

Mental Health

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the relationship between mental health and optimal student performance and describe some best practices and resources that can help you to stay mentally healthy. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Caring for Your Mental Health

Just like your physical health, concern with and maintenance of your mental health is important not only to your overall happiness and well-being but also to your success in higher education and your performance in your individual courses.

The workload of higher education on its own can be stressful and leave a student feeling overwhelmed. Whereas school is the primary responsibility for most high school students, many college students balance this workload with demanding work or family schedules. In addition, students in higher education are more likely to be living on their own, without their parents noticing and asking whether something's wrong.

Institutions of higher education are not cold or uncaring places—more and more, schools are developing resources aimed at encouraging and helping to maintain their students' mental health. The difference, once again, is that the responsibility falls to you, the student, to identify when you need help and seek out the resources that can provide it.

2. Good Mental Health and Optimal Student Performance

As with your physical health, the upkeep of your mental health is not just a crucial component of your general quality of life, but it also has a direct and profound effect on your academic success.

According to The National Alliance on Mental Illness, “The American College Health Association informs colleges (and all of us) that mental health needs are almost directly related to measures of academic success. Their 2015 survey found that students who reported psychological distress also reported receiving lower grades on exams or important projects; receiving lower grades in courses; receiving an ‘incomplete’ or dropping courses altogether; or experiencing a significant disruption in thesis, dissertation, research, or practicum work.”

It should be no surprise that students do not produce their best work in states of anxiety or depression, yet not enough students take seriously the idea that a big part of doing your best is feeling your best. Whether you are struggling with anxiety or depression or just feeling stressed out, thinking about your mental health and how you can improve it is a positive step toward optimizing your performance at school.

IN CONTEXT

In order to underline just how common and significant mental health issues are among students in college, let's take a closer look at some of the statistics gathered by researchers. According to the American Psychological Association, about one-third of college students report difficulty functioning due to depression and almost half of the students experienced overwhelming anxiety at some point in the last year—and these numbers are steadily trending upward in recent years. The number of students seeking counseling rose by 30% between 2010 and 2015.

Out of those students who sought counseling, here is a breakdown of the issues they reported: anxiety (61%), depression (49%), stress (45%), family issues (31%), academic performance (28%), and relationship problems (27%).

3. Best Practices for Coping with Stress

No matter what temperament students might have, some degree of stress is inevitable as they work through their college career—it's essentially a "fact of life" in higher education. This means that coping with and managing stress are essential skills for student success. There is no universal prescription for stress relief—different students will respond better to different methods—but there are definitely some time-tested best practices for coping with stress.

First of all, recall that your physical health and mental health are significantly related—working out or getting some form of exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins that can improve your mood and diminish stressful feelings. Doctors and therapists are increasingly citing the benefits of meditation for stress relief—just ten minutes of meditation can train your body to achieve a state of relaxation in which your blood pressure decreases and your mood improves.

Another key component of stress management is making sure you reserve some time each day for doing something you enjoy. This can involve socializing with friends or engaging in a hobby or activity that you do on your own—anything that will improve your mood and thus put you in a better position to succeed when you return to your schoolwork. In addition to these practices, you can also reduce stress by adjusting your attitude—remind yourself that stress is temporary and you can and will get past it.



THINK ABOUT IT

Some degree of stress in your higher education experience is essentially unavoidable. But does this mean you have to passively accept stress as a condition of your reality as a student?

Similar to time management, you can approach stress management proactively and scientifically and have a positive impact on those aspects of your stress level that are under your control. Begin by identifying stress and the sources of stress, and then consider seeking help and/or reflecting on ways to manage your stress. Simply having a plan will boost your confidence and sense of control over your academic destiny—and that in and of itself can reduce stress.

4. Common Mental Health Issues

The most common mental health issues that college students struggle with include depression, anxiety, substance abuse or addiction, and eating disorders. In order to properly avoid or deal with any of these issues, you need to be able to recognize them.

- Symptoms of depression include feeling sad, hopeless, or worthless; not enjoying things you used to enjoy; gaining or losing weight; sleeping too much or too little; and having trouble concentrating or making decisions. If you have any of these symptoms, you should consider getting help. If you have all of these symptoms, you may be suffering from major depression.
- Symptoms of anxiety include restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and changes in personality. Students with anxiety can also experience panic attacks, which are intense periods of fear lasting up to ten minutes that can be accompanied by sweating, shortness of breath, dizziness, or nausea.
- The on-campus college lifestyle has a well-earned reputation for excessive drinking and casual drug use, so every student entering this social environment should be mindful of this. But, substance abuse in college is not limited to binge drinking at frat parties; students both on campus and online can turn to drinking or drugs as a means of coping with stress by self-medicating. Symptoms of substance abuse or addiction can include regular or daily drinking or drug use, not meeting obligations or responsibilities, and experiencing withdrawal when you stop drinking or using.
- Like students who engage in substance abuse, students with eating disorders can also be triggered by feelings of stress. The most common types of eating disorders are anorexia (characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss) and bulimia (characterized by episodes of binge eating followed by episodes of vomiting, fasting, or compulsive exercising).

If you identify with any of the above symptoms or if you're just struggling to get through each day and you're not sure why, it's in your best interest to seek help from a mental healthcare professional immediately. If ignored, mental health disorders can become a serious threat to your well-being.

5. The Role of a Counseling Center

Most college campuses offer some form of mental health services, often housed at a counseling center. Counselors at a counseling center can talk to you about the mental health issues detailed above—depression, anxiety, substance abuse or addiction, and eating disorders. They can also help with other kinds of problems college students commonly face, including issues with relationships or sexual orientation, time management, grief, and adjustment to life in college in general.

Recall that colleges increasingly provide resources for the maintenance of students' physical health and well-being because they realize that healthy students are happier and more productive; the same is true of colleges' relationship to students' mental health. More and more resources are available to students to reflect on and improve their mental health. Whether your problems are big or small, your mental health and your academic performance can benefit from making use of these resources.



THINK ABOUT IT

What should you do in the event that your school does not have mental health resources available for students?

If the resources are not provided, you still need to be proactive about getting yourself the help you need. The best advice is to talk to a medical doctor or nurse about your concerns. They can refer you to someone who can help.

6. The Importance of Seeking Help

Many students struggle with mental health issues on their own, allowing their problems to fester or seeking to “treat” them with self-medicating quick fixes that can create additional problems. Again, most—if not all—students will at some point encounter some form of difficulty that can be better processed and dealt with by seeking help. Therefore, you shouldn’t hesitate to seek help due to fear of stigma—students who take steps to maintain their mental health are no different than students who work to improve their physical health.

Besides the potential to improve your overall quality of life, seeking help with regard to your mental health can help you optimize your academic performance. Certainly, if you are experiencing severe symptoms of depression or anxiety, addressing these symptoms will help to remove obstacles to your success at school. But even if your issues are relatively minor, consideration and assessment of your own mental health can help you achieve the height of your potential.



SUMMARY

Caring for your mental health will ensure that you can **perform your best as a student**. Stress can be an issue for students, so you must use **best practices to help you cope** and manage the level of stress in your life. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and eating disorders are some of the most **common mental health issues** that students suffer from. Learn to recognize the symptoms. **Counseling centers** can assist with problems related to mental health. If you are struggling with your mental health, **seek help** immediately.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [The Importance of Maintaining Mental Health in College](#) | Author: Dr. Deborah Tull and Dr. Jay Feldman
- [By the Numbers: Stress on Campus](#) | Author: Lea Winerman
- [Students Under Pressure](#) | Author: Amy Novotney