

Students in
Crisis Topic:

Depression and Anxiety in College Students

Compiled

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Introduction:

Depression and anxiety are commonly reported issues among college-aged populations. Student's issues and needs are directly related to their academic success. Diagnosed depression has been associated with a decrease in GPA of up to .49, a half a letter grade. Treatment of depression has been associated with a nearly equal increase in GPA. These issues also affect student's interpersonal skills and can impede their ability to function on a day-to-day basis. Faculty and staff may be one of the first modes of outreach for a student in emotional crisis. It is vital that you are fully aware of the mental health counseling services offered by your institution and that you are prepared to provide base level assistance to students in need.

Facts and Tips:

- There are many warning signs that may signal distress in a student.
 - o Emotional distress, anxiety, depression, unmanageable anger
 - o Isolation
 - o Difficulty adjusting
 - o Unusually high stress level and excessive worrying
 - o Elevated or decreased mood
 - o Suspected drug or alcohol abuse
 - o Irritability, disruptive behavior, peer conflict
 - o Fatigue or social withdrawal
 - o Threatening/aggressive behavior to self or others
 - o Inability to care for self
 - o Indications of self-destructive thought
 - o A significant change in a student's behavior, appearance, or demeanor
- *Depression:* Depression can vary in severity and duration. In less severe situations, depression is a temporary reaction to loss, stress, or life challenges. It can be alleviated through the passage of time and/or the natural healing effects of social support, daily routines, and simple coping strategies like distraction and exercise. Severe or chronic depression usually requires professional help.
 - o Signs of depression include: feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness or worthlessness, deep sadness, inability to experience pleasure, difficulty concentrating, problems with memory and decision making, fatigue, social withdrawal, problems sleeping and/or eating.

- What you can do:
 - Talk to the student in private
 - Listen carefully and validate the students feeling/experiences
 - Be supportive and express concern
 - Formulate a clear and concise plan of action, refer them to your institutions counseling center.
 - Be willing to consider flexible classroom arrangements to temporarily alleviate stress
 - Ask the student if they are having suicidal thoughts or impulses. If so DO NOT leave the student alone, accompany them to seek immediate help.
- What to avoid:
 - Downplaying the severity of the situation
 - Telling the student that they are not, in fact, depressed
 - Providing an overwhelming amount of information
 - Assuming the student has an outside support group (family or friends)
 - Assuming that the student’s depression will solve itself
- *Anxiety*: Students may feel general anxiety or anxiety in relation to a specific experience or situation (test anxiety, social anxiety, or public speaking).
 - Signs of anxiety include: stress, panic, avoidance, irrational fears, fear of losing control, and problems sleeping and/or eating.
 - What you can do:
 - Talk to the student in private
 - Remain calm and take the lead in the conversation
 - Focus on relevant information, be specific
 - Help the student formulate a plan
 - What you should avoid:
 - Arguing with the student’s irrational fears or thoughts
 - Presenting an overwhelming amount of information or very complicated solutions
 - Devaluing the student’s opinion or feelings
 - Assuming the student will “get over it”
- *Thoughts of suicide*: Though a rare event, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. Thoughts of suicide are usually related to severe depression, a combination of anxiety and depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and/or bipolar disorder. Students with suicidal thoughts often tell people about those thoughts or give clues to others.
 - Warning signs of suicide risk: Suicidal thoughts, bleak outlook of the future, intense feelings of hopelessness, feelings of alienation or isolation, viewing death as a way out, previous suicide attempts, family history of suicide or mental disorders, substance abuse, and self-mutilation.
 - What you can do:
 - Don’t be afraid to ask if the student is having suicidal thoughts!
 - Talk in private
 - Remain calm and take the lead

- Express care and concern, take the situation VERY seriously
- Ask directly about the student's feelings or plans
- Explain that you will help the student reach out to a professional. Escort them to your institutions counseling center or contact an emergency professional.
- What you should avoid:
 - Making light or belittling the situation
 - Allowing the student to leave alone or with friends without contacting a professional
 - Arguing the merits of living
 - Assuming that the student's family is aware of the situation
- Students may seek counseling for a variety of reasons. Anxiety or depression can occur in instances of extreme stress and dissipate or may be chronic and require long term attention. Situations that may lead students to seek counseling include:
 - Overwhelming or prolonged sadness or helplessness concerning their future.
 - Pervasive emotional difficulties that interfere with the student's ability to function day to day or concentrate on assignments.
 - Students whose actions are in some way harmful to themselves or others.
 - Emotional difficulties that result in difficulty facing family members or close friends.
 - Needing someone to talk to.

Tips for the Classroom:

- Be aware of the mental health counseling services offered by your institution.
- Contact a counselor at your institution when unaware of how to appropriately help a student. Professional assistance may be helpful in determining the most effective way to provide the assistance your students need.
- As a person that students see on a regular basis it is possible that you may be a more accessible resource for them. Faculty and staff can provide help through empathic listening, facilitating open discussion of problems, instilling hope, conveying acceptance, giving reassurance and offering basic advice. In some cases, however, students need professional help to overcome problems and to resume effective functioning. The following signs indicate that a student may need counseling:
 - The student remains distressed following repeated attempts by you and others to be helpful.
 - The student becomes increasingly isolated, unkempt, irritable, or disconnected.
 - The student's academic or social performance deteriorates.
 - The student's behavior reflects increased hopelessness or helplessness.
 - You find yourself doing ongoing counseling rather than consultation or advising.
 - The student shows significant and marked changes in behavior and mood.
- Tips for referring a student to counseling:

- Be caring but firm, students may be resistant to accepting help.
- Clearly describe your reasons for concern.
- Be specific in your referral, students are more likely to follow through if specific contact information is given.

Helpful

Web Sites:

- Visit this website to download a .pdf guide entitled *Helping Students in Distress*. Contact information within the guide is specific to the University of Connecticut; however, it provides a great deal of useful information.
http://www.dos.uconn.edu/helping_students/index.html
- Visit the National Institute of Mental Health to read more detailed information on the different types of anxiety disorders, current research, and possible treatments.
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>
- At this website you can find a .pdf guide with a variety of detailed information on depression, including what to do if someone you know is in crisis.
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/complete-publication.shtml>
- This site is compiled by the American Psychiatric Association and provides a variety of fact sheets and articles on common mental health issues experienced by college students. <http://www.healthyminds.org/collegementalhealth.cfm>

Citations:

- University of Connecticut, Counseling and Mental Health Services
- Arthur, N. (1998) The effects of stress, depression, and anxiety on postsecondary students' coping strategies. *Journal of College Student Development*.