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Mental Health Care: How colleges are helping students cope

I never wake up on the wrong side of the bed, rather, I am beside it or underneath it for days, hours, or just a few minutes. It all depends on how my brain wants me to feel for the following day. The Sun is shining in my peer’s world; however, I’ve been living under the Solar Eclipse since I was about 6 years old. The box that I am enclosed in compresses and enlarges throughout the day, and the uncomfortable state is overbearing sometimes. There are dandelions planted underneath my feet to uphold the numbness throughout my body. Photography. That is a passion of mine I’ve discovered just recently, but I always discover great qualities about myself that is swallowed by the negative feelings my mind slithers its way into. Now, I am reaching my third year of college, having change my major three times and I still feel unsure or namely unhappy with life. “Get over it” or “everyone has those days” isn’t enough to get through the depression war where my mind reigns victory. However, I’ve discovered that there are people at my university who care about individuals struggling with mental illnesses, and is using their training to help students have a successful college career.

There is the stigma that mental health care facilities in colleges are only for students who are dangerously suffering from depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorders. Some colleges overlook first year students who develop homesickness, panic attacks and stress over time. During our first week of freshman year in college, we are required to complete modules subjected on sexual harassment, underaged drinking and smoking policies, and bullying. However, none inform students about mental health related illnesses, and ways to seek help when going through emotional trials. We take for granted psychologists employed at universities who help us during times of despair. When a teenager enters their senior of high school, teachers and counselors challenge them academically to prepare for rigorous coursework in their future college classes. It is repeatedly stressed how important it is to maintain the best grades in college, and to always seek help in academic studies. However, there is little to no discussion on the importance of talking with a trusted adult about the stress that comes from loads of coursework. Eugene Beresin, a professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School wrote in his article, “The College Mental Health Crisis: Focus on Overall Wellbeing” that “it is one thing to worry about isolated, freak events. It’s another for us to appreciate that college is a risky time for our kids.” Mental illness is not a stigma and we shouldn’t make someone feel unwanted or isolated, because they have a panic attack from a few classes versus someone who deals with depression daily.

Colleges can provide positive responses or feedback to a student who deals with anxiety, depression, or paranoia daily to help them manage academic and life activities. At the beginning of the school semester in 2017, a music department at a university lost a friendly senior instrumental recitalist to suicide. The news was devastating as many of his close friends grieved and music professors reminisced on the musical legacy he left with the department. The student had attended the mental health care center provided on campus, but it isn’t known how often he attended a meeting. Relatively, many people state that students are afraid to seek help from psychologists periodically because they’re judgmental. However, we do not know that college has a way of shaping us into stronger individuals. David Davino, a psychologist who works at the mental health care center at Longwood University said that “a small group of 4-8 people with stress and anxiety disorders will attend a group meeting and share similar experiences which serves as a support system.” Furthermore, most students claim that they are more likely to talk with their peers or students our age, because they relate better than adults. In addition, colleges that are susceptible to reach out to incoming freshman on their program are more likely to help a student feel secure.

People against mental health care services in schools, protest that psychologist are only limited to the amount of information and help they can provide to a student. Parents are specifically the leading role models in teaching some of their children to handle stress, depression and anxiety independently. They believe that some school counselors can’t prescribe medicine to control the mental stressor a student is enduring. According to Lee Burdette Williams’ article, “Under Pressure: The Growing Demand for Student Mental Health Services”, colleges have less resources and must meet certain legal criteria while being asked to do more than what they’re capable. College may be the best place where a student feels secure, and can easily access a free health care center through appointments. Davino, who’s worked for Valley Community Services Board as an Access/Crisis clinician prior to his employment at Longwood, now meets somewhere between 45-50 students equating to 150-160 sessions per semester. The primary reasons students meet with him is due to stress anxiety, interpersonal relationships, depression, bipolar, trauma, life/career transition, and sexual identity concerns. Most psychologists argue that it may take students many semesters to step up and seek help, because they lack coping skills once they hit college from being sheltered by their parents.

Parents explain that their children need immediate attention and the wait is too long, or that a school counselor can’t control the violent acts their child partakes in due to depression or anxiety. Peter Nolan, a professor of Mental Health Nursing School of Health Services at the University of Birmingham, writes in his article, “Violence in mental health care: the experiences of mental health nurses and psychologists” that violence against mental health service personnel is a devastating problem and while it is increasing, not many people are aware of this danger. The number of students who meet in a group session sometimes become frustrated and release violent behavior towards their mentor, but there are few instances where it is a physical attack. Furthermore, it does not mean we should give up on our students. A simple hug could help in the slightest way to make sure a student feels accepted. New York Times journalist for “Colleges get proactive in addressing depression on campus”, Alina Tugend believes that for some students, a break to paint or pet a puppy is all that’s needed to calm anxiety about an upcoming final or test. Music, art, dance, creative writing and sports are few of the many extracurricular activities colleges offer to students who attend their schools. Students who feel unobligated to seek help from a school counselor has the option of enrolling in an art class or joining a club to provide the coping mechanism they need to help with their mental illness. On the other hand, classes are too expensive for most colleges students. They may not be able to afford to take an art, music, or dance class, so their focus is to complete their degree courses. However, colleges implement free organizations ruled by advisors to help students express themselves.

A couple of years ago, my mother knew a co-worker who secretly suffered from depression since he was a child. The time that he spent in school was hard for him, because he grew up with the stigma that black people cannot experience depression. There were great opportunities offered in seeking help from the college he attended, but he ignored his depression for almost 10 years. He shared a story with my mother that will change people’s perspective on other’s who suffer from mental illnesses. I woke up one morning feeling more unusual than I’d ever experienced throughout my adulthood. I wasn’t in control of myself, but had transformed into a marionette who was pulled up and down by my emotions. I walked into the bathroom, and prescription pills that had been ignored for years were now the center of attention. Just as I was about to end my life with those pills, I thought about the few times I had opportunities to seek help with my mental disorder from friends, family, and counselors at my school. I was afraid. In the background, Michael Jackson’s song, “Man in the Mirror” played and is what made me decide to give life one more try. This is just a reminder for parents who persuade their children to ignore mental health care facilities in school. The longer they ignore help, the more susceptible they are to give up on life.

How does that correspond to the fact that my child must wait in between days and weeks to see a counselor at a university? I’d rather spend thousands of dollars for a psychologist to see them every day or at least three times a week than them meet once a week. Helicopter parents are constantly on their toes with those questions. However, the number of students who attend a college or university ranges from about 3,000-18,000 a year equating to roughly 5 or 6 counselors who work at the universities. It is impossible to schedule an appointment every day with 1,000 out of 15,000 students who may suffer from a mental illness. College counselors dedicate as much time as possible to tend to the mental needs of students, and there are simply not enough hours in the day to see one student each day. People fear that adolescents may turn to hurting themselves or sadly committing suicide before their next meeting with a college counselor. Megan Thiekling, a reporter and the lead writer for STAT’s Morning Rounds newsletter expressed her thoughts on college students waiting to see a psychiatrist to talk about their anxiety. In her article, “A Dangerous Wait: Colleges can’t meet soaring student needs for mental health care”, students must wait weeks after taking an initial exam that reviews their symptoms so psychiatrists can properly prescribe the most beneficiary medicine for their mental illness. However, most school counselors are not licensed to prescribe medicine, but can direct students who need extra guidance and attention to better mental health care facilities.

While leaving my apartment complex, I saw a flyer that outlined days and times students could attend an info-session on mental illnesses. I was surprised to see the black and white paper taped against the wall next to the elevator, because the three years I’ve spent in college were more focused on drug and alcohol abuse. It was even more shameful to realize that the flyer had been sitting there since November 2017, and it further justifies people’s opinions on schools not reaching out to their students. We’re subconscious to important and serious topics until an unfortunate tragedy opens our eyes. According to Katherine Weare and Melanie Nind’s article, “Mental health promotion and problem prevention: what does the evidence way?”, schools are the predominant resources to help diminish the number of students who suffer from anxiety and more common mental health problems while in school. Counselors and even regular teachers have the knowledge to promote positivity, resilience and cope mechanisms to lessen negative stressors.

Our common concept on schools is that they were created to teach fundamental subjects to help students ultimately seek a career that will throw money into their pockets. While enduring great financial stability is important, it doesn’t take care of our mental health. Erik Erickson, a developmental psychologist said life doesn’t make sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, the better for us all. We shouldn’t fall victim to the stigma of having to be seriously ill to receive help. Each person develops unique talents which involves sharing their creative ideas with the world. In return, others can then use those ideas to help cope with difficulties faced in our daily lives.