Collegiate Mental Health 101

Getting the "college experience" used to mean going to class, getting involved in a few extracurricular activities, and pulling a couple all-nighters, but for many of today’s college students, dealing with mental health disorders has become part of the experience.

College is often referred to as "the best time in your life," but when the pressures of moving away from home, doing well in school, and finding an adult identity become too much, mental health problems can emerge. "It's partly just the age of college students," says Dr. Kathryn Klock-Powell, clinical coordinator in the Professional Counseling department at South University — Savannah. "Also the pressure of being in school can bring on stress and anxiety. Plus you're being exposed to different lifestyles — drugs and alcohol."

Mental health issues like anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and eating disorders continue to be problems on college campuses across the country, pushing college healthcare professionals, faculty, and staff to take notice.

According to the American College Health Association-National Health Assessment — a student survey designed to follow health trends on college campuses — about 18% of students have seriously considered suicide; nearly 19% believe that anxiety has negatively affected their academic performance; and around 11% believe that depression has negatively affected their academic performance.

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Additionally, the survey found that a little over 1% believe that eating disorders or problems have negatively affected their academic performance and almost 28% of college students polled believed that general stress negatively affected their ability to perform well at school.

Collegiate Collapse

For some students these mental health issues start before they have a chance to be concerned with difficult school work and a new social scene.

Dr. Robert Gallagher, associate professor in the administrative and policy studies department at the University of Pittsburgh and former vice chancellor for student affairs and director of the university counseling center, believes that in today’s pressure-packed academic environment, collegiate stress is starting during the college search process. "There is a lot more stress on students these days just to get into college," Gallagher says.

Once enrolled and taking classes, academic pressures begin to take its toll. Gallagher explains that some students feel the academic pressure of being the first person in their family to go to college, while others get stressed when they realize that the quality of the academic competition in college is higher than in high school.

In addition to scholastic problems students also experience stress, depression, anxiety, and other disorders when dealing with relationship problems, drug and alcohol abuse, homesickness, identity issues, and career uncertainty.

These different stressors can be overwhelming for students, and according to the 2009 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors conducted by Gallagher, 48% of the students that walk into campus counseling centers have major problems with anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal thoughts, impulse control issues, and other concerns that negatively impact their college experiences.

What to Watch For

Given the number of students affected by psychiatric conditions, family, friends, and faculty need to be looking out for possible warning signs of mental disease and distress.
Klock-Powell says that changes in behavior are a sure sign that something is wrong. "There could be a problem if this is somebody who normally isn't missing classes and they start missing classes," Klock-Powell says.

She additionally points to changes in hygiene, attitude with friends, and reclusiveness as possible warning signs to look for.

Gallagher believes that not sleeping, oversleeping, and avoiding work are also warning signs that something could be wrong. He adds that resident assistants, academic advisors, and faculty are trained to look out for all of the warning signs. "We want as many people providing help as possible," Gallagher says.

It's Just a Phase?

Although collegiate stresses can lead to mental health conditions, the challenges that everyone in their late teens and early 20s faces as they transition from childhood into adulthood can be difficult.

"It's not college, but age. This is an age group where common psychiatric problems emerge," says Dr. Paul Barreira, associate professor of psychology and director of the department of behavioral health and academic counseling at Harvard University.

Barreira believes that while college has its own set of unique stressors that can push students into psychiatric issues, coming of age is stressful for everyone, not just college students.

In addition to the stress caused by becoming a grownup, psychotic disorders like schizophrenia manifest during the college years, Klock-Powell says.

Gallagher notes that college students commit suicide about half as often as non-college students of the same age.

Getting Through It

These suicide numbers may be connected to the work colleges and universities put in to keeping their students happy and healthy. The process starts with an orientation designed to build positive community connections and help students feel like they belong, Barreira says.

"We encourage students to get involved," Gallagher agrees.

After orientation colleges continue to foster this sense of community with events, clubs, organization, and activities offered throughout students' academic careers.

In addition to community-building activities, colleges offer peer groups and faculty mentors. "There's a place they can go when they are overwhelmed," Klock-Powell says.

Many colleges also have counseling centers that will offer a wide range of psychiatric help depending on the severity of a student's mental health problems. And for some students, temporary issues just need to run their course before they can get back to a normal scholastic life. "There're a lot of moments of feeling unhappy or overwhelmed that pass," Barreira says.

Help from Parents

On-campus efforts go a long way towards helping alleviate depression, anxiety, and other conditions, but parents also need to be involved. "Coming to school is stressful," Barreira says. "Parents can either be a stress producer or stress reducer."

To help be a stress reducer, Klock-Powell recommends picking up the phone. "Keep in touch," Klock-Powell says. "Have that open communication."
Gallagher says that parents can help just by being available. Being ready for a call and reviewing the emergency mental health services information provided by their child's school are very important.

Barreira says the most important thing parents can do is tell their children that they need to get help when a real problem arises. Admitting that there is a problem and working towards solving it are the first steps towards getting healthy. Once a student admits to having a problem, treatment can be offered, which can mean time off from school, but that does not mean that a student's college dreams will be shattered.

Klock-Powell says that some students have to take time off to deal with their psychiatric problems, but that colleges want their students to succeed, and even if they have to take a year off to get better, schools will usually welcome students back and give them a chance to finish their education.