Information Brief

Smooth Transitions: Post-Secondary Education and Mental Health Issues

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

Enrolling in post-secondary education can be an exciting time for students. However, post-secondary education also can present unique challenges such as increased academic demands, establishing independence, negotiating new social situations and managing time effectively. Students with pre-existing mental health conditions often experience additional challenges during this pivotal time. Examples of these unique challenges include managing medication, coordinating counseling appointments, advocating for academic accommodations, controlling emotional variability and handling sleep difficulties.[4]

An increasing number of students enrolling in post-secondary education have mental health issues. The American College Health Association conducts an annual, national survey of college students and asks respondents to identify whether they have been diagnosed or treated by a professional within the last 12 months for a variety of disorders. Estimates of most disorders have increased from previous surveys. The results are listed in the table below:[1]

Disorder(s)	% of Students
Anorexia	1.2
Anxiety	17.7
ADHD	6.2
Bipolar Disorder	1.8
Bulimia	1.1
Depression	14.9
OCD	3.0
Panic Attacks	9.1
Phobia	1.4
Schizophrenia	.3
Substance abuse or addiction	1.0
Depression AND Anxiety	11.2
Combination of 2, excluding Depression and Anxiety	8.0

In addition, within the last 12 months, 10.3 percent of respondents indicated they seriously considered suicide, 1.7 percent attempted suicide and 7.1 percent reported intentionally cutting, burning, bruising or otherwise injuring themselves.[1]

POTENTIAL NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

Significant numbers of post-secondary students are experiencing mental health concerns. These issues must be addressed because psychological distress can lead to a wide range of negative outcomes while in school and also in later adulthood. Some of these negative outcomes are depicted below:
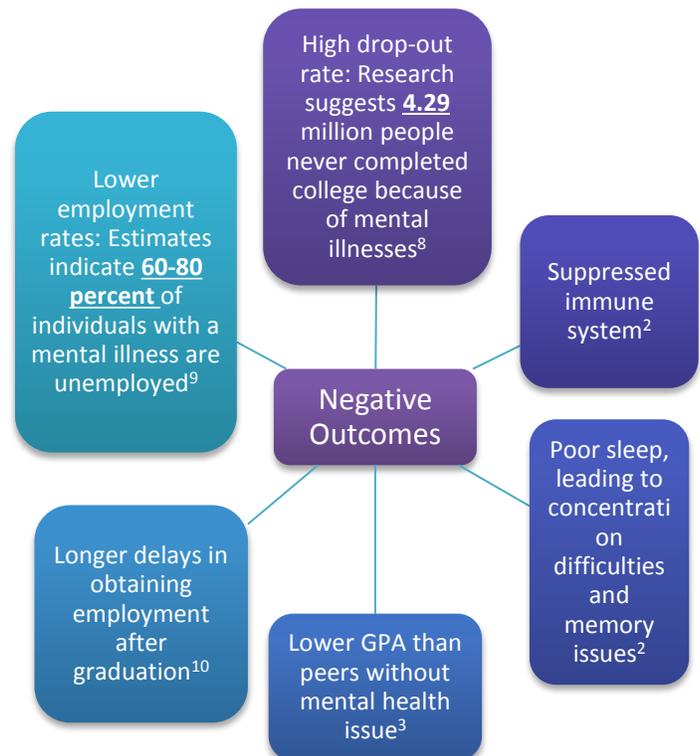
Given these potential negative outcomes, it is important to help students with mental health issues prepare for post-secondary education and related changes in order to ensure smooth transitions from high school.

High drop-out rate: Research suggests **4.29** million people never completed college because of mental illnesses[8]

Lower employment rates: Estimates indicate **60-80 percent** of individuals with a mental illness are unemployed[9]

Suppressed immune system[2]

Poor sleep, leading to concentration difficulties and memory issues[2]

Negative Outcomes

Longer delays in obtaining employment after graduation[10]

Lower GPA than peers without mental health issue[3]

Although mental health issues can lead to some unique challenges for students in post-secondary education, these challenges can be mitigated with appropriate amounts of support. In order to facilitate smooth transitions into post-secondary education, K-12 school staff members should openly communicate with students and families and begin planning for upcoming changes far in advance. First, encourage students to advocate for themselves and provide them with opportunities to demonstrate their independence, especially toward the final years of high school. Prior to post-secondary education, parents are most likely the ones strongly advocating for the student, and schools are largely responsible for identifying students who need supportive services. On the other hand, post-secondary institutions typically do not closely monitor students. Without parental support, it becomes the student's responsibility to inform post-secondary personnel if he or she needs help.[4]

Next, help students understand the supports available to them at the college level. In a recent survey that asked college students why they did not access these supports, several students reported they were unaware of their resources.[5] Thus, it is important to provide students with information regarding available support and encourage them to advocate for their rights. **Accommodations** are examples of one type of support available to students. Talk with students about how accommodations ensure equal access to education and help them successfully complete post-secondary education. In fact, responses to a recent survey revealed that **more than 45 percent of individuals who dropped out of college did not receive accommodations.**[5] Students need to also understand that **disclosure** is legally required to receive accommodations for post-secondary education. A recent survey indicated that **only 50 percent of respondents disclosed their mental health diagnoses to their colleges** and reported not knowing that disclosure could help secure accommodations as one of the top reasons for not doing so.[5] Thus, it is critical that students understand that disclosure can provide them with resources that can help them successfully complete their education. Examples of common accommodations are depicted to the right. Assistive technology also can be considered an accommodation.
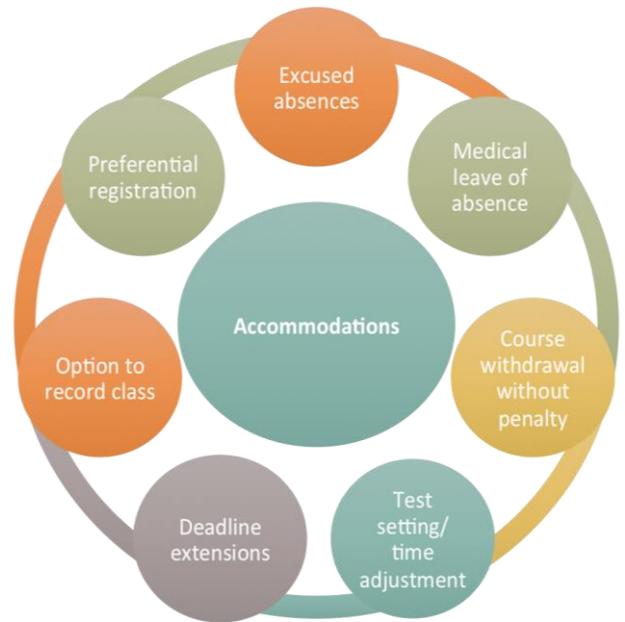
Once students understand the importance of disclosure, spend time talking with students about how to specifically share this information at a meeting with their schools' **disability services**:

- Find contact information for the school's disability services — look at the school's website or handbook.[5]
- Encourage students to schedule a meeting and coach them beforehand.[6]
  - Have students practice discussing their limitations and potential accommodations.[6]
- Many schools require a recent statement from a doctor or licensed mental health professional that outlines limitations and suggested accommodations. If applicable, it also might be helpful to bring previous copies of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Help prepare these documents beforehand. When asked for reasons why accommodations were not accessed, students have reported that the process for obtaining accommodations is too burdensome and requires too much documentation.[6]

Mental Health Services circle with surrounding elements: Walk-in health centers, Individual counseling, Crisis services, Screening and evaluation services, 24-hour hotline, Group counseling

- If the school agrees to provide accommodations, it will write a letter that lists these supports. This letter will not disclose the student's disability. The letter might be sent directly to professors or the student will be asked to deliver it.[6]

- Students should be encouraged to meet with disability services before and after registering for classes each semester to discuss recommendations for their schedules, as well as specific accommodations for each class.[6]

Mental health services are another type of available support that helps students successfully complete post-secondary education. Results from a recent survey indicated that **50 percent of individuals who dropped out of college did not access mental health services**. Work with students to develop a list of mental health services on or near campus. Mental health services that have been identified by students as most critical to their success are listed to the left.[5]

Additional recommendations to ensure a smooth transition include the following:

- Encourage students and families to have an **open dialogue** with each other because privacy laws prevent the post-secondary school from sharing information with parents without student consent (i.e. HIPAA and FERPA).[4]

- If applicable, develop a list of **medications** and doses with the student and find a local pharmacy if the student will be living away from home.[6]

- Practice **self-management strategies** with the student that specifically target his/her mental health issue.
    - Check out this comprehensive guide that offers suggestions regarding how to manage common mental health disorders among college students: learnpsychology.org/mental-health/

- Check, monitor and develop **time management skills.** Again, students will be expected to take on new responsibilities in post-secondary settings, so it is important to prepare them to independently manage their time.[7]

- Mental health should not be viewed as a fixed and unalterable point. Rather, mental health should be considered a fluid notion in which finding a proper balance between certain mental and physical factors will interact to facilitate good health and well-being. It is helpful to develop good eating, sleeping and exercise habits with students before they begin postsecondary education.[4,11]

Although these suggestions will hopefully provide general guidelines regarding how to facilitate smooth transitions, it also is important to remember that different types of mental health issues will require different types of planning, scaffolding and interventions. Therefore, the transition process should consider individual strengths and needs, as well as the resources available in the K-12 and post-secondary settings.

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