

Mental Notes

A Monthly Newsletter

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Trends & Challenges in College Mental Health

by Barbara Mitchell, PhD, LCSW, LMFT

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the mental health needs of college students have changed. In addition to developmental and career issues, college students face an ever-increasing range of challenges related to acculturation, gender issues, life transition, stress, violence, and severe psychological problems. Students with mental health problems on campus sometimes exhibit distressing or disturbing behavior that is often seen in classrooms or in the residence halls. These behaviors are certainly problematic for the student, but they can also affect other students, residence hall managers, classmates, faculty, and multiple student services who must decide how to best help the student, and at the same time assure the safety of all concerned.

Trends

Over the past 20 years college counseling center directors in the United States have reported increasing numbers of students with serious mental health problems. In 1988, 56% of counseling center directors reported seeing more severe student psychopathology. This percentage increased to 82% in 1997 and 91% in 2007. One 13-year study reported a 100% increase in the proportion of students seen for both anxiety disorders and depression. Students with serious suicidal ideation have tripled and sexual assault client numbers quadrupled.

Danger and Lethality

Tragic events on college campuses around the country have raised awareness of related mental health issues. Unfortunately, news accounts of these events often lead to inaccurate perceptions and misleading generalizations. The fact is, of course, that a student with mental health problems is not likely to act out violently toward others, causing serious harm or lethality. The two most frequent causes of college student deaths are alcohol-related incidents (1400 deaths per year) and

suicide (1100 deaths per year). Alcohol in itself is a risk factor for lethality, and appears to be related to disruptive and/or dangerous behavior and negative student conduct on campuses.

Possible Explanations

Many factors have contributed to the increased prevalence and severity of mental health problems seen in college student populations over the past 20 years. Among these factors is the change in demographics of college students to reflect more consistently the demographics of the general population. In other words, today's college students are increasingly similar to the general population in that, like the general population, approximately 26% of them live with some form of mental illness. The progressive development of treatment modalities which improve functioning and make higher education more attainable for those with mental illness is another possible explanation. Increased pressure for academic success, financial concerns, concerns about personal physical safety, decreased social support, and poor physical self-care have

also likely contributed to increases in depression and anxiety. Such things as family dysfunction and instability, violence, poor interpersonal attachment, poor frustration tolerance, and early experimentation with alcohol, drugs and sex can all negatively influence personal development, and negatively effect one's ability to successfully navigate the aforementioned challenges.

Campus Challenges and Implications

Mental health problems affect academic performance and, thus, student retention. Such problems can also produce a range of disturbing, disruptive, even dangerous behavior that can interrupt the educational process for faculty and students alike, and require additional time and resources from other campus personnel, including counseling services, police, departmental administration, and judicial affairs. Mental health issues also produce legal and economic challenges for educational institutions, especially with regard to concerns about confidentiality and potential accusations of negligence.

Recommendations

The trends highlighted in this article indicate a need for more research into issues related to college mental health so that services and resources can be tailored to match expanding needs. The exploration of changing treatment models targeting the most effective and far-reaching interventions will also be essential as these trends continue. Ongoing case management teams representing and housed under a variety of college departments might also be developed as a means of addressing crisis or potentially dangerous situations more effectively.

A Final Note

While this article mentions some serious mental health issues, it should be noted that many, if not most of the mental health issues encountered on college campuses can be effectively treated in brief treatment (generally, one to 12 sessions). Brief treatment has also been associated with improved academic performance and improved student retention rates.

FREE WORKSHOPS!

Time Management

Tues. Sept. 9 10:00-11:00AM

Public Speaking

Wed. Sept. 17 12:30-1:30PM

Career Choice

Tues. Sept. 23 12:30-1:30PM

Study Skills

Wed. Oct. 1 12:30-1:30PM

All workshops will be held in
Kirschman Hall #401.

For disability-related accommodations,
please call 280-6683.