

# A STRESSED-OUT GENERATION: THE GROWING EPIDEMIC OF STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

By: Caitlin Donahue

*College students today are experiencing an epidemic of mental illnesses.*

## What is the Problem?

*“College students are showing greater levels of stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and poor sleep patterns than any time in our nation’s history”*

*- Gregg Henriques  
Ph.D.*

The presence of mental illnesses among college students today has become increasingly and alarmingly common. It is argued that this generation of college-aged individuals (18-24) is suffering from greater levels of stress and mental health issues than any other time in the nation’s history. In fact, **1 in 4 young adults** between the ages of 18 and 24 are living with a diagnosable and treatable mental illness.<sup>i</sup>

In the past year alone, **more than 25% of college students** have been diagnosed and treated for a mental health condition<sup>ii</sup>, demonstrating the severity of this issue and proving that this is a crisis that young adults, and more specifically college students, are experiencing.

❖ The National Alliance on Mental Illness defines a mental illness as “**a condition that affects a person’s thinking, feeling or mood**” and “**may affect a person’s ability to relate to others and function each day.**”

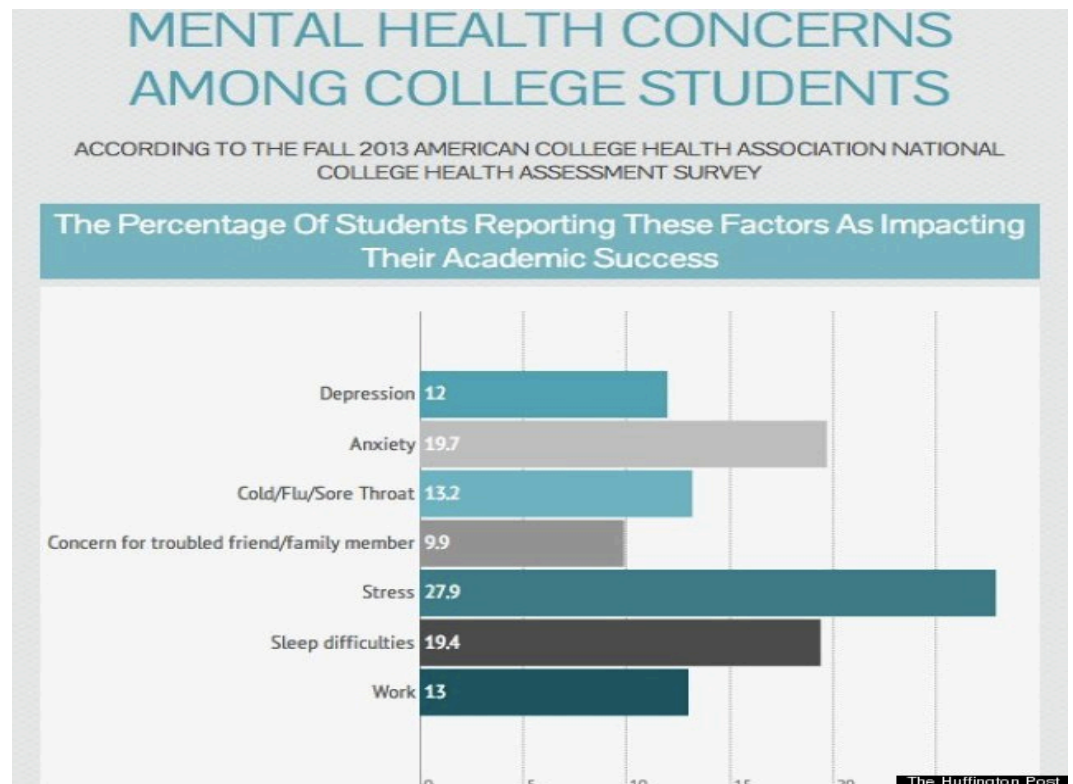
The common mental illnesses that college students suffer from<sup>iii</sup>:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Self-harm/Suicidal tendencies
- Drug or alcohol addiction/abuse

- Bipolar disorder
- Eating disorders
- ADHD
- OCD

Nearly **73% of college students** living with a mental illness have experienced some form of mental health crisis on their campus. However, **34.2%** of these students reported that their college was unaware of their crisis. <sup>iv</sup>

College is an extremely crucial time for many and is usually a key component of achieving one's goals, however being in college while living with a mental illness can have a seriously negative impact on a student's schoolwork and social life. Mental illnesses are often debilitating and prevent people from living to their full potential, and they can severely interfere with a student's ability to perform well in their classes. Many students have reported that their mental illness has negatively impacted their academic success.



- ❖ It is clear that college campuses need to take more initiative in preventing future mental health crises, while also making help more easily accessible to those students in need.

*“My depression and anxiety issues began before coming to university, but leaving home, being in a taxing social environment and being under lots of pressure all took their toll on me.”*

*-A college student interviewed for The Odyssey*

## Why is This So Common?

It is no secret that college students undergo copious amounts of stress throughout the duration of their years at school. In the past year alone, **40% of students** reported having felt a higher than average amount of stress, and **80%** reported having felt completely overwhelmed by all of their responsibilities and school work. Even more alarming, **45% of college students** reported that they felt entirely hopeless. But what exactly causes this increase in stress and hopelessness among college students?<sup>v</sup>

For many students, college is their first time living away from home and being surrounded by new and unfamiliar people in a completely different environment. Some students may thrive in this new and challenging environment, while others may struggle to adapt to such a sudden change. As a result, it is common for many first-year students to experience loneliness and increased amounts of sadness and depression during their time of adjustment.

- In the past year alone, **10% of college students**<sup>vi</sup> have been diagnosed or treated for depression, although this only includes the students that have come forth seeking help, and not the students who are suffering alone

Another contributing factor to the high amounts of stress and anxiety that college students are facing is certainly the most obvious: increased responsibilities due to school work and living away from home combined with the constant pressure to maintain good grades and a high GPA. This can be very overwhelming for many students and can potentially lead to increased levels of anxiety and panic attacks.

- In the past year, **11% of college students**<sup>vii</sup> have been diagnosed with or treated for anxiety, however the number of students who suffer from anxiety but have not been diagnosed or treated is likely to be higher

When considering all of the stress and newfound freedom that comes with being a college student, other problems may also arise such as **drug or alcohol abuse or eating disorders**.

### ***Substance Abuse and Alcoholism:***

A student can potentially become too heavily dependent or addicted to drugs or alcohol to either cope with their stress or as a result from being unable to control their new independence and freedom.

Trying out alcohol or drugs is more often than not an entirely normal and expected part of the college experience. However, when these substances are combined with students who are suffering from mental illnesses partaking in these activities can result in numerous negative impacts on the student's life.

Alcoholism among college students is usually directly related to a student doing poorly in their classes. This student may begin to fall behind in one or more of their classes or start to miss their classes altogether.

Once a student begins to do poorly in school, they may get caught in the cycle of becoming more stressed or anxious and turn to alcohol or drugs even more in order to deal with the pressures of school.<sup>viii</sup>

### ***Eating Disorders:***

Eating disorders can stem from numerous reasons and can happen at any time in a person's life. However, for college students eating disorders can often result from the pressures of college and the lack of time to eat healthy and get proper exercise.

Eating disorders have multiple negative and long-term effects on a person both physically and mentally. They can lead to depression and anxiety, which can greatly impact student's ability to perform well in school and their motivation to continue with school and focus on their studies.<sup>ix</sup>

## **What Are Universities Currently Doing to Combat This?**

Many college campuses have implemented numerous programs and organizations and have expanded their mental health resources in order to tackle the issue of mental illnesses among students, however there is still a lot of progress that needs to be made.

A critical and effective step that many colleges have taken is by partnering with nationwide mental health organizations such as:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
- JED Foundation
- Active Minds
- American College Counseling Association (ACCA)
- American Psychological Association (APA)

These organizations have developed comprehensive college campus programs in order to effectively help the growing concern of mental illnesses among students. By partnering with these organizations, colleges are taking the initiative to become better informed on the multidimensional issue of mental illness, raise mental health awareness, and establish student-led clubs designated to helping students with mental illnesses.

### What Programs Have Made a Difference:

#### ❖ NAMI On Campus:<sup>x</sup>

*“We provide mental health education, advocacy, and support through a variety of events that serve the students themselves. Whether it be through a movie night, de-stress event, educational training, suicide vigils or social get-together, we are dedicated to meeting its students' particular needs”*

*- Megan Rogers, president, NAMI on Campus North Carolina State.*

- The goal of this program, founded by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is to put an end to the stigma that makes it difficult for students to openly and comfortably talk about mental health and seek out the necessary help.
- It establishes student-led clubs on college campuses focusing on raising awareness for mental health, educating the campus, improving mental health services and policies, and help students living with mental illnesses. These clubs have been effective so far and utilize relevant and signature NAMI programs specially designed to help college students.
- If a NAMI On Campus club does not currently exist at a college, a student can apply and easily receive the necessary information to start the club

#### ❖ JED Campus:<sup>xi</sup>

- Created by the JED Foundation
- This program is a nationwide initiative that works to empower and provide colleges with a specialized framework unique to their campus and an individualized support system in order to improve student mental, substance abuse, and suicide prevention efforts

- Once a college has completed this program, they are rewarded with the JED Campus membership seal which symbolizes their ongoing commitment to student mental health

❖ **Active Minds - Transform Your Campus:<sup>xii</sup>**

- This program was created by the Active Minds organization
- Designed to help students in creating structural and policy changes regarding mental health on their campus
- Schools are provided with a “Transform Your Campus” toolkit, which includes a comprehensive set of resources and tools that are intended to assist college student leaders in making lasting and effective changes to current mental health policies

Other successful and effective programs that college campuses have introduced in order to reduce stress include:

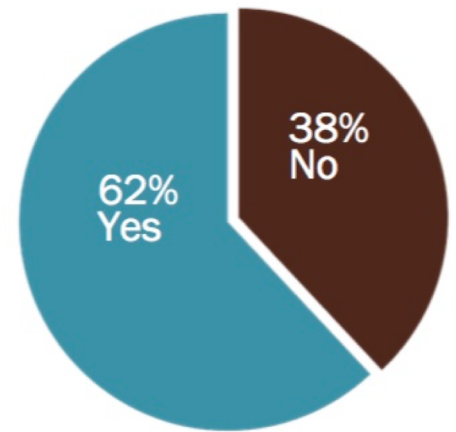
- Canine therapy
- Counseling centers <sup>xiii</sup>
- Nap hall
- Stress and anxiety peer groups

❖ These programs are easy yet effective ways in which college campuses can take initiative to decrease the amount of stress and anxiety among students.

## What Still Needs to be Done:

Although many colleges do provide resources and help for students suffering from mental health issues, the help and services available may be difficult to access and not effective for every student's individual needs, or students may be unsure of where to seek this help in the first place. For example, according to a survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 38% of the students surveyed did not know how to access accommodations provided by their counseling center.

### **Do you know how to access accommodations?**



Across the country, colleges have reported large increases in enrollment. Simultaneously, college counseling centers have seen an increase in the frequency and seriousness of mental health issues and crises among students, as well as an increase in the amount of students taking psychotropic medications.

Due to the increase in both the enrollment rates of colleges and the amount of students who are experiencing mental health issues and taking medications, colleges should be focusing on expanding their mental health resources and the help available, while also providing comprehensive and in-depth mental health training to faculty members and student-run organizations involved with mental illnesses.

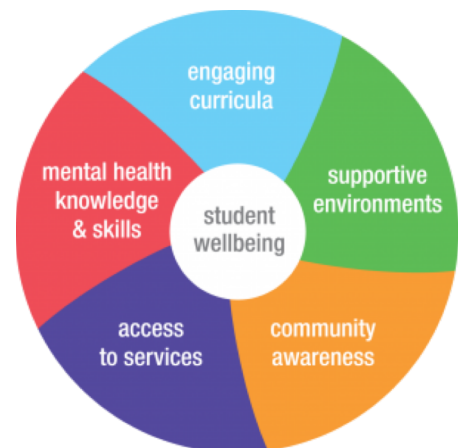
## Conclusion:

Looking specifically at Penn State, the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) has experienced a 46% increase in its demand for services over the past several years. As a result of this increase in demand, CAPS has added more staff and space available<sup>xiv</sup>. CAPS is advertised on posters around campus, and students are informed during New Student Orientation about the help that is available for possible mental health issues a student may have. However, there is still more that should be implemented here in order to ensure that our campus is well-equipped to provide effective help to those students in need.

For example, many students are unaware of how to actively seek help when they actually need it, or they may feel uncomfortable doing so. CAPS can be an effective measure for students to take and a readily available form of help here on Penn State's campus, however if students who are suffering from a mental illness are failing to seek this help, Penn State should also consider other options that may reach more students.

The college campus programs introduced by the various nationwide mental health organizations such as NAMI On Campus, JED on Campus, and Active Minds - Transform Your Campus, are effective and hands-on approaches to combat mental health among students, and should be adopted by Penn State. Each of these programs offer something different in order to help solve the complex issue of mental illnesses and have been successful in raising the awareness and increasing the knowledge of mental health issues.

Furthermore, these programs are relatively simple to implement on campus, and could potentially make a huge difference in the lives of many Penn State students. Each program would not take the place of CAPS, but rather would offer more students more options of help available and would help to raise awareness among the student body about mental health issues. With implementation of these programs, Penn State's campus will have a well-rounded approach to addressing student mental health issues that is **focused on a student's overall well-being.**



### **Proposal Letter to Penn State's Vice President for Student Affairs:**

Dear Damon Sims,

I am contacting you in order to address my concerns for the growing mental health crisis that college students are experiencing today. Here at Penn State, we are a close community who cares about the general well-being of our fellow peers. This being said, I find it extremely crucial to our student



body that the mental health services and help available for those suffering from a mental illness are greatly expanded and added to on campus. While the current programs we have in place currently through the Counseling and Psychological Services may seem sufficient, they are lacking in some areas and there should be more options available to fit each student's individual needs.

There are programs already available through mental health organizations such as NAMI On Campus, JED Campus, and Active Minds - Transform Your Campus. Each of these programs offers a different approach to mental health issues and could be greatly beneficial to the overall well-being of all Penn State students. In order to establish these programs here on campus, our school would have to contact each organization and apply for their assistance and training on the complex issue of mental health.

NAMI On Campus would effectively establish a student-run club on campus that would help to raise the awareness of mental illness and help those in need. Active Minds - Transform Your Campus and JED Campus would help to educate faculty and students on mental health and how to properly address this issue.

Partaking in these programs would show Penn State's dedication to caring for their students and would positively impact the lives of many students here on campus.

Thank you

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<sup>i</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> "Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources." *Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources | AccreditedSchoolsOnline.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

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<sup>iv</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>v</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>vii</sup> College, Chadron State. "Chadron State College." *College Student Mental Health Statistics - Behavior Intervention Team - Chadron State College*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> "Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources." *Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources | AccreditedSchoolsOnline.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> "Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources." *Student Mental Health Awareness & Resources | AccreditedSchoolsOnline.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>x</sup> "NAMI." *NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017

<sup>xi</sup> "Jed+on+campus - Google Search." *Jed+on+campus - Google Search*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>xii</sup> "Active Minds." *Active Minds*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>xiv</sup> State College, PA - Need for Increased Mental Health Services Grows at Penn State -." *StateCollege.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.