

The potential benefits of Sophrology
techniques on students' wellbeing, with a
focus on stress and anxiety reduction and self-
confidence building

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Introduction and objectives:

Students' mental health has become a major focus for many universities, including the University of Sussex. According to a survey conducted in 2022 by the mental health charity Student Minds, 57% of students reported experiencing mental health issues, and 27% stated they had been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Recognising the importance of this issue, I decided to dedicate my scholarship activities in 2023-24 to evaluating and improving the well-being and experience of Media Arts Humanities (MAH) students during their time at the university.

In Term 2, I organised and ran seven well-being workshops specifically for MAH students. The primary objectives of these workshops were to help students manage stress and anxiety, build self-confidence, and assess the benefits of these activities on their overall well-being.

During these workshops I introduced a wellbeing technique, for which I trained for two years, called Sophrology. Sophrology is an effective mind-body technique designed to address various stress and anxiety disorders. Although relatively new to the UK, Sophrology has been widely practiced in countries like France, Spain, Belgium, and Switzerland for over 60 years. This methodology involves a series of mindful breathing exercises, gentle body movements, and positive visualisations, all aimed at enhancing mental and physical well-being.

Ten students enrolled in the workshops, which took place during lunchtime on Wednesdays from week 4 to week 10. Through these sessions, students engaged in practices that not only aimed to alleviate their immediate stress and anxiety but also provided them with tools to maintain their mental health in the long term.

By focusing on mental health initiatives, we aim to create a more supportive and nurturing environment for all students, ensuring they have the resources and support needed to thrive both academically and personally.

Methodology:

To recruit participants for these workshops, I designed a poster which was placed across the school but more effectively I sent an email to MAH students. 9 students signed up for the workshops and 1 person from the public. Some participants attended regularly, while others, came more sporadically. I did give an initial questionnaire to all new participants but I was only able to measure the session outcomes for the students who came regularly, including the last session when I gave the sessions' outcome questionnaires.



NB: I originally advertised for 6 workshops, but I delivered 7 due to popular demand for one more session before the exam period.

Example of Exercises During a Workshop Focusing on Anxiety Relief

- **Body Scan:** Focus the mind on different body parts to release tensions and improve attention.
- **Tense and Release:** Tense and release all the muscles of the body using the breath to release tensions and negativity.
- **Breathing Awareness Exercise:** Helps to bring calm to the body.
- **Guided Visualisation:** Participants visualise a protective layer or bubble around them using all their senses, then visualise a situation where they can interact with the world while the bubble protects them from negativity.

Questionnaires:

To evaluate the benefits of these workshops on the participants, I gave a pre-programme questionnaire where participants scored wellbeing criteria from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). During the last workshop, I provided a post-programme questionnaire to evaluate participants' well-being using the same criteria.

The criteria were as follows:

1. Day-to-day energy levels
2. Levels of stress/anxiety
3. Quality of sleep
4. Physical well-being
5. Emotional well-being
6. Concentration and focus
7. Motivation
8. Self-confidence
9. General outlook on life as it is now

The choice of criteria was based on a wellbeing questionnaire I used during my training as a sophrologist. These criteria allow for the specific evaluation of participants' levels of stress, anxiety, and self-confidence, as well as more general wellbeing factors that might be affected by stress, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

The pre-programme questionnaire also included three open questions to obtain information about medical issues the participants might have and what they were hoping to achieve with these workshops.

Wellbeing Questionnaire (Pre-programme)

Thinking about the recent past, please rate your:

1. Day to day energy levels

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

2. Levels of stress/anxiety

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/positive

High/negative

3. Quality of sleep

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

4. Physical wellbeing

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

5. Emotional wellbeing

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

6. Concentration and focus

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

7. Motivation

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

8. Self-confidence

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

9. General Outlook on life as it is now

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

Do you have any medical conditions, other health issues or on medical treatment?

How are you hoping to benefit from this course?

Anything else to add?

The post-programme questionnaire included the same criteria along with three open questions to evaluate if participants had practised the well-being techniques in between sessions and what specific positive changes they could observe post-programme.

Wellbeing Questionnaire (Post programme)

Thinking about the past weeks practicing Sophrology, please rate your:

1. Day to day energy levels

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

2. Levels of stress/anxiety

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/positive

High/negative

3. Quality of sleep

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

4. Physical wellbeing

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

5. Emotional wellbeing

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

6. Concentration and focus

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

7. Motivation

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

8. Self-confidence

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

9. General Outlook on life as it is now

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Low/negative

High/positive

Did you practice any Sophrology exercises in between sessions?

What positive changes have you noticed since practicing Sophrology?

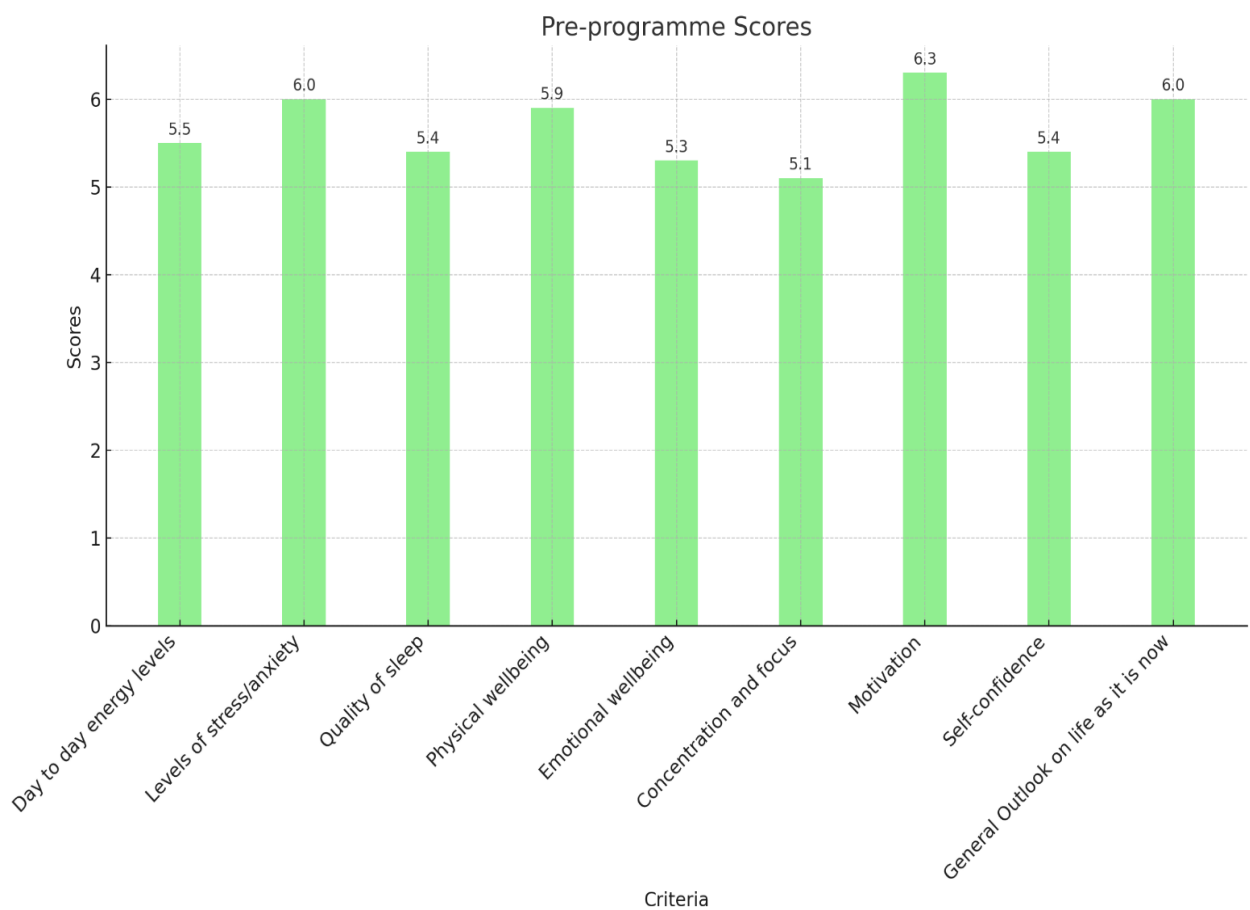
Do you have any other feedback you'd like to give about your experience?

Pre-programme results:

The results below indicate the benefits of Sophrology techniques on students' well-being. It is important to note that this is a very small-scale study, as 10 participants submitted a pre-programme questionnaire, but only 5 of them submitted a post-programme questionnaire.

Number of pre-programme questionnaires: 10

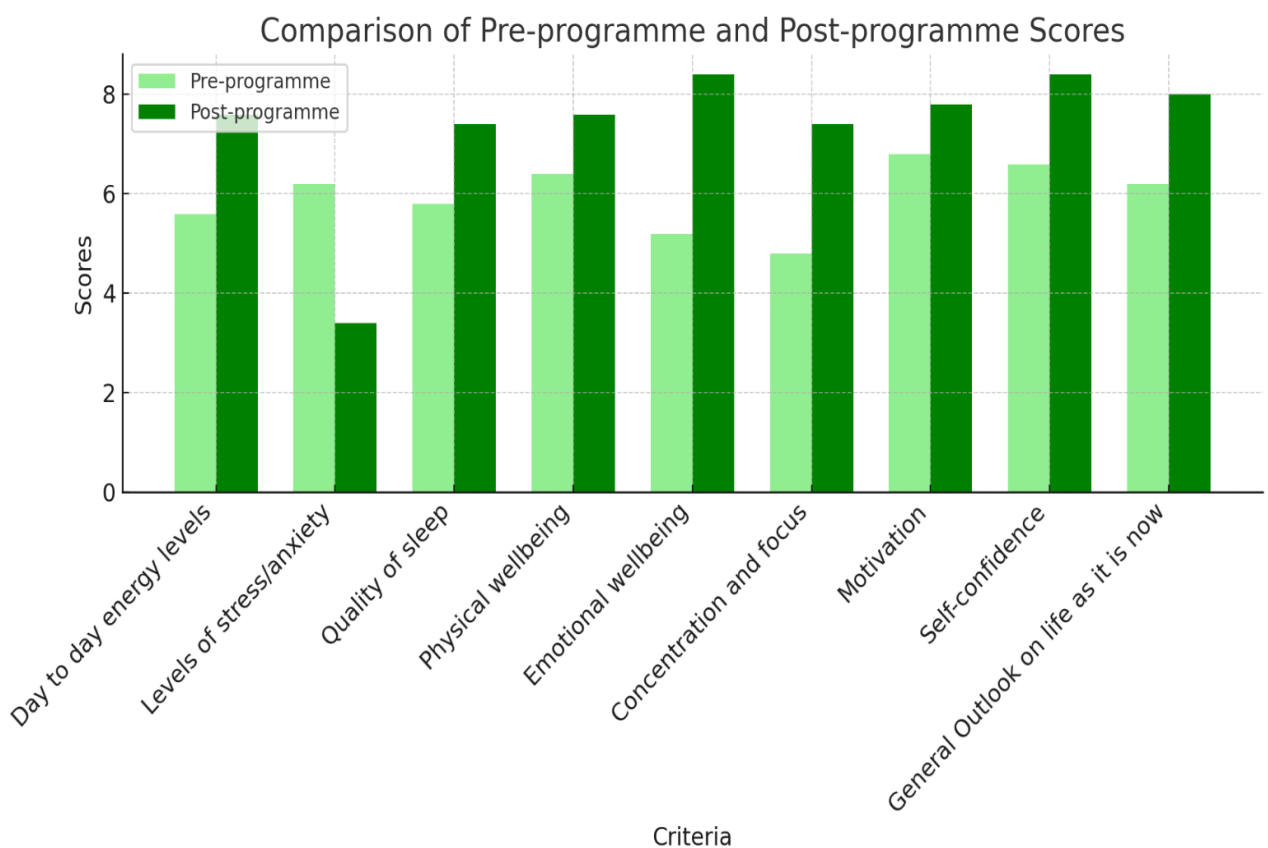
Scores out of 10



Post-programme results:

NB The pre-programme results shown in the graph below differ from those shown above as only the 5 participants that also provided a post-programme questionnaire are taken into account. It should be noted that the scores of these 5 participants are broadly similar to the 10 participants, hence it is also likely that the post-programme results of all 10 participants could be similar.

Scores out of 10



NB The score for 'Levels of stress/anxiety' reduced but this still indicates an improvement in students' wellbeing.

The results from this small-scale study highlight the positive impact of Sophrology techniques on various aspects of students' well-being. While the sample size is limited, the trends observed suggest significant improvements across all criteria.

Results 'discussion:

Day-to-day energy levels: +35.7%

There was a noticeable increase from a pre-programme score of 5.6 to a post-programme score of 7.6. This suggests that participants felt more energised in their daily activities after practising Sophrology techniques.

Levels of stress/anxiety: -45.2%

A substantial reduction in stress and anxiety levels was observed, with scores improving from 6.2 to 3.4. Since reducing stress and anxiety was a primary focus of these workshops, this significant decrease indicates that the techniques were particularly effective in helping participants manage these issues.

Quality of sleep: +17.2%

Participants reported an improvement in sleep quality, with scores increasing from 5.8 to 7.4. The increase here is less significant because the Sophrology exercises did not focus on sleep specifically but this suggests that the increase of all the other criteria, especially the reduction of stress and anxiety, naturally improved the participants' sleep quality.

Physical well-being: +18.8%

The scores for physical well-being increased from 6.4 to 7.6, suggesting that with techniques such as gentle body movements and breathing exercises participants felt healthier and more physically robust after the programme.

Emotional well-being: +61.5%

This is the most significant improvement in this group's wellbeing. This criterion saw an improvement from 5.2 to 8.4, suggesting that the practise of specific techniques helping participants identify and accept their emotions, as well as techniques developing positive emotions, has led to a significant positive shift in participants' emotional states.

Concentration and focus: +54.2%

Scores for concentration and focus improved from 4.8 to 7.4, this is the second-best improvement in the participants wellbeing. Enhanced concentration and focus are critical for academic and personal success. It suggests that Sophrology techniques may help students better manage their cognitive tasks.

Motivation: +14.7%

There was an increase in motivation scores from 6.8 to 7.8, indicating that participants felt slightly more driven and engaged after the programme. It is worth noting that the motivation score was relatively high even before the programme started. Since the programme did not specifically target motivation, the observed improvement might be a positive side effect of enhancements in other areas, such as physical wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, and general outlook on life. This suggests that overall improvements in these areas could have contributed to the increase in motivation.

Self-confidence: +27.3%

Scores in self-confidence saw a substantial rise from 6.6 to 8.4, reflecting a boost in participants' belief in their abilities and self-worth. This increase suggests that the programme could help students perform better academically, improve class participation, and reduce anxiety, especially during exams and oral tasks.

General outlook on life as it is now: +29%

Participants' general outlook on life improved from 6.2 to 8.0, indicating a more positive perspective on their current circumstances. This improvement, along with the increase in day-to-day energy levels, suggests that the Sophrology techniques can significantly enhance students' wellbeing, particularly for those experiencing low mood or depression, even without specifically targeting these areas.

Conclusion:

While these results are promising, the small sample size in this study necessitates cautious interpretation. Nonetheless, the improvements observed across all criteria indicate that Sophrology techniques can positively influence various aspects of wellbeing, particularly for university students. These techniques could be especially beneficial in managing stress and anxiety, enhancing self-confidence, and improving overall mood—factors that are crucial for academic success and personal development. To confirm these findings and fully explore the potential benefits of Sophrology for university students, larger-scale studies with more diverse participants are needed. Such research would help validate these initial results and provide deeper insights into the broader applications and effectiveness of Sophrology in academic settings.

Bibliography:

Student Minds. (2023) Student Minds Research Briefing. Available at: https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student_minds_insight_briefing_feb23.pdf (Accessed: 05 August 2024).