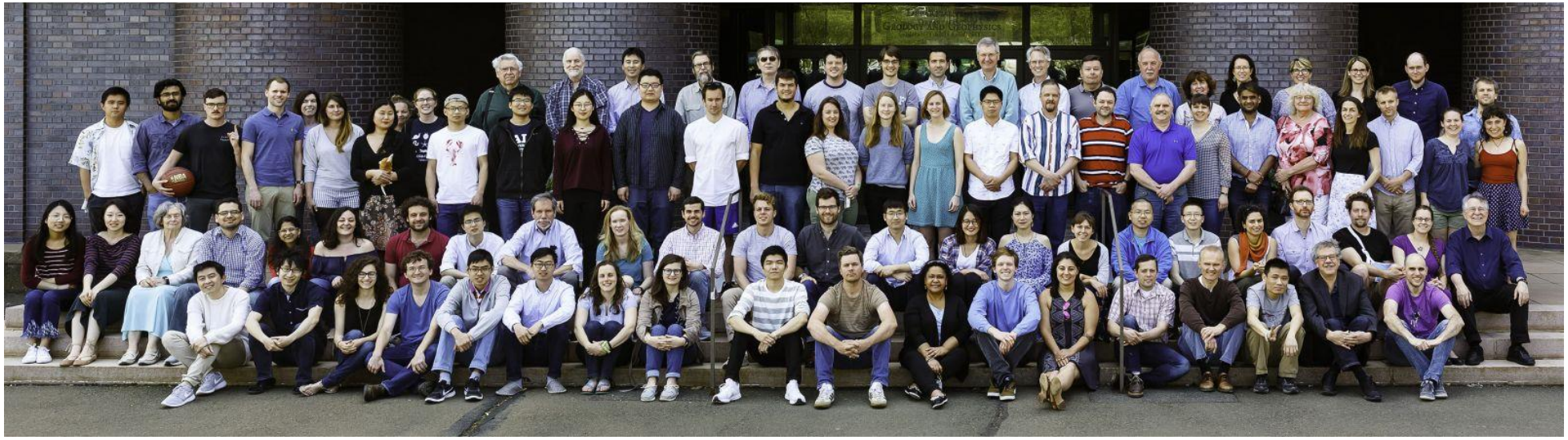
Student and faculty mental health: How can departments support a culture of wellbeing?



Maureen D. Long and the Yale EPS Disability, Mental Health, and Chronic Illness (DMhCi) Working Group

Yale

AMS/AGU Joint Heads and Chairs Meeting
October 7, 2024

Yale
Earth & Planetary Sciences

A little bit about me…



- I’m an observational seismologist; I work on the structure and dynamics of the Earth’s interior.
- I have a mental health diagnosis, and I parent a child with a (different) mental health diagnosis.
- I’ve been on the faculty in the EPS Department at Yale since 2009; I’ve served as Director of Graduate Studies (2018-2021), DEI committee chair (2021) and department chair (2021-present).
- I am NOT a mental health clinician or expert; I’m sharing thoughts based on my own experiences in my various roles.

A little bit about my department



EPS Department faculty, April 2022

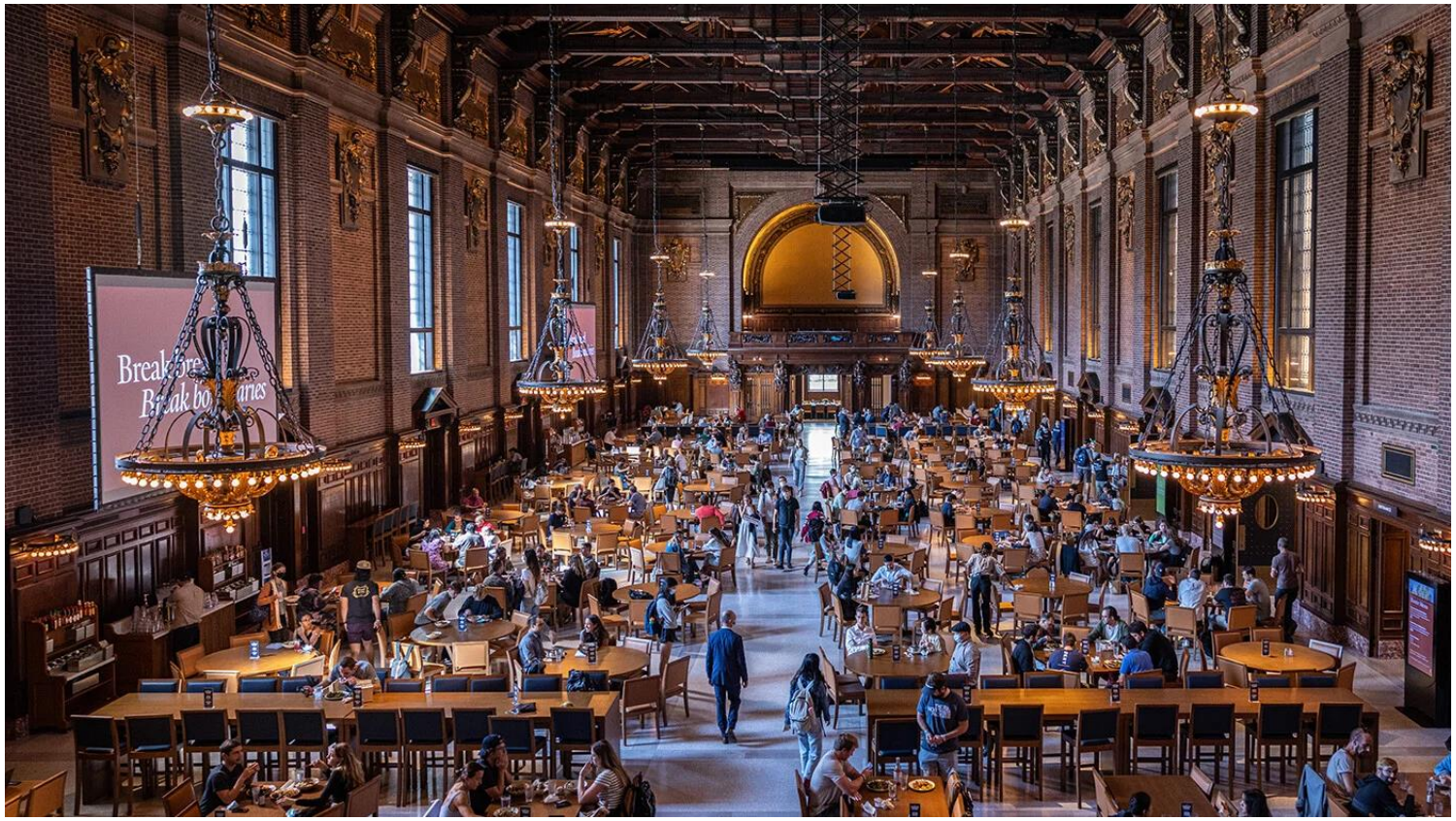
- 23 faculty members across geology, geophysics, paleontology, geochemistry, and atmosphere/oceans/climate dynamics



EPS Chair's Reception, Fall 2024

- 7 research faculty, ~15 research associates, ~25 postdocs, ~15 postgrads, ~55 Ph.D. students, ~40 undergraduate majors

A little bit about Yale College



- Currently 6600 undergraduate students.
- Residential college model: students assigned to one of 14 residential colleges, each with a dean and faculty head.
- Lots of support for students at the college level.

- Well-resourced, with a substantial university endowment.

My own awareness/activism around mental health started in 2020/2021, during the Covid pandemic



Me recording lectures in my dining room, September 2020

- From my own experience and from conversations with grad students and colleagues, it was clear that many members of the departmental community were struggling with respect to mental health.
- It was equally clear that our department (and our field!) were not particularly well equipped to manage these challenges.

First steps: A departmental mental health awareness workshop



Dr. Paul Hoffman, Yale Mental Health and Counseling

- Held on Zoom in May 2021.
- Sponsored by the departmental DEI committee, with substantial input from students.
- Goals:
  - Give an overview of mental health issues in academia, with statistics on prevalence and Covid impacts.
  - Make department members (particularly faculty) aware of available mental health and counseling resources at Yale.
  - **Raise awareness** and break down barriers to talking about mental health in the department.
- Talk was extremely well-attended and feedback from departmental community was positive.

A new departmental working group on mental health, disability, and chronic illness





Ashley Arroyo and Annika Margevich (2024-2025 co-chairs)

- The Disability, mental health, and chronic illness (DMhCi) working group was formed in Fall 2021. Open to all department members.
- Part of a set of working groups sponsored by the departmental DEI committee (others include Women in EPS, international/first-gen scholars, field work safety, LGBTQ group, Black Students Association, etc.).
- DMhCiWG (yes, I know it's a mouthful) has worked on several issues, including building and field trip accessibility, discussions around remote access to classes, and mental health awareness.
- Designed and ran a departmental Wellness Survey in 2022 and again in 2024.

Lessons learned from the 2022 EPS Wellness survey

- Designed and run by the DMhCi working group. Only the department chair, the DEI committee chair, and the DMhCi committee chair had access to survey results.
- Aggregated/de-identified/paraphrased results were shared with departmental community in a town hall in May 2022.
- Goals of survey and town hall:
  - Identify areas of widespread concern in the department.
  - Enable greater empathy and compassion in the community.
  - Brainstorm potential policy solutions.
- Faculty had extensive discussion of survey results at faculty retreat in May 2022.

Lessons learned from the 2022 EPS Wellness survey

- As expected: Mental health and sense of wellbeing/belonging generally suffered during the pandemic.
  - A challenge: how do we continue to rebuild community?
- Major factors affecting wellness and mental health:
  - Work-life balance
  - Sense of community and belonging within the department
  - Culture in the department and in individual research groups
  - For grad students: quality of advisor/advisee relationship

My number one takeaway from the survey:

- **When students feel that faculty are disconnected, disengaged, or do not care about them as individuals, their wellbeing and mental health can suffer.**

Initiatives at Yale: New resources for graduate students



Dr. Eva Wilson, mental health clinician embedded in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

- All Yale graduate students receive health care coverage that includes mental health services. All students can access therapy through Yale Mental Health & Counseling or through outside providers.
- However: major challenges with a shortage of clinicians and long wait times.
- In Fall 2022, Dr. Eva Wilson became the first mental health clinician embedded in the Graduate School. Available for individual appointments, workshops, and mental health programming for graduate students.
- Confidential drop-in therapy appointments; can sign up up to 7 days in advance.
- New clinician, Julian Arias, joined in 2024.

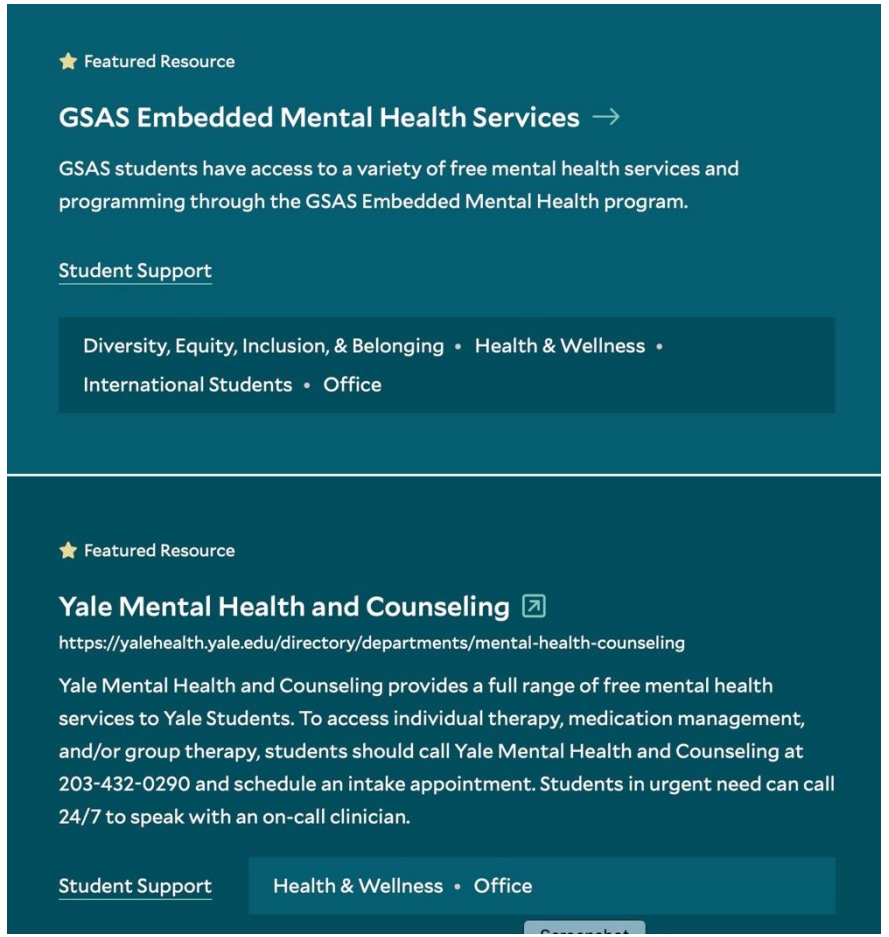
Policies on leaves of absence for graduate students

Yale GSAS offers personal, medical (including mental health), and parental leaves of absence:

- Leaves must be approved by associate dean, on recommendation of the department (medical leaves require a recommendation from a Yale Health clinician as well).
- Leaves may last one semester or one academic year. Leaves extend eligibility for fellowships and other financial support.
- Leaves may be renewed, up to a cumulative maximum of two years of personal/medical leave.
- Students are not expected to participate in academic activities when on leave (may not fulfill degree requirements while on leave, except for completing work for Temporary Incomplete course grades).
- Ph.D. students on medical leave receive a Health Award to cover the cost of Student Affiliate health care coverage.
- Students notify associate dean of intention to return from leave. Students must receive approval from a Yale Health clinician and must complete "an academic assignment tailored to the student's stage of study," as assigned by the associate dean in consultation with the student's DGS.

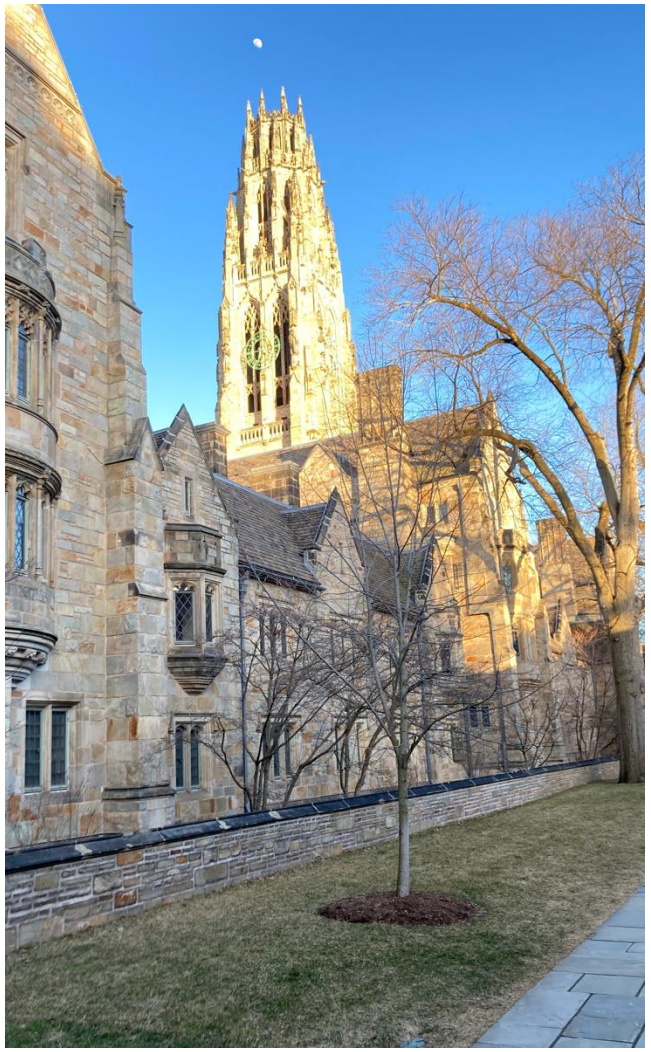
Upcoming DMhCi working group event: Seminar on mental health resources





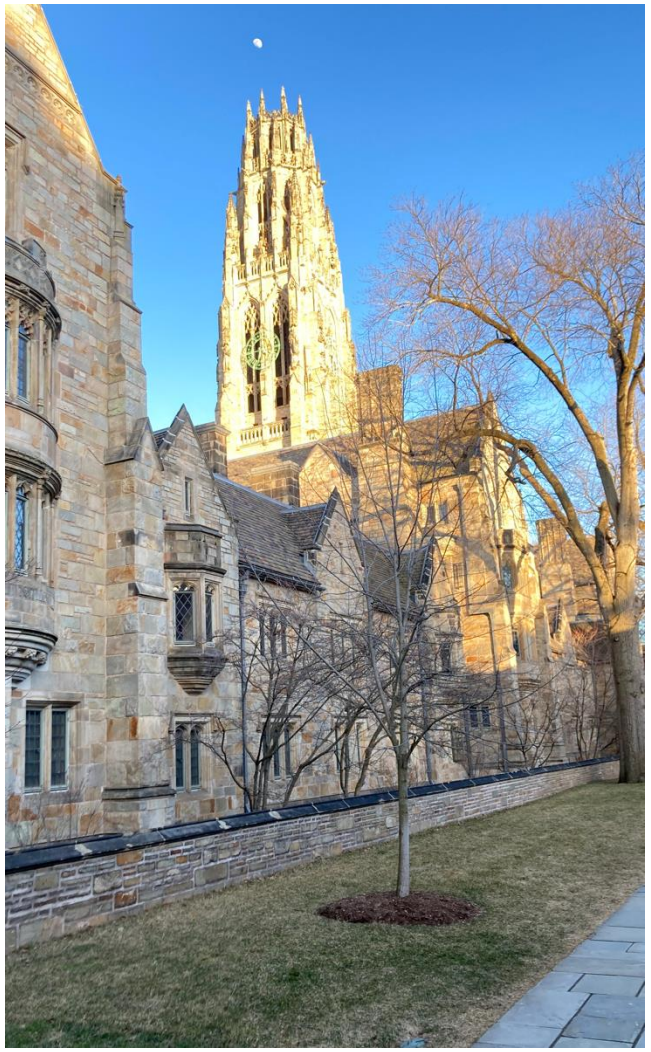
Informal chat led by senior grad students, DGS, and chair, open to all department members. Will include a guest talk by one of the GSAS clinicians. Goal: to raise awareness of mental health resources and how to find them. Upcoming on October 25, 2024

Initiatives at Yale: New policies on medical withdrawal for Yale College students



- Until 2023, Yale College students who went on medical leave (for mental health or other reasons) mid-semester had to withdraw. They lost Yale health insurance and access to campus and were required to stay away for at least a semester.
- Reinstatement was not automatic; students were required to successfully complete two college courses outside Yale (often at a community college) and apply for reinstatement.
- The Ruderman Foundation graded colleges on leave of absence policies in 2018; Yale received an F, worst among Ivy League institutions.
- After the tragic death by suicide of undergraduate Rachel Rosenbaum in 2021, the activist group Elis for Rachel began pushing for change. A lawsuit was filed by two student plaintiffs in 2022.

Initiatives at Yale: New policies on medical withdrawal for Yale College students



- In January 2023, Yale announced new policies as part of a settlement of the class-action lawsuit filed by Elis for Rachel.
- Students can now take a medical leave of absence, rather than a withdrawal.
- Students can keep health insurance (via Undergraduate Affiliate Coverage), can continue working as a student employee, and can use resources such as the library and the Office of Career Strategy.
- No time limit (maximum or minimum) on leaves of absence.
- Return process involves a medical clearance and a simplified reinstatement request; the completion of coursework outside Yale and letters of reference are no longer required.

So: what can we do?

- **As individual geoscientists**:
  - Destigmatize talking about mental health.
  - Provide empathy and support for community members who are struggling.
- **As faculty members/educators/mentors:**
  - Cultivate a positive and supportive community.
  - Refrain from comments that put down individuals with mental health issues.
  - See our students (and colleagues) as whole people.
  - Understand policies and resources for students and share as needed.
- **As department chairs:**
  - Be aware of policies and advocate for changes where needed.
  - Set the tone for constructive dialogue around mental health.

A closing thought



My **awesome** research group (they are truly the best!), September 2023

Questions for discussion

- Do members of your department feel comfortable discussing mental health issues?
- How are the mental health resources for students at your institution?
- How good is awareness of mental health resources among your students and your faculty colleagues?
- What has worked well in your department around wellbeing and mental health awareness?
- What challenges do you face around wellbeing and mental health awareness?
- What do you see as leading practices in this area?
- How well equipped do you feel as chair to provide leadership in this area? What resources would help?