

Parents, look out for mental health issues as college kids return to class

August 24 2021



(HealthDay)—This year of pandemic isolation and anxiety has been

tough for many, but an expert says college students are at particularly high risk for mental health issues as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

As students return to their campuses, it's important for parents to monitor their young adults' mental health, said Dr. Richard Catanzaro, chief of behavioral health at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

"Human beings are [social animals](#), so after this past year and an extended period of disconnection in our face-to-face interactions, we can expect college students to experience a steep increase in [social anxiety](#) and anxiety about navigating their new world," he said, noting that clinical data supports concerns about mental health.

A July report from the [Center for Reinventing Public Education](#) found that many students felt isolated and alienated from school, their friends and life. [The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reported that 1 in 4 young adults have considered suicide during the pandemic.

Catanzaro said many [college students](#) regressed during the pandemic in terms of social skills while living with their parents again. Their time-management and emotional self-regulation skills may be rusty as they try to resume getting up and to class on time. This can lead to anxiety, feelings of ineffectiveness, an inability to function and depression, he said.

College is traditionally the time when young people experiment with substances, and they may self-medicate with drugs and alcohol to deal with their increased anxiety. This could lead to an uptick in overdoses, Catanzaro said.

How well a student is functioning can help a parent distinguish between

emotional problems and serious mental illness. A student with emotional issues may have trouble getting to class on time or doing their best work. A student with a serious mental health disorder may be unable to get out of bed, bathe or eat.

College-age students are typically at greater risk of suicide because of difficulties in the transition to adulthood, but the increased anxiety of abruptly shifting from being at home in front of a computer screen for a year to life in a lecture hall with 100 or more people, on a campus with 20,000-plus strangers may feel especially daunting.

Parents can try to spot [mental health issues](#) in their young adults in several ways, Catanzaro said. They can:

- Use Zoom or FaceTime to see how their [student](#) looks and what their living environment looks like. Both can be indicators of mental [health](#).
- Watch for red flags, such as failing many or all classes, dropping out of school, being consistently unavailable and sounding or looking terrible.
- Ask specific questions such as: What did you eat last night? What are you studying in your Psychology/Science/Literature class?
- Set expectations. Say, "I'm paying for your school and your phone. We need to do Zoom once a week." Find out how often you can see their grades and regularly review them.
- Monitor social media for concerning statements, such as "Just remember, I love you all." These can indicate a wish or plan to for self-harm.

If you suspect or know your child is having suicidal thoughts, be direct, he advised. Ask: "Are you thinking about ending your life?"

This doesn't promote suicide and can be a relief, as well as a starting point for treatment. If your child is contemplating suicide, immediately bring them home or have them brought to a hospital, Catanzaro recommended. If you sense it's an emergency—if they say to you, "I can't control these thoughts"—call 911 immediately.

"I'm not suggesting that parents worry; rather, they should be watchful. My best advice is to make yourself available and speak frankly with your young adult," Catanzaro said.

He added that there must be an expectation for regular communication.

"Express your concerns," he advised. " 'These are my worries....' Put things in context: 'When I went to school, it was stressful. And now it's stressful for me to get back to work, back on the subway, back in the supermarket.' "

More information: The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration offers a [national helpline and additional advice](#).

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Citation: Parents, look out for mental health issues as college kids return to class (2021, August 24) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-08-parents-mental-health-issues-college.html>

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