

# Mental health a top priority for students, staff

College isn't just about essays and exams. It's also about learning how to care for yourself mentally, physically and emotionally. Enter Stress Relief Week at Lee College. This event, sponsored by a Title V grant from the U.S. Department of Education, encouraged students and faculty at the college to take a break from their normal routine and practice self-care and stress management. Activities like color walls, spa treatments, games and animal therapy were all part of the mix.

"The idea behind Stress Relief Week was to create spaces and activities to help reduce stress levels of students and to cultivate awareness of ways to help their minds relax and manage stress," said Diana Aslin, Lee College Title V Project Director.

"By offering these events, we hope students will know we care about them as people. We aren't just here to help them pass their classes, but we want them to be the best versions of themselves by taking a moment to take care of themselves. The students are worth it, and they deserve it," said Aslin.

Originally intended to help students cope with anxiety the week before finals, Stress Relief Week was moved to October because faculty and students said they would benefit more from an event mid-way through the semester.

"As we know, it is very difficult to perform at our best when we feel stressed or overwhelmed. We want students to know that self-care, in moderation, is just as important as homework and other responsibilities," said Cassandra Flores, Coordinator for the Puente Program at Lee College.

One of the most popular activities on campus was called "Cat Therapy," in which students and employees were invited to interact with rescue kittens from the City of Baytown Animal Shelter.

Jessica Polvadore, a second-year art and education student at Lee College, said the interaction with the animals couldn't have come at a better time.

"I am literally about to take my midterms, and this is helping me stay calm before the test," said Polvadore. "Now I feel relaxed and I can focus. I'm ready."

Good mental health is a top priority for Lee College. Since 2017, 150 staff members have been certified in Mental Health First Aid, which trains individuals to provide support services until professional mental health care is available. The training also teaches people to look for signs of mental health problems or crises, while understanding the warning signs of illnesses such as anxiety, depression and addiction.

To help reduce stress experts recommend getting plenty of sleep, practicing deep-breathing exercises, and spending time with friends and family. If students or instructors find they are overwhelmed by stress, they are encouraged to reach out to their academic dean or counselors for help with community referrals. A list of helpful mental health resources can also be found at <http://www.lee.edu/cares-team/mental-health-resources/>.