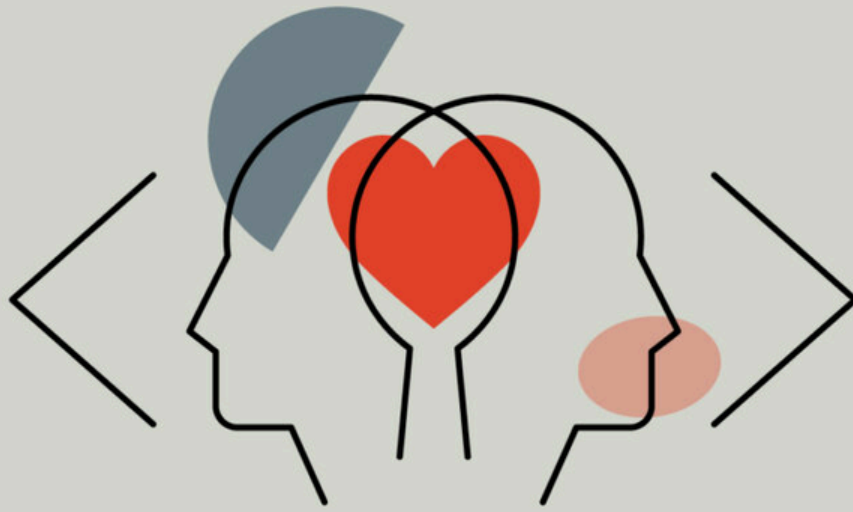


# The Need for Redesign of the SHSU Website

Usability & UX Report: An Analysis of the SHSU  
Active Minds Website

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# BEST MENTAL HEALTH WEB DESIGN

Picture Retrieved from: <https://strongrootswebdesign.com/best-mental-health-website-design/>

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## **i. Introduction**

Contemporary college students are constantly struggling with mental health issues. They must reach out to organizations around campus to find support and counseling to solve these problems. It is evident that Active Minds, a website dedicated to improving students' mental health, is easily accessible for a variety of students and is intentional with their resources and information. If not, it risks leaving students feeling helpless or misunderstood. The website introduces the Sam Houston State University (SHSU) Active Minds website as a part of the larger organization, Active Minds, which is dedicated to addressing mental health concerns. As a user, I found that its homepage design does not have the valuable information organized, causing me to feel confused or lost while navigating the website. I also noticed a lack of diverse representation of gender and BIPOC. Many students attend SHSU and experience mental health issues at various levels regarding their gender, race, or ethnic background, and they should be represented on the website. In this report, I offer suggestions to add organizational strategies that implement new and diverse sections to links and information, which allows a variety of users to easily find help.

As I read further into the SHSU Active Minds website, I interpreted the language as presenting mental health as a singular problem that can be solved with limited resources or counseling that were difficult to find on the website. However, I found that there are layered assertions connected to oppressive systems; these assertions influence additional risks for experiencing stigma and consequent mental health disorders among people of different genders and BIPOC (Zelaya, 2022). As an organization, I urge the website to investigate sources that suggest methods for counseling individuals based on their gender and cultural background. This report's primary purpose is to bring attention to ways to progress the website's design and affirm the user's identity to increase positive user experience.

## **ii. Methods**

For this report, the research used to conduct this analysis was presented through a think-aloud protocol for usability testing and attained through published articles by scholars and professionals. According to the SHSU Active Minds website, 39% of students in college experienced a significant mental health issue, and 76% of young adults turn to a friend first when they are struggling instead of institutional help. The main question that guided this research was as follows: Why do most students not turn to their college campus resources for mental health support, and what can the Active Minds website do to increase engagement to help fix this? To gain more information about this question, I looked into SHSU's library database through a website channel like "doi.org," and ".edu" to ensure that the data I collected communicated professional and educationally researched perspectives.

### **iii. Research Behind Gender & Race in Mental Health**

The bulk of my research measures the impact of gender and race on mental health. Those identifying as non-binary, transgender, agender, and others along the gender spectrum are not directly referred to or represented in these studies. In my report, I use the term “women” as those who identify with the female sex, identity, anatomy, or biological structure. The scope of my research addresses women generally, which presents a limited view of the gender spectrum. This raises questions on the matter of research pertaining to non-binary individuals. I endorse the argument that gender roles, social structures, and fear of racial discrimination exacerbate the mental health of certain individuals.

College students experience increased rates of stress and anxiety due to their efforts in pursuing higher education. Additionally, college students experience differences in mental health due to gender. According to Kasper Burger and Diego Strass (2023), disparities in life experienced between young men and women often occur due to macro-structural forces, such as the result of unequal socialization experiences, social norms, cultural values and ideologies, institutional arrangements, political trends, and economic and welfare systems. In addition to gendered differences, there are sociocultural determinants such as national policies, living standards, working conditions, etc. that cumulatively impact different populations’ experiences. These populations have higher exposure to risk factors and less access to opportunities that protect their mental health (Anand, 2020). For example, recently the U.S. overturned *Roe v. Wade*, allowing states to prohibit abortions, and limit women's access to healthcare. This directly affects cis-gendered women, and heightens their stress and anxiety with regard to potential pregnancy, rape, and sexual assault. This case does not directly affect cis-gendered men or their healthcare to the same extent, and therefore would have less of an effect on their mental stability.

To deal with these conditions, men and women respond differently to developmental challenges, or they develop gender-specific strategies to cope with mental health. In a recent study, it was found that “self-esteem [and] self-efficacy [were] significantly lower among women than among men, [and] levels of negative affectivity were significantly higher...” (Burger and Strassman, 2023). The difference in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and negative affectivity aids the consideration that gender related to sociocultural and external factors affects our internal states and compasses which conceptualize how each gender copes or interacts with the stress and adversity affecting their mental health.

Moreover, my research regarding race stems from a post-quarantine and COVID-19 social sphere. Heather Dahl (2022) investigates BIPOC students at universities living in low-income and high-density geographical areas that disproportionately face inequities. She refers to Khazanchi et al. (2020), noting how historical racial segregation downpour factors contribute to BIPOC risk factors as differential quality and distribution of housing, transportation, economic opportunity, education, food, air quality, health care, and more. Through her findings, Dahl reveals that mental health, since the pandemic, has been exacerbated amongst BIPOC students, but there was no significant increase in their anxiety or feelings of depression in their white counterparts. Dahl says, "...while a White individual might experience COVID-19 as a single event or trauma, a Person of Color might experience COVID-19 compounded by higher incidents of implicit racism, racialized trauma, and healthcare inconsistency" (Dahl, 2022). Additionally, an increase in racial discrimination since the pandemic has magnified anxieties and stresses among Black and Asian individuals due to an increase in racially motivated hate crimes. Fearing or having experienced discrimination worsens mental health among BIPOC students, leading to issues of substance abuse, alcohol use disorder, and major depressive disorder (Zelaya, 2022). Overall, BIPOC have additional risks, stresses, and anxieties that influence and accompany their mental health struggles due to their social and living conditions.

My research firmly highlights how gender, racial, and ethnic determinants impact individuals' mental health and should be assessed on the SHSU Active Minds website. It is more reason to provide further resources that address these issues for students at SHSU.

#### **iv. Limited Accessibility for Users**

In web design, there are seven principles of universal design associated with plain language structure that ensure any user can easily access information. There are two potential issues with this website regarding its user accessibility. First, the website does not utilize two universal design principles: perceptible information and low physical effort. This complicates how the user interprets the website and gains important guidance from the website. Moreover, the website does not acknowledge the broader social context behind mental health. There is an inattention to the influence that gender and race have on certain mental health concerns. With this, the website fails to consider various users or audiences, leading to user discouragement.

##### ***a. Lack of Universal Design Principles***

Starting on the website's home page, I would like to point out that this page does not fully utilize the universal design principles of perceptible information and low physical effort, meaning it does not prioritize the necessary information for a user

who is battling mental health. In plain language, the universal design principles benefit users when wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and utilize that information. Currently, the resources for the user are at the bottom of an extensive article linked to the homepage, making it difficult for a user to find. It would be best for the website designers to relocate the resources to the front of the homepage and integrate a navigational toolbar at the top or side for better guidance. In doing so, it essentializes the plain language structure by offering enough detail to limit questions and dividing key information.



Figure 1: Picture retrieved from: [SHSU Active Minds Website Article](#)

One way to increase the **ability to perceive vital information** is by moving rhetorical artifacts (images) and text around. If a student is not aware of current events that will improve their mental health, then they might lose sight of what to do next. As a user, I found it quite difficult to find details on events, workshops, or contact information. I found an event calendar for Mental Health Awareness week (see Figure 1 pictured right) that I believe would function best on the homepage so a user can find support easily. Another element that could be moved to the front of the homepage are the parts of text in the second to last paragraph which say, "Students may also find various resources throughout the year at the Counseling Center such as a Helpline" and "Those seeking assistance can reach the Helpline at...". These indicate where a user can go and provide significant contact information if the user needs to reach out. This information is not helpful to a student at the bottom of a lengthy article where they may not make it to.

Additionally, to **reduce the amount of effort used to find information**, the website could implement a navigation toolbar or drop-down menu. There are two

supplementary links on the homepage with no heading, title, or description attached to it. The lack of directory details hinders usability because it means a user must scavenge the website to find what they are looking for, leaving them feeling discouraged. To help the user identify information, a toolbar with descriptive links should be displayed at the top of the homepage to give users a preview of each link. Additionally, to follow plain language conventions, supplementary links should include brief, descriptive headings and a short paragraph with a clear topic sentence that reflects the focus to help users read easily.

### ***b. Perpetuation of Male Mental Health Stigma***

The homepage and articles associated with the website are informative and helpful, however, they do not discuss gender-related issues in mental health or show representation for male-identified students. For some reference, the photos under the “Recent Events” section on the homepage display mostly female-presenting students. Only two out of the eleven photos capture male students; one is part of the Active Minds chapter, captured in a group photo, and the second is engaging with the “Send Silence Packing” event. The nine other photos all capture female students. Holistically, the homepage does not depict male-identified students as a group who struggle with mental health, nor does it implicate gender differences in mental health. In this sense, the inability to display and communicate gender differences in mental health undermines the diverse challenges that affect men and women, and perpetuates the male-oriented mental health stigma that disaffirms male mental health. The website could highlight an array of photos that show **survivors, stories, and subjects of all genders and infographics with information** regarding gender as a factor in mental health. This way it encourages both men and women to seek support.

Sam Houston State’s population is made up of **63.8%** women and **36.2%** men, meaning that men make up the minority. This does not mean that men should be represented less, but that men should have more representation. Mental health studies relate to four factors: stability, suspicion, anxiety, and tension. There are significant gender differences in three out of four of these factors. According to an empirical analysis by Renbao Liu (2021), men with borderline personality disorder are more vulnerable than women and have a higher risk of death by suicide. Furthermore, male college students “often ... [are] indecisi[ve], fickle, weak in self-control, evasive from reality, easily restless or tired” which is significantly different from female college students. Thus, male mental health must be equally addressed as a concern but with a different form of outreach.

Through this analysis, Liu (2021) offers a suggestion on two accounts: First, college students should learn and understand the gendered differences that affect their mental health to help with self improvement, and second, **college educators should fully grasp the specific gender differences and implement gender-specific, personalized, and targeted education and guidance** when counseling students with mental health concerns. In this aspect, the website does not engage with targeted education or counseling which characterizes solutions to help mental health as simple and universal. I offer the idea of developing an infographic that explains the previously mentioned data, in simplified and digestible terms, along with resources for counseling and self-care forums that accommodate men and women's mental health differences alike.

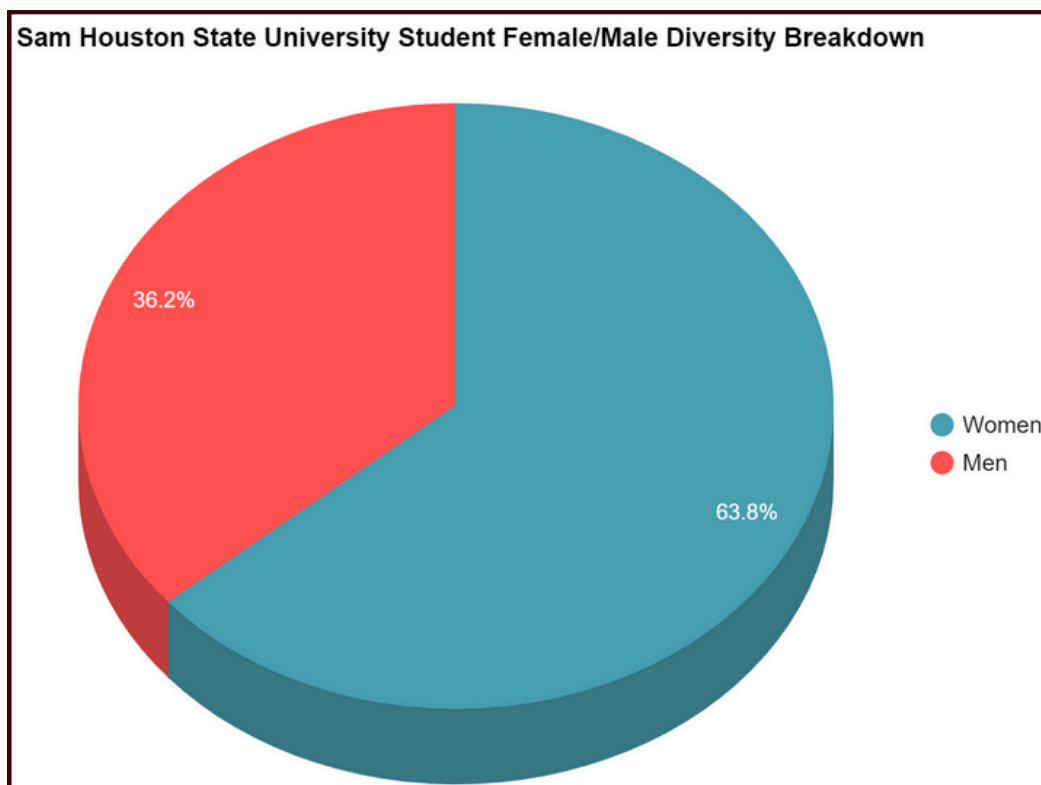


Figure 2: Picture retrieved from: [College Factual](#)

### ***c. Inattention to Racial/Ethnic Diversity***

As a part of the BIPOC community, I felt that the website did not **illustrate many different students of color and ethnicity**. Half of SHSU is made up of BIPOC, while **48%** are white students. There is a lack of BIPOC students in photos, videos, and rhetoric. The majority of the photos are white students. A student user with a non-white identity may not feel understood or seen, therefore, they will not be motivated to seek help or benefit from the resources that the organization offers. Additionally, with no discussion or consideration of BIPOC student-related fears, anxieties, and stresses that are connected to certain social determinants and socioeconomic factors such as education, income, and employment, these communities of students are at risk for further struggle.



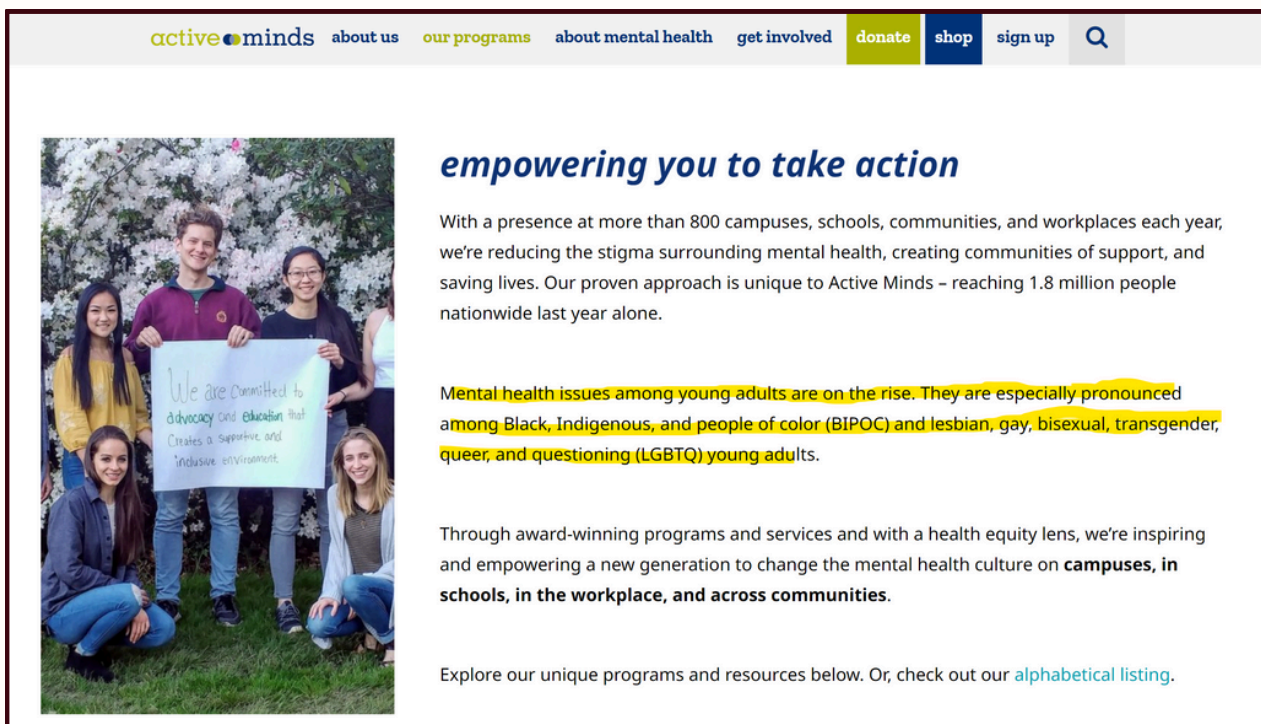


Figure 3: Picture retrieved from: [Active Minds Website](#)

As a solution, it would strongly benefit the website to **add a tab/link section along with a new navigation toolbar that contains designated resources** like help-lines, awareness articles, self-care lists, etc. If you refer to Figure 3 (pictured above), you can also see how Active Minds has a clickable bar menu at the top. This is the design element that would best suit SHSU's page, along with a breakdown of the mental health issue, facts, and a link to external resources at the bottom. For some context on the race and ethnic issue on mental health, it is found that "disparities in mental health status between racial/ethnic minority and White populations occur at the intersection of race/ethnicity" in which they are more likely to have increased stress and anxiety (Zelaya, 2022). The Active Minds organization includes these insights on their website, which I have highlighted in Figure 3. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, discrimination against BIPOC communities has heightened, and it worsens the mental health of BIPOC, leading to issues of substance abuse, alcohol use disorder, and major depressive disorder (Zelaya, 2022). This is why I believe it is detrimental to address the race and ethnic issues in mental health by providing further resources on the website. SHSU Active Minds could motivate underrepresented students who face additional risks of experiencing stigma and consequent mental health issues or substance use disorders.

## v. Conclusion

I strongly urge that the website reorganize helpful information for the user and place it at the top of the website with navigational tools to indicate its significance. It would also benefit both the website and user if they included more visuals and rhetoric that

display male and BIPOC students to assure that all student mental health concerns are understood and represented. As previously mentioned, a new section or infographic on gender and race should contain additional online resources. Here are some to consider:

### **Gender**

- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/women-and-mental-health>
- <https://www.bethedifferencescv.org/resources-for-men.php>

### **Race/Ethnicity**

- <https://www.csusm.edu/counseling/race.html>
- <https://www.theprojectlotus.org/>

Altogether, these actions will improve the website's usability and user-experience by making it more comprehensible and fostering a sense of compassion from a variety of users.

## References