

Students' PTSD symptoms fluctuate greatly during first year of college

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Credit: University at Buffalo

A new University at Buffalo study is helping researchers better understand how post-traumatic stress disorder fluctuates in students during their first year of college.

The segment of the young adult population with PTSD is particularly at risk for problem drinking and other [harmful behaviors](#) that can potentially exacerbate symptoms, according to Jennifer Read, a professor in UB's Department of Psychology and corresponding author of the paper published in the journal *Psychological Trauma: Theory,*

Research and Policy.

"You have a group of young people exposed to some trauma who are away from many of the things that would otherwise provide them with support," says Read. "Even those who are commuting have still entered into a new way of life."

The researchers analyzed a class of 649 freshman who had suffered some kind of trauma, using a 17-question form designed to assess PTSD symptoms in civilians. Based on their answers, the [students](#) were separated into three categories: those with severe symptoms, moderate symptoms or no symptoms.

Each participant was subsequently assessed five additional times during the year: three times during their first semester and twice during their second semester.

The findings suggest significant early variations in how people's symptoms fluctuate. Most of the change is happening when students first transition to college. That's when the symptoms are malleable.

However, as the students progressed through their freshman year, they became more fixed in their categories, a finding that points to the possible benefits of early intervention.

"This is relevant to college administrators for a few different reasons," says Read. "One is to know that there is a class of students whose symptoms are getting worse or staying bad. While students are first transitioning the symptoms are the most malleable. So early detection and intervention are important.

"If these people can be identified, then outreach could be provided," she says.

Many of the students, however, saw their symptoms moderate, a finding that informs researchers on how people recover naturally, according to Read.

"It's encouraging that people with PTSD symptoms are getting better on their own," says Read. "Resilience is common in human behavior. People can have bad things happen to them, but will most likely be okay. It doesn't mean they won't be affected, or that they won't be changed in some way, but they will probably be okay."

Although resolution of PTSD [symptoms](#) was the most common pattern in the study's participants, Read cautions that there is a subset of people who arrive as college freshman with PTSD and see no change in their condition.

"Drinking affects this," says Read, who has conducted previous research on the intersection of PTSD and alcohol consumption. "If someone is drinking regularly or excessively, the likelihood is less that they'll move from a high category to a lower category."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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