

# The mental health crisis on campus and how colleges can fix it

6 January 2020, by Marty Swanbrow Becker, Ph.D.



Campus counseling centers are seeing an influx of students seeking help with mental health issues. Credit: [Motortion/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

When college students seek help for a mental health issue on campus—something they are doing [more often](#)—the place they usually go is the college counseling center.

But while the stigma of seeking mental [health](#) support has [gone down](#), it has created a new problem: College counseling centers are now [struggling](#) to meet the increased demand.

As a [researcher](#) who examines problems faced by [college students in distress](#), I see a [way](#) to [better support](#) students' mental health. In addition to offering individual counseling, colleges should also focus on what we in the mental health field refer to as [population health and prevention](#).

These efforts can range from creating more shared spaces to increase social connections to stave off feelings of isolation, to reducing things on [campus](#) that threaten [student](#) well-being, such as discrimination and violence.

## What's behind the problem

Student mental health distress has escalated to high levels nationally. The [American College Health Association found](#) in 2019 that over the past year, 87% of [college](#) students felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 66% felt overwhelming anxiety, 56% felt things were hopeless and 13% seriously considered suicide. Contributing factors include distressing and traumatic circumstances during college, such as assaults, in addition to academic [performance demands](#).

The college experience is not the only factor, however. Students are also coming to college with preexisting mental health challenges. For instance, over 80% of students who think about suicide during college had [first thought about suicide before college](#).

Some college campuses may add counseling staff to try to meet the increased demand for counseling centers, but not all campuses can afford to do this. Even if they do, it still might not be enough. Students need alternate ways beyond college counseling centers to address their mental health needs.

By being more proactive and equipping students to deal with mental health issues before they become too large to manage, fewer students will need crisis services—and those that need them will be able to get them sooner—because more students will have the tools to work through their problems earlier on their own.

To improve the overall health of their population of students, here are four areas where I think colleges should focus.

### 1. Empower students

Colleges must help students assess their strengths and overall resilience. By empowering students with increased self-knowledge, they can more adeptly identify problems early and access

supportive resources. Campuses could help motivate and encourage students to monitor their progress through creating an online portal where students can access tools, such as those promoting skill development in the areas of mindfulness, time management and career reflection. There's such an online portal—known as the [Student Resilience Project](#) – at the university where I teach, and results are [promising](#).

## 2. Provide stress-management resources

Colleges and universities should create processes and tools for students to improve their ability to manage stress. For example, the campus could create a decision tree that helps students identify when and where to reach out to get help with their specific concerns. A web-based portal can tell students where to locate campus-based support services, such as coaches, advisers and counselors, or peer-to-peer education and support and skill-building groups. For an example of a program designed to increase social support in high schools and one that could work for colleges, see the [Sources of Strength](#) program.

## 3. Take preventive measures

Research shows that [helping many people lower their risk](#) improves the benefit for the larger population more than focusing on those at the highest risk.

This suggests that colleges should look at the factors that are contributing to stress—such as substance use, discrimination, assaults and the pressure around figuring out one's major and career—and then work to reduce their influence. Promoting resources for early intervention in these areas can help students cope with stress and build time management skills.

## 4. Launch wellness campaigns

Colleges should create a wellness campaign. Students, faculty and staff should be trained in how to work together to improve the mental health of everyone on campus, including identifying others in distress, intervening with them and referring them to help. The campus should advertise their vision

and initiatives to get the message out to all members of the community. These wellness campaigns are aspirational at the moment, but I am currently working with several colleges to make these campaigns a reality.

When colleges shift their focus to population health and prevention, in my view it should lead to an improvement in the health and well-being of students and free up counseling centers to treat the students most in need of mental health support.

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