

FAMOUS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



Amanda Bynes

The child star turned college student battled anxiety, depression and addiction. She credits her parents for supporting her and helping her achieve graduation from California's Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in 2019.



The Mental Health Struggles of a College Student

During a normal school year, college students report high levels of anxiety and depression, but this year is anything but normal. How are they coping during the pandemic? Here, two experts offer insight. *By Stacey Winconek*

Going to college is the first big step toward freedom. While exciting, these years are stressful — resulting in high rates of anxiety and depression among college students.

“Close to 60% of all college students at some point in their college career experience significant depression, and what I mean by significant depression is it’s reaching those levels where it’s starting to interfere with functioning, like school, relationships, work, things like that,” says David Schwartz, Ph.D, director of the Oakland University Counseling Center.

For some, these mental health struggles can result in suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among those ages 10-34, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

“It’s a very stressful period of life,” Schwartz says. “It’s one of the most stressful periods of life.”

During this period, students are going out into the world for the first time, discovering who they are and trying to figure out how they fit in — all while striving for independence. These factors alone can cause anxiety or depression, but when you pair this transition period with a pandemic, it’s a recipe for disaster for many college students.

“We are seeing increasing rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation in the last six months since the pandemic hit, adding in all the social injustices that have come more to the forefront of the country. I think both of those things have taken a pretty significant toll,” he says.

As a fully licensed counselor and the suicide prevention coordinator at Wayne

State University, Stephanie Kastely, MA, LPC, has seen the impact of college anxiety and depression firsthand. These days, she says, issues are amplified.

“Students are experiencing a new level of stress and some to the point where it’s really that they’re dealing more so with trauma,” Kastely says. “Students are reporting that their normal coping strategies for stress aren’t working anymore, and that’s what happens when an individual experiences a trauma.”

Isolation, low motivation, burn out, financial stress and navigating the new normal of the pandemic era have further intensified emotions. Grief plays a role, too, as many have experienced unexpected loss due to COVID-19. Isolation from family, friends and peers, in Kastely’s opinion, is the No. 1 risk factor for college students in the pandemic era.

What can parents do?

You know your child better than anyone, so Schwartz encourages parents to, “trust your gut, trust your instincts.”

Is your outgoing daughter starting to withdraw? Are your son’s grades slipping? Have you noticed changes in sleep or appetite? Any of these could be signs of struggle. Any changes in behavior and personality are worth noting, Kastely says.

“We assume we know that people are doing OK. We want to fight that assumption,” she suggests. Check in with your child and ask, “How have things been going? You seem different. What’s up?” to start that conversation.

If someone is using the “-less” words

such as “hopeless” or “useless,” she suggests checking in to see how they are doing. Same goes for those who are posting concerning things on social media. Reach out and start a conversation, Kastely says.

“If you’re worried, call someone like me,” Schwartz adds. “I always encourage parents to call us, ask our advice and consult with us” for general information.

How can college students cope?

Kastely and Schwartz agree that speaking to a professional is key when it comes to coping with anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation. Each university has its own policy for therapy, but both WSU and OU offer free, short-term sessions to enrolled students. Check directly with your own university’s counseling center for information on services provided. This year, as many schools are offering a hybrid approach to learning, in-person counseling sessions may not be provided, so may need to be done remotely. “Go for one or two sessions,” Schwartz says. “See if it’s a good fit and if it feels right.”

If you don’t feel comfortable speaking to a professional, talk to someone in your inner circle — whether it’s a family member or friend that you can trust.

Self-care is important, too, Kastely notes. “There’s a misconception that self-care is ‘treat yourself,’ but it’s just something a person does to restore part of their wellness,” she says.

For some, that could mean daily exercise. For others, that could be planning out assignments for the week to ensure they are ahead of the game when it comes to class.

STUDENT STRUGGLES

Beginning college is a monumental moment for young adults. The college years are some of the most transformative years of a young person’s life. While college is an exciting time, it can also be a cause of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation for students. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among this demographic, and while it isn’t an easy topic to discuss, it is necessary.

That’s why, in this installment of Opening Minds, Ending Stigma, we shine light on the common mental health struggles of college students and the added pressure of living in a pandemic era.

We hope you find this information helpful and that you’ll share this article with other parents of college students.



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