



Mental Illness on Campus ~ What You Can Do to Help

Times of anxiety and feeling down are common experiences in college, but did you know that they may be part of a treatable mental health condition? The latest research reports that feeling depressed to the point where students have trouble functioning impacts about 40% of students—while 15% have a serious clinical depression. Suicide is a serious problem in college---about 1,100 lives a year are lost to this largely preventable outcome.

The 2005 National College Health Assessment (NCHA), a survey of nearly 17,000 college students conducted by the American College Health Association, revealed that 25% reported they “felt so depressed it was difficult to function” three to eight times during the past year and 21% reported they “seriously considered suicide” one or more times during the past year. In the NCHA survey, students also ranked depression as one of the top ten impediments to academic performance.

While colleges and universities have a role in ensuring the health and safety of people on campus, students themselves are often the first to recognize when a problem might exist and are likely the first to be able to engage before the condition becomes a more serious issue.

How can you tell if a Person is in Trouble?

- Take conversations about suicide or homicide very seriously. A person who jokes about suicide or homicide may be struggling with a deeper sense of hopelessness. Most people who commit suicide have told someone, often in the days preceding the event.
- Sleep problems are often a symptom of more serious health problems. Roommates who have big changes in sleep patterns may be at risk for psychiatric illnesses. For example, if a person who usually sleeps ten hours, midnight to 10 am, suddenly begins waking up at 5 am and acts agitated or begins pacing, this could be a sign that they may be experiencing a deeper problem that should be addressed.
- Bulimia and Anorexia are eating disorders that often co-occur with anxiety and depression. Behaviors such as patterns of binge-eating, recurrent inappropriate behavior to control one’s weight, self-induced vomiting,

excessive exercise, expressions of an intense fear of gaining weight, or an ongoing preoccupation with weight and food despite being may be signs of a more serious psychiatric illness that needs medical attention.

- Alcohol and drug use compound all risk. Alcohol risk is higher in sororities and fraternities, but the risk remains for most college students as alcohol is often a part of acceptable campus social life. Guns are very high risk in combination with alcohol and other drugs; these two in combination are very dangerous.
- Be aware of expectable life stresses. Relationship breakups, future career stress, exam pressure, peer pressure and judgment, loneliness, financial stress, and even graduation can compound all other risks.
- Be mindful of other possible, less expectable but very real stresses--for instance the realization that one may be gay, that one is being bullied or discriminated against, the death of a parent or grandparent, or divorce can compound self harm risk.

What to do if you suspect a person is in trouble or at risk.

- Follow your instincts. People have been wired for Millennia to detect unusual or risky social situations, and your instincts can be a key to helping someone get the help they need. If you feel sad around the person, remember feelings can be contagious, and you may be sensing their own internal despair. If you want to avoid the person, note that, too. Do not hesitate to tell someone in authority on campus about your concerns.
- Don't worry alone. If you live in on-campus housing, start with your Residential Assistant/Advisor who can offer more information and resources or will often know the best approach and services available to you. You can also go to the Campus Counseling Center for information and assistance about what is available on your campus community.
- If you feel you can, approach the person with concern, not judgment. Easy comments such as "I sense you are (sad, troubled) etc." can begin a discussion and possibly invite the person to talk about what they are experiencing. Gently suggest they get help, offer to go with them if you feel comfortable with that. However, safety should always come first—yours.
- Offer information on college mental health services. Don't be afraid to use them as they help people every day deal with the stresses of college life.

- Offer information on web sites that might be helpful. Students rely on networking and the Internet as primary information sources. NAMI has a “NAMI on Campus” section at www.nami.org/namioncampus that also features discussion group networking options that may offer the person support and information to help them manage their own situations. Additionally, there are over 1,100 local NAMI affiliates in communities across the country. Visit www.nami.org to Find Support that is the most convenient.
- Meetings and groups can offer hope and support to students. There are often dozens of campus student groups operating all days of the week, including support and networking groups for mental illness and stress management. Find out what may be available and encourage the person to attend. If you feel comfortable, offer to go to a first meeting with the person, or find another person who might offer to make the meeting more inviting.
- Be gentle with yourself. Even the best doctor cannot predict all bad outcomes. People sometimes hide their feelings and behavior to avoid consequences. Remember that you are ultimately only responsible for your own behavior.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., 2007

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