

Research busts mental health coping myth

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People with extreme psychological distress have exceeded the limits of their own resources, and need support from others to cope, according to new research led by USC Australia.

The [mental health research](#) by USC's Thompson Institute was published in *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, based on a survey of more than 500 university students in the United States.

It found that healthy coping strategies—such as mindfulness and distraction—certainly work, but sometimes they are not enough.

Lead author and Professor of Suicide Prevention Helen Stallman said the findings contradicted a common belief that people who were in extreme [distress](#) were not resilient or did not have healthy coping mechanisms.

"What we have found busts the myth that [mental health services](#) and workers should encourage extremely distressed people to build resilience or learn healthy coping strategies like relaxing or distracting activities," she said.

"Support should not focus on 'fixing' the person who is suffering, it should focus on other ways to

help reduce their overwhelming distress.

"While we may consider people in mental distress to be lacking in resilience, they are the most resilient people but have too much to cope with," she said.

"We found that the majority of extremely distressed people already used healthy coping methods such as mindfulness techniques before turning to unhealthy methods to feel better such as emotional eating, aggression, alcohol, drugs and self-harm, social withdrawal and suicidality."

Professor Stallman said the study means that if we want to support people who are upset, we need to use what we call the "Care Collaborate Connect" model to ensure people feel supported, rather than being expected to cope alone.

"Care' is the initial intervention when someone is upset, so listening without interrupting and validating their experience.

"'Collaborate' starts with asking how they are coping and 'connect' involves suggesting they talk to a [health](#) professional, like their GP, if things keep getting them down."

Professor Stallman hoped the research would inform changes in public messaging around [mental health](#) and improve the delivery of needs-based [mental health care](#).

More information: Helen M Stallman et al. Modelling the relationship between healthy and unhealthy coping strategies to understand overwhelming distress: A Bayesian network approach, *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadr.2020.100054](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2020.100054)

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