so much support for the problems themselves.”

“I’m in my first year, they helped me begin the process of finding a therapist but did not assist with my actual issue personally. My GP did more tbh”

“It was pretty positive, the SLO is helpful”

“They tried to help, but the help was very much lacking. The structure of AUC Academic Rules and Procedures is too inflexible to let them actually help. Mandatory attendance makes it impossible for me to visit my family in times of crisis. The living conditions in the dorms (especially in the shared apartments) can be drastically bad because no one watches over that, which can make mental health of students incredibly worse (living in a mouldy dirty apartments). The tutors are extremely unhelpful (they don’t really care or know how to help). Self-study way of learning at AUC can be extremely isolating for people without a strong friend group. Committees (that should be places for students to meet each other) have limited places so those who have no friends cannot really MAKE any, or get involved with anything because they get rejected from them. Every helpful initiative is created by students, while the university itself does nothing to make it better for students.”

“The UvA Psychologist was kind but only said they could help with work-related issues, and then told me I should just get regular therapy instead”

“The Student Life Officers were also very kind and supportive, checked up on me a couple of times but fairly don't offer the same as therapy (which makes sense because it's not their role)”

“I have attended a few UvA Mental Health Workshops, but I did not find them helpful because I do not think they can thoroughly address any mental health problems. In short, I found them to be quite superficial, both in term of the "teacher's" approach as well as in terms of the content that was being presented and discussed (as in, a quick Google search had already offered me the same information and coping exercises).”

“I met with Fili a few times and she is great”

“The SLO was friendly but I felt like she wasn't very well equipped to help me deal with what I was struggling with, her role seemed to be more like a listening ear rather than someone who can give actual advice or instructions on what to do.”



“Peer support is the best! :)”

“It was brief and unhelpful. I was offered very little support”

“These are not that helpful”

“Very positive to talk someone in the same boat”

“UvA psychologist: negative experience, the doctor simply told me to join a mental health group to help me be better organized when it clearly wasn't the problem”

“Mental Health Guide: very useful resource to get informed of the options
Student Life Officers: great to get things off your chest in a save space; however, cannot replace psychotherapy”

“The SLO was not able to help me much, since I had therapy before already, but she was really nice and sent follow-up e-mails. The mental health workshops were nice, since it was in a group with peers, but very short (only 6 times)”

“It was nice but I don't think they can help in the long run”

“Peer Support was nice, but the SLO could do nothing useful for me and overall it didn't help much. I like Peer Support, the events they organise help people relax and stop thinking about academics for once.”

“My experience with Student Life Officers was rather negative, I felt like my problems were ignored and treated less seriously than they should, at least from my perspective”

“Peer Support - response was quick on Instagram. One particular member helped me during my first week of uni with loneliness and homesickness. They were very kind, relatable, and reassuring and I'll cherish the tiny memory”

“SLO - it was hard to convince them of my situation but after repeated trials it did feel hopeless. For me it was a roommate situation. Eventually with intervention from my parent and speaking/persuading an RA repeatedly, they understood the seriousness of the problem. A solution was eventually given which didn't please me at that time. But thanks to their help, I am in a much better housing situation now and met the best roommate. It was exhausting though to have to detail the events as it worsened and having to return to the meetings.”



“I really enjoyed chatting with Peer Support and SLOs (maybe Peer Support was less uncomfortable for me tho) and I was hoping they'd give me advice on therapy in the NL and they did :)”

“The overall experience was rather positive. You can not expect SLO to be your further therapists. At the beginning I was a bit disappointed with rather simple and cliché advice I got, afterwards I realized it's only first-contact choice and they do good job there.”

“Negative, but my experience was largely limited to trying to get a referral to someone else, so that may not be representative.”

“They can't do much, their support is very superficial and doesn't change much in terms of my struggles”

“Overall the support systems were very useful, and even a few sessions with the UvA psychologist made a positive difference in my mental well-being.”

Suggestions for improvement

“Making it more visible to every student and maybe a bit more personal.”

“I think the UvA psychologists tend to reject everyone who has had any issues before, and that doesn't acknowledge the way the Dutch healthcare system is so difficult for newcomers to enter. Sometimes UvA is the only place to turn, but they won't let you in if you've had any mental health incident in your past, which is most people.”

“Shorter waiting times for UvA psychologist”

“For me the major problem is waiting time. (Taking mainly about the UvA psychologist) I feel like your condition can change drastically while waiting for an appointment. I know it's difficult to change this and also not sure how to tackle this but yeah I would say this is the main problem for me. Once you get the support they are doing pretty awesome in my opinion”

“Literally every aspect needs improvement”



“More open hours for SLO's (in-person). I also feel the UvA workshops and other workshops held at AUC are too strict about attendance which raises the threshold for reaching out.”

“Teachers play a huge role in the mental health of students, I think it would help a lot if they were more aware of services that AUC provides and promote them”

“If there was the opportunity for AUC to have its own psychologist for students, that would be great”

“Honestly a group therapy system could be nice”

“Just make the process more accessible in terms of knowledge and in practice. Also be more understanding toward students experiencing severe mental health issues with regard to work/BoE processes”

“AUC needs their own trained psychologist, and the Academic Rules and Procedures needs to be more flexible to allow for people dealing with their mental health issues. There needs to be supervision of the conditions in the dorms in some way, especially when people move out (and leave their trash behind). Committees need to be more inclusive and open for new members. There need to be more (voluntary not mandatory for students) hours with teachers to practice, discuss, and go over the academic work, instead of leaving it for students to self-study.”

“I would suggest making people more aware of which options are available. I did not know any steps I could take when struggling with excessive stress and panic attacks, and contacting any options that I was 'aware' of never occurred to me. It also seemed useless to me as talking about it would not get my stress away.”

“Teachers being understanding contributed a LOT in reducing stress, so I wish all of them were sensitive to this topic (I only had one bad experience though, every one else was very kind) + making students more aware of what could help them, making access easier”

“I feel like there is a "fear" of addressing more sensitive topics because there is no rapport built with those participating to the workshops. I understand that most people might not want to open up to a complete stranger and would like to talk to someone they trust, but I think it could be worth a shot once in a while to be bold and try and have those difficult conversations more quickly. I think it's very helpful even if the person attending the workshops only gets to rant because that can also help you in figuring out your thoughts and organizing them in your mind.”



“I think having Dutch health insurance shouldn't be a requirement to receive covered mental health care.”

“It needs completely restructuring to be honest. The fact that AUC outsources their mental health support to students in the form of Peer Support (are they even trained?) is irresponsible and absurd.”

“More mental healthcare workers lol, acknowledging that these AUC-provided mental health support systems are limited in helping solve issues rather than claiming that this should be more than enough for students to resolve their issues”

“Exposure”

“More visibility and acknowledgement of the mentioned support systems and resources and promotion of those by AUC to destigmatize needing help and showing more support in general”

“I would like to see the SLO have some control over your absences, more power within AUC”

“I honestly think that a lot is already done. I have never been in an environment which cares about mental health that much but that's different for everyone. The thing which stresses me out the most on daily life basis is academics but this is more about the organisation of the program rather than environment provided by students/teachers.”

“Maybe having specific RAs dealing with situations like housing (and roommates) as RAs are connected to the SLOs and are part of the AUC hierarchy”

“Giving RAs more power in the system as this year I felt the role of RAs missing but in my first year, one RA I reached out to was great, prompt and very helpful”

“I think SLOs visibility should be improved and I think AUC should have its own psychologist”

“We need an AUC psychologist”

