

Mental health support can help students making tough transition to college

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Credit: Wikipedia

On Twitter, hundreds of thousands of people are #TalkingAboutIt.

The popular hashtag is all over the social media platform, denoting tweets on experiences and concerns about [mental health conditions](#). Its goal is to demystify [mental illness](#), promote open conversation and

encourage people to seek support.

But for many, it can be hard to have those same conversations offline. People often find it tough to communicate what they're going through or to get the help they need. Similarly, it can be difficult for people to figure out the best way to support loved ones.

That pressure often is compounded for young people making the transition to college life, which can be overwhelming on its own.

"I do think sometimes students don't realize how hard it is, adjusting to college," says Laura Smith, associate dean of students for health and wellness at the University of Texas at Dallas. "You're not the big fish in your classes anymore, you have all kinds of personal stress, you're away from home. ... It sometimes leads to [mental health problems](#), and dealing with this stuff is not easy."

For 18-year-olds, college means freedom and novelty and opportunity. But being consumed by future possibilities makes it easy to overlook what's going on in the present.

In fact, it's often extremely easy to dismiss small signs of duress. Excessive sleeping (or lack thereof), feeling anti-social, changes in hygiene, and apathy in classes or extracurriculars are some of the more common warning signs of an underlying problem. But it can be hard to see those signs: Sometimes students are actually just tired, or they simply want to stay in for a while.

"It's when it all happens at once, or when it turns into a pattern, that it becomes a concern," says Smith. "In these cases, even a minor intervention can make a difference. Say something - it can be any number of harmless things going on, but it can also be significant. It's never a waste of our time to reach out."

Students who have been through these issues agree with Smith's reasoning. One second it might seem like benign behavior, but the next, it's not. It's best to address problems when they start cropping up, before they escalate. And if students don't feel comfortable seeking help, many feel that it's the responsibility of university to create safer spaces to talk things out.

"I really wish that there was more importance placed on how counseling centers help students, and if schools could fund them more it would make such a difference," says Connie Trinh, a recent graduate of Texas Woman's University. "Counseling services are just as important as academics and sports."

Trinh, 27, graduated from TWU in 2015. During college, she began to notice a demand for more [mental health services](#) and safe spaces on campus. Partnering with the National Alliance on Mental Illness' Dallas office, Trinh would host various workshops and information sessions on how to handle mental health conditions as a [student](#).

'I WAS IN DENIAL'

Trinh used her own story to connect with students who might be facing similar problems, or students who have no idea how to identify what they're going through.

There were many factors that played a part in Trinh's severe depression and anxiety: High academic pressures, cultural stigma from her Asian heritage and stressful social situations stand out as some of the most common triggers.

"I was in denial," Trinh says. "It wasn't until a mental breakdown that I realized that something bigger was happening."

She reached a point where depression began to tint her entire college experience. Panic attacks and depressive episodes were becoming unmanageable on her own. It was only after years of personal strife that she could admit there was a problem, and that reaching out isn't a sign of weakness - in fact, it's quite the contrary.

"When you're so anxious and so stressed that the thought of work cripples you, when you can't function normally, if you feel really alone, you can't connect with other people around you - you should address the issue without shame, without any guilt," says Trinh. "You'll find that there are a lot of people out there that genuinely want to help you, that won't judge you or criticize you."

Trinh stresses the importance of using all of the resources that colleges have available. Then, if that's not effective or enough, reach out to groups like NAMI, which are dedicated to helping people find affordable help in the Dallas area.

She also suggests, based on her experiences, that students who are part of certain marginalized groups on college campuses might face additional stigma or triggers that lead to severe, untreated mental health problems. This includes people of color, low-income, first-generation or those identifying as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual).

NAMI's data supports her observations, with studies having found that LGBTQIA and multicultural communities have less access to treatment, higher levels of stigma about mental health, and often fall victim to insensitive or discriminatory health care systems.

"We need to start thinking about [mental health](#) just like we think about physical illness," says Lisa Pedersen, the Youth Programs coordinator at the NAMI Dallas branch.

"Taking care of yourself is key - all the things that are good for everybody become more important when you're at risk," she says. "Eating healthy, getting exercise, sleeping well, taking nutritional supplements are all positive coping and prevention skills for early symptoms. The sooner you address it, the better."

As schools, counselors and students are beginning to promote open conversation and clinical services across college campuses, the aim is to break down social stigmas and provide timely resources for budding young adults.

"It can feel really big and overwhelming at first, and it's a process," says Dr. Denise Lucero-Miller, the director of TWU's counseling center. "But I find that once someone has a positive therapy experience, they're kind of hooked for life. It just means recognizing that they can go back to it in the future if they need it."

RESOURCES

Beyond specific campus programs, college students and others can seek help and information through the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which has a Dallas office.

Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

Suicide and Crisis Center of North Texas: 214-828-1000

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