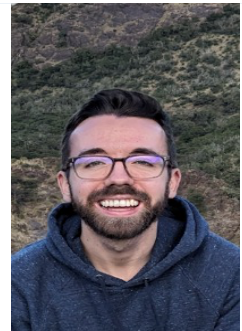


Navigating Mental Health Challenges in College

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Living with a mental illness in college can be extremely difficult, but there are treatment options and support services available. However, if you're navigating a major life transition, dealing with stress, aren't sure where to access services, or don't even know you have a

mental health condition, it can make getting help even harder. Unfortunately, these are all common problems for college students who face mental health challenges.

Why do college students need specialized mental health services?

Young adults find themselves at a pivotal point in their lives, and they may be dealing with social, emotional, and psychological issues. After all, most people experience their [first onset of a mental health disorder by the age of 25](#), likely when they're in college.

The annual [Healthy Minds](#) study compiled responses from nearly 100,000 college students across the country, and the latest results clearly point to a need for more mental health awareness and treatment. 44% of college students reported symptoms of depression, 37% experienced anxiety, and 15% had seriously considered suicide. These findings represent the highest numbers in over 15 years. Another study found that nearly [73% of college students reported having moderate to serious psychological distress](#), and of those who were struggling, nearly [half hadn't accessed care](#).

Unique challenges for college students

Young adults (ages 18 to 24) in college face unique stressors. These need to be addressed in conjunction with mental health concerns, as these factors can exacerbate symptoms and make it harder to find help. Here are examples of common stressors:

- **Transition:** Even if college students were diagnosed with a mental illness as a child or teenager and received regular care, moving to a new city or state to attend college means they may no longer have access to these support systems.
- **Finances:** Students are often worried about the financial burden that college represents. They may have to take out student loans or feel they are straining their family's finances.
- **Society:** Young adults have seen an increase in awareness in issues like climate change and gun violence, adding to larger fears that could trigger mental health episodes.
- **Independence:** College is likely the first time that many people will be living on their own. Some may be unfamiliar with how to access services, overwhelmed by the demanding workload or social life, or unaware of the warning signs of mental health issues.
- **Responsibilities:** Traditional students who begin college right after high school will be on their own without their families for the first time and forced to deal with adult responsibilities they may not be able to navigate.
- **Work:** Non-traditional students who are older may need to work full-time and may need to care for their own families.

All of these factors can make students feel lonely and isolated or engage in risky behavior. Students are also more likely to experience their first onset or worsening of mental illness.

Many college students may fail to realize they need professional help. They may assume that the stress and anxiety is a normal part of college life, and they may simply deal with it instead of reaching out for help.

At-Risk Groups

There are certain underserved groups that are at higher risk for mental illness and may not receive the help they need.

- **Freshmen:** Freshmen are brand new to college, and they may struggle to adapt to their new life. They may feel homesick, lonely, and uncomfortable asking for help.
- **Students in demanding programs:** Students who major in a healthcare-related field are more likely to experience mental health challenges due to the high cost of schooling, the demands of the program, and the pressure of caring for others. These same issues continue after students graduate.
- **LGBTQ+ students:** Those in the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who identify as trans, experience higher rates of mental illness and the detrimental side effects that can come with it. [Nearly half of trans college students reported serious psychological distress](#), and [60% of trans or gender non-conforming college students have reported suicidal behavior](#).
- **BIPOC students:** [White students are far more likely to seek help for mental health issues than Black and Asian students](#). The root causes of this involve inequitable socio-economic factors, cultural stigmas, and access to providers of color.

Common mental health issues



Depression

Depression is often used as a catch-all term for simply feeling sad, but true depression goes beyond this. Also called “major depressive disorder,” this condition is defined as a “sustained feeling of sadness and a loss of interest in things you once enjoyed,” and it is often accompanied by feelings of worthlessness or self-loathing. According to the [American Psychiatric Association \(APA\)](#), to qualify as depression, the symptoms must be present for at least two weeks and represent a departure from typical ways of thinking and behaving. The APA estimates that roughly [16.6% of adults will experience a depressive episode](#) at some point in their lives.

Bipolar disorder is also frequently connected with depression (it used to be referred to as “manic depressive disorder”), though someone with a bipolar diagnosis will feel both depressive episodes and “manic” episodes where they may feel happy, have increased activity, or have an unusually positive mood.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Sustained sad or anxious feelings
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Feelings of guilt
- Changes in sleeping patterns (either sleeping too much or not sleeping at all)
- Loss of pleasure in activities
- Difficulty concentrating
- Suicidal thoughts or thoughts of death
- Fatigue
- Impulsivity
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Isolation from friends and family
- Feeling irritable or frustrated

Treatment

Depression, like nearly all mental illnesses, is treatable. Antidepressants are commonly prescribed for those diagnosed with depression, but these should be used in conjunction with psychotherapy. For mild cases, therapy may be used on its own in an individual or group setting. In extreme cases and only after trying other treatments, some may undergo

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT). As far as at-home treatments, many people find that [regular exercise decreases symptoms of depression](#), as well as eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and avoiding alcohol.

Anxiety Disorders

Although anxiety is often seen alongside depression, it can also exist by itself in the form of Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Social Anxiety Disorder, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Like depression, anxiety is more than simply feeling nervous before a big test or during a major life transition. The clinical definition is “[apprehension, tension, or uneasiness that stems from the anticipation of danger, which may be internal or external](#).” Furthermore, these feelings of anxiety impede your regular functioning, causing people to overreact or not be in control of their reactions. College students living with anxiety can find it difficult to concentrate in class or retain information, leading to a drop in grades. Over [27% of college students reported feelings of anxiety](#).

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Nervousness
- Feelings of worry
- Panic attacks
- Phobias
- Unwanted, obsessive thoughts
- Feeling judged or watched by others
- Irritability
- Mood swings
- Difficulty sleeping
- Digestive issues

Treatment

The two main ways to treat anxiety are with psychotherapy and medication. Antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, or sedatives may be used based on the diagnosis and symptoms, though the use of marijuana can often worsen anxiety symptoms. Therapy is usually provided in the form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or exposure therapy. Those living with anxiety can often improve symptoms through regular exercise, following a schedule, getting enough sleep, or practicing meditation.

Schizophrenia

Definition

Schizophrenia is often misunderstood, and it can cause a person to confuse illusion and reality. This produces disruptions to thought processes, which can affect social interactions, reactions, perception of reality, and emotions. All of this can have a severe impact on college life and academic performance. In fact, [nearly half of all adults living with schizophrenia drop out of college](#), but there are treatment options available.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Hallucination
- Delusions
- Muted emotional expressions
- Relationship difficulties
- Cognitive impairment
- Low motivation
- Distorted or exaggerated beliefs
- Difficulty finding pleasure in activities
- “Jumbled” brain
- Confusion

Treatment

Because most cases of schizophrenia [aren't diagnosed until someone is in their late teens or early adulthood](#), it can be hard to find early treatment options. There is no way to cure this disease, but patients can manage symptoms with the use of antipsychotic medications. One challenge is that those with schizophrenia often have a co-occurring mental health disorder that must be addressed.

Substance Abuse

Definition

Substance abuse is a broad term that can refer to both drug and alcohol abuse. Students who abuse substances may still be able to continue with their daily life, attend classes, and hold a job, but they use drugs or alcohol to cope with their problems. They can have different levels of control over their use, but it isn't considered an “addiction” until the drug use is uncontrollable and has taken over all aspects of their life. However, just because someone does not have an official addiction does not mean it isn't a problem.

These are the most common substances that college students abuse:

- **Alcohol:** Perhaps the most widely used and abused substance, alcohol is in many ways a rite of passage on college campuses. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) found that [nearly half of college students ages 18 to 22 drank alcohol, with almost 29% reporting “binge” drinking](#) (defined as over five drinks in two hours for men, and over four drinks in the same period for women). The NIAAA reports that 15% of college students fit the criteria for alcohol use disorder (AUD), and one in four of these students say their alcohol use has caused academic problems. Another dangerous effect of alcohol abuse is sexual assault, with one shocking study finding that [29.6% of college-aged women reported a drug-related sexual assault or rape](#).
- **Marijuana:** Like alcohol, marijuana is a common drug on college campuses, and for the vast majority of users it poses no problem. For others, marijuana could cause memory issues and trouble concentrating, which can affect grades.
- **Opioids:** Opioids like oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), morphine, methadone, heroin, and fentanyl can relieve feelings of anxiety and stress, but they are

all incredibly addictive. They are also the [leading cause of overdose deaths](#).

- **Stimulants and Sedatives:** Both stimulants and sedatives can be very addictive. College students are known to use stimulants as “study drugs,” and roughly [20% of college students have reported abusing stimulants to help with their studies](#). Furthermore, use of either sedatives or stimulants along with other drugs like alcohol can cause major health risks and even death.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Feeling uncomfortable or not like yourself without the drug
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities
- Using drugs in dangerous situations, like driving
- Impulsivity or lack of restraint
- Cravings for the drug
- Chronic constipation (opioids)
- Changes in appetite, jitteriness, hair loss, or weight loss (stimulants)

Treatment

Many people may be able to quit abusing drugs with the help of friends, family, or counseling, but others may need more assistance. There are drug rehabilitation centers that combine psychotherapeutic treatment and medication, and others that use an alternative drug such as methadone to help with withdrawal symptoms.

Eating Disorders

Definition

The most prevalent types of eating disorders are binge eating, bulimia, and anorexia, with the latter two being the most common among college students. To address an increase in stress and social pressure, students may resort to trying to control their environment in unhealthy ways, like severely restricting their diet, over-exercising, or becoming hyper-critical of their body and focusing on weight loss. One study that looked at trends from 2003 to 2013 found that the [risk of an eating disorder diagnosis was 13 percentage points](#) higher among college students. Unfortunately, screening for eating disorders is lacking, with only [22% of campuses having year-round screening opportunities](#), meaning many college students don't receive the help they need.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Excessive preoccupation regarding weight, dieting, or exercise
- Developing food rituals
- Mood swings
- Large weight fluctuations
- Sleep problems
- Feeling cold

- Dizziness upon standing
- Dental problems
- Dry skin, hair, and nails
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irregular menstrual cycles

Treatment

Many people don't understand that eating disorders are in fact a mental illness and not a choice someone makes. Because of this, treatment needs to include psychotherapy, out- or in-patient programs, regular medical monitoring, and nutritional counseling.

Self-Harm

Definition

The Healthy Minds study found that an astounding [29% of college student engaged in “non-suicidal self-injury”](#) (self-harm). The two most common age groups were teenagers (14-15) and college-age students. Self-harm can be linked to suicidal thinking, but not always. It is often used as a way to deal with stress, pain, sadness, anger, or loneliness.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Feelings of low self-worth, shame, and guilt
- Scarring on body
- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, or burns
- Impulsive or intense behaviors
- Relationship difficulties
- Hiding evidence of self-harm (such as wearing long sleeves in hot weather)

Treatment

Treatment will depend on the individual and whether there are any co-occurring mental illnesses, such as anxiety or depression, and can include psychotherapy, counseling, medications, or in-patient care. Addressing the root causes of the harm and finding alternative, healthy coping skills is the key to improvement.

ADHD

Definition

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is most commonly diagnosed in younger children, but once they enter college, they can face new challenges. The academic demands of their classes and lack of support and services can be difficult. Those with ADHD have difficulty paying attention, and they may be hyperactive and impulsive. A survey done in 2020 by the American College Health Association found that roughly [11.6% of college students suffer from ADHD, up from only 2% just 20 years ago](#).

Warning signs and symptoms:

- Both an inability to focus and the ability to hyper-focus
- Trouble focusing on lectures and conversations
- Short attention span
- Fidgeting
- Failure to complete assignments on time
- Poor time management skills
- Sensory overload
- Lack of impulse control
- Disorganization

Treatment

Stimulant medications like methylphenidate (ritalin) and dextroamphetamine (Adderall) are quite common and shown to be [effective in about 70% of adults](#) with ADHD. In some cases, these medications can be paired with therapy and counseling.

How to Request Accommodations at School



Per the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#), students must receive reasonable accommodations for a documented disability, including psychiatric disabilities. However, students will likely need to advocate for themselves or enlist the help of parents. Once these accommodations are in place, they can help immensely and allow college students to thrive in an academic setting. Many students with mental illnesses can experience symptoms that interfere with their ability to be successful in school. If your condition leads to any of the following, you could be entitled to certain accommodations:

- Anxious or nervousness during a test

- Disorganized thinking
- Inability to block out environmental stimuli
- Difficulty with concentration and memory
- Difficulty interacting in group settings
- Lack of stamina

Your school can and should by law offer you reasonable accommodations that could include:

- Preferential seating
- More time for testing
- Alternative testing environment
- Ability to use notes for test
- Use of other students' notes
- Instructor-provided notes or lecture materials
- Use of a digital recorder during class
- More frequent breaks
- Individually-proctored exams
- Flexibility in how assignments are completed (ie. a written assessment instead of an oral presentation, or a handwritten paper instead of typed)

Online mental health resources

- [The Jed Foundation](#): This online resource helps both high school students transitioning to college and those already in college address mental health concerns
- [Active Minds](#): This student-led advocacy group is dedicated to eliminating mental health stigma among young people and providing on-campus resources. The program has chapters at over 600 schools across the country, but you can also find resources on their website and connect virtually with peers who can help.
- [Anxiety & Depression Association of America \(ADAA\)](#): The ADAA serves all ages, but it offers special online resources for teens and college students to help them understand their conditions and find help.

- **[National Eating Disorder Association \(NEDA\)](#)**: This comprehensive online resource provides information for those with an eating disorder and their friends and family.
- **[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)**: This is a federal online resource for those needing mental health treatment or suicide counseling. Anyone can call or text 988 for immediate suicide counseling or crisis help, or call the national help line at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for treatment referrals and information.
- **[ADDitude Magazine](#)**: This is an online publication to learn about ADD and ADHD, including how to identify symptoms, find treatment options, and access free webinars and videos.
- **[National Alliance of Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)**: This organization has an extensive college guide that helps students find the support and information they need to thrive. They also have a newsletter and a [guide for those experiencing a mental health crisis](#). You can call the NAMI helpline at 800-950-6264.
- **[Mental Health America, Life on Campus](#)**: This fantastic resource for college students living with a mental illness offers in-depth information and practical how-to guides about talking with professors about mental health, dealing with stress, and balancing your school and social life.