

4 Ways Faculty Can Be Allies for College Student Mental Health

Home Blog

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2

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Mental health disorders are common, consequential, and largely untreated on college campuses. These findings are evident

through data from the [Healthy Minds Study](#), which has examined college student mental health at more than 200 institutions in the last 14 years (and counting), on which I serve as a co-investigator.



Among our findings:

- On clinically-validated mental health screens, 42% of students report thoughts of suicide or symptoms indicative of a likely diagnosis of depression, anxiety, an eating disorder, or non-suicidal self-injury if they were to be seen by a clinician
- Among students struggling with mental health problems, almost half (45%) are not receiving treatment
- 77% of students report that emotional or mental difficulties hurt their academic performance one or more days in the past 4 weeks

These aren't the healthy levels of stress that help the learning process, such as when students feel accountable to deadlines, program requirements, and standards for quality work. Rather, the levels of distress we're seeing interfere with students' ability to

concentrate, function, engage with material and peers in meaningful ways, and complete assignments. In other words—their ability to learn.

Research indicates that most faculty members believe it is their role to help identify at-risk students. Many struggling students have received crucial support and referrals from a caring and alert professor.

While not all college students face mental health disorders, ALL students have mental health. College offers both an opportunity and a reason to learn to take care of it. Faculty can play an important role in creating learning environments that support health and well-being, decrease anxiety, increase learning, and encourage seeking help when needed.

1. Include a syllabus statement on mental health

We see that students find it helpful when faculty include a statement on mental health on their course syllabus. Doing so helps to set expectations, normalizes the need to seek help, and emphasizes the **link between mental health and academic success**. Including information on campus resources further removes barriers between students and support services. Authentically conveying that mental health matters to you and for your course is powerful.

2. Be open about your own struggles and successes

Students need role models to learn how to cope with challenges and to recognize that seeking help is a sign of strength. Sharing your own experiences about struggles, failures, successes, and coping strategies is a good way to connect and foster a climate that supports mental well-being.

Some colleges and universities are creating programs to encourage faculty to speak out. The **Story of Failure** initiative at Tulane University encourages students, staff, faculty, and alumni to share their own personal stories of failure and resilience. The project combines storytelling, events, programs, and academic skills coaching to motivate and support students as they experience setbacks that are a normal part of a rigorous education. These stories highlight for students that the road to meaningful and productive lives is often messy, frightening, uncertain, and unpredictable.

3. Be prepared to recognize, respond, and refer students in distress

Gatekeeper training refers to programs that seek to develop individuals' ability to identify those at risk, determine levels of risk, and make referrals when necessary. Trainings available for college and university educators include [QPR](#), [At-Risk for University and College Faculty](#) by Kognito, and [Mental Health First Aid](#). In addition to gaining the skills and knowledge to recognize and respond to students in distress, it is important to know the mental health resources available to students at your institution as well as the appropriate mechanisms for raising the alert regarding students you are concerned about. There are national resources like the Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) and Crisis Text Line (text 741741) and likely services offered by your college or university.

4. Establish class conditions and norms that promote well-being, social connectedness, inclusivity, and a growth mindset

For just one example, we know that sleep is important to mental health and a small change to deadlines can reinforce, in a subtle way, good sleep habits. Assignments can be due by 5pm, instead of “by midnight” or at 9am. Although this change won't guarantee that students get the sleep they need, we can avoid signaling an expectation that work should be done into the late hours of the night. Better yet—be explicit about the importance of a good night's sleep!

Dozens of other practical and evidence-based ways to establish a healthy learning environment are among the core competencies defined in ACUE's [Effective Practice Framework](#). Also, many institutions are providing a growing set of resources to educators to help them foster conditions for well-being in class. The University of Texas at Austin's [Well-being in Learning Environments guidebook](#) is a particularly good example.

On campuses that are perceived to be supportive of mental health issues, rather than stigmatizing, students are over [20 percent more likely to seek treatment in general and 60 percent more likely to do so on campus](#). By taking steps in these four areas, faculty can help to foster a campus culture that supports student health, success, and well-being.

This essay was developed from remarks delivered at the American Council on Education's 2019 South Winter Summit.

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