



# depression

## The Mental Health Crisis On Campus

### anorexia

BY HARA ESTROFF MARANO

**S**everal years ago, I began reporting about the mental health crisis on college campuses and the ever-increasing rate at which college students are experiencing serious psychological problems. In the course of interviewing directors and front-line staff of campus counseling centers, I began questioning why a public-health model of preventing now-predictable problems was not being applied to this reasonably captive audience. I also began to wonder if the educational system could use a novel approach for novel times to deal with the many stresses causing college students to stop functioning in unprecedented numbers.

### diagnosis

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# anxiety

Major depression. Anxiety disorders. Eating disorders. Self-mutilation. Binge-drinking to blottodom. The emotional distress now rampant on college campuses is taking its toll on the mental and physical health of individuals as well as the collegiate infrastructure. "The mental state of students is now interfering with the core mission of the university," affirms Steven Hyman, provost of Harvard University and former director of the National Institute of Mental Health. College, including admission to it, is now part of the problem. Shouldn't it be part of the solution?

## **An Escalating Problem**

Robert Gallagher, former head of counseling services at the University of Pittsburgh and current keeper of an annual survey of campus counseling center directors, pinpoints the rise in the severity of mental health problems on campus to 1988, when those children born just after the first man walked on the moon began entering college.

In 1988, 56 percent of counseling center directors responding to the survey reported seeing students with more serious psychological problems. By 2001, that number had jumped to 85 percent. According to a number of recent surveys, more than 10 percent of the student body, including both traditional and non-traditional students, on the nation's campuses now receives counseling in any given year with the top problem cited as depression. The statistics speak for themselves.

- ◆ Anorexia and bulimia afflict up to 40 percent of female students at some time during their college careers.
- ◆ Hospitalization for psychological reasons, an option of last resort, is increasingly common on campus. In 2003, 333 campus counseling centers hospitalized a total of 2,136 students.
- ◆ With suicide the third leading cause of death among those aged 15 to 24, and the second leading cause of death among those aged 18 to 24, universities can expect almost

1,100 student suicides this year. Two-thirds of all students who kill themselves do not seek help beforehand.

Psychologist Sherry Benton, assistant director of counseling at Kansas State University, where 40 percent of seniors have used the services at some point in their academic careers, reports that through 1996 "the most common problems students came in with were relationship issues. That is developmentally appropriate." But that year anxiety overtook relationships and has remained the top problem.

Perhaps the problem colleges can stand to learn the most from is self-mutilation. An extremely rare event 40 years ago, it is commonplace today. In 2003, nearly 70 percent of counseling center directors reported increases in cases of self-injury such as deliberate cutting or cigarette burning of body tissue. "It has now reached critical mass and grabs our attention," says Russ Federman, director of counseling and psychological services at the University of Virginia, who has hosted a national conference on suicide, violence, and disruptive behavior on campus. Self-harm is a serious symptom but "it isn't about taking one's life," explains Federman, even though it always mobilizes a crisis response. "It freaks others out and people are agitated by it. But rarely does cutting constitute imminent danger to the self. There's not usually suicidal ideation," he adds.

What makes the self-injury disorder commonplace today? "It allows students to take control of painful processes they feel are out of control," offers Federman. What's more, "It is an extremely effective treatment for anxiety. People who do it report it's 'like popping a balloon.'" It serves "an important defense—distraction. In the midst of emotional turmoil, physical pain helps people disconnect from intense emotional turmoil." Since the effect lasts only a few hours, it must be repeated again and again to achieve the same results.

And that's just the beginning. The problems that are currently taxing the resources of campus counseling centers may be just the visible tip of the iceberg. Students themselves point to a huge amount of hidden mental anguish. "In the

# stress

# self-mutilation

atmosphere that is established at a competitive university,” says a Stanford University graduate now enrolled in a master’s program at Harvard University, “it is often difficult to express personal vulnerability.”

“Indeed,” observes the graduate student, a former peer counselor, “many students see others effortlessly finding success and happiness at college. And they feel they are the only ones who are unhappy.” Once, students might have gained comfort from talking to each other. But today, “the dorm community is not a ‘safe’ place to expose personal weaknesses,” she observes. The climate is just too adversarial and students go to great lengths to keep their problems private. She adds, “They suffer in silence.”

## The Sources of Their Discontent

The severity of mental health problems on college campuses has risen dramatically since 1988—one year into the Prozac era. The last 15 years have been marked by major shifts in American culture at large, as well as in the character of American colleges and universities. Despite the stereotypical experience of fraternity parties and spring breaks, the college years are a challenging time of life when individual vulnerabilities are often exposed. “Everyone underestimates the amount of change normally required to leave home and adapt,” offers Linda K. Hellmich, associate director of counseling at Carleton College. “It’s a huge stress.”

From the high cost of a college education to the lack of positive cultural outlets for anger and anxiety, there are a host of reasons why today’s students exhibit stress in its varied guises.

- ◆ Adolescence begins earlier and lasts longer, delaying the transition to adulthood. Kids live in a far more complex world than their parents did as children and they are exposed to “heavy” issues before they have the cognitive and emotional resources to deal with them. For example, they no longer can take the time to discover their sexual-
- ties; sex is literally thrown at them at every turn on roadside billboards, in store advertisements, and in magazines.
- ◆ Children grow up virtually unbuffered from stress. Many live in fractured families, which can lead to greater instability in their psychological lives. For many children, it can be hard to focus and to define themselves if the ground is always shifting beneath their feet. As a result, these children lack an internalized sense of stability and have little to draw on when under stress.
- ◆ Most of today’s college students have faced competitive pressures from an early age and they carry a burden of stress that, like radioactivity, is cumulative. “It’s more stressful to be a kid growing up these days,” says Psychiatrist Mark H. Reed, director of counseling and human development at Dartmouth College. “These students experienced competition to get into kindergarten. Today’s kids have portfolios to get into the best prep schools.” By the time they get to college, some lose their love of learning. “Many are on a treadmill with blinders,” adds Reed. “Most of their self-esteem comes from a few areas of excellence. They fail to develop an internal system to sustain them in all environments. They’ve sunk under the weight of obligation at an early age.”
- ◆ Many children are overprotected. Hovering parents contribute directly to the development of psychological problems in their children by overprotecting them and keeping them from learning to cope with frustration or any kind of adversity—such as a C in economics. Today’s parents, bombarded with news reports of kidnappers and sexual predators, seek to create a world that is as risk free as possible for their children. As a result, many children have been protected from struggles in their own young lives even though the struggle toward a goal is neurologically and psychologically necessary for happiness.
- ◆ Psychopathology is showing its true face. Colleges are seeing the natural prevalence of mental disorders, most of which begin in late adolescence. Major depression, bipolar



disorder, and schizophrenia have been there all along. But a generation ago, affected students were seldom diagnosed or treated. Most did not make it to college and, if they did, either dropped out or hid their disorders. Today, the “Prozac payoff” is high and many more students arrive on campus with significant mental health problems. The advent of relatively safe and effective antidepressants has encouraged early diagnosis and care, enabling students to stay in the academic system and function well enough to handle at least some of the tasks of higher education. On a positive note, the diminishing stigma of mental health problems makes it more socially acceptable to disclose and seek treatment—an attitude today’s students will hopefully carry into their post-college lives.

- ◆ You can not discount the roles of basics like consistent sleep patterns, healthy food, and regular exercise in maintaining physical and mental health. The notoriously erratic sleep patterns of students can dramatically affect body systems, which precipitates depression even in those with no prior history of it. Students at some schools compete over sleep deprivation: it is a badge of honor to say they have been up for several days straight. Fast food, in particular, does a giant disservice to the brains of college students at a critical time of development and nutritional need. Further, recent studies demonstrate that the amount of physical exercise young people get inversely correlates with their symptoms of depression. Exercise specifically stimulates nerve growth factors in the brain, changes that underlie learning and mood improvement.
- ◆ Students sorely lack relationship skills. The growing diversity of college populations is great, but it places an unanticipated burden on students. Yes, it is exciting to encounter people of different cultures, says Christine Mullis, a recent Duke University graduate, “but it puts more stress on negotiating differences. Different groups of students bring different ideas of how to make relationships work.” Forging healthy relationships between the sexes, races, and ethnic groups is a continuing challenge for students.
- ◆ Campus peer culture is increasingly competitive. Mullis notes that students even compete over their eating disorders. “Kids need more connection to healthier relationships with friends and professionals,” relates Psychologist Joseph M. Behen, head of counseling at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “Lots of students learned pathological ways of relating to others not only in their families but in their peer groups. Getting people connected is the solution to the isolation and loneliness students feel that precipitate their crises.”

### Searching for the Cure

Just as there is no one cause of the accelerating fragility of college students today, there is not likely to be one cure. It is clear that many forces in the culture are impinging on young people during the college years: a cumulative burden of the past; an isolating, competitive environment; an urgent awareness of a highly uncertain future; and a lack of social supports and personal skills just when the demands for independence become critical.

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The following approaches are but a few examples of the types of changes colleges and universities may consider.

**Develop and mandate a new for-credit course for entering students.** Start students with a big push in the right direction. Do not just inform them about the availability of campus counseling services, but seriously educate students about the realities and challenges of college life, about their bodies and brains, and about social and emotional needs. Teach social skills and reinforce the importance of connection. Use all of the tools of the culture, including panels of students who have learned hard lessons, to make the course real, relevant, and riveting.

**Adopt engaged learning strategies.** “Both alcohol and depression are forms of disengagement,” observes Donald W. Harward, president emeritus of Bates College and head of the new Bringing Theory to Practice Project, which is actively exploring links between engaged learning and mental health. “We think engagement is the solution.” There is no single formula for engagement. It can be encouraged through courses that employ inquiry-based problem solving or through course-based community service, where academic objectives are woven into civic activity. In fostering effective strategies for learning in diverse contexts, in creating passion for solving problems and grasping concepts, in making learning more intrinsically motivating, and in requiring students to take charge of their own learning, engaged learning promises to make students active agents in their own lives and architects of their own resilience.

**Require a year of community service before matriculation.** Offer provisional acceptance to graduating high school students, based on completion of a year of service at the national, state, or community level. Young people would have a year to mature and they would discover new ways to experience themselves in noncompetitive environments. Students would find new meaning in being of value to others and they might discover unique ways of making an impact on society and broadening individual goals. A consortium of colleges could agree to experiment with such a program. Campuses could offer students a broad range of service options that could be coordinated with coursework during the years of matriculation.

Colleges and universities are ideally placed to innovate solutions as the problems facing campus counseling centers nationwide move into classrooms, residence halls, and the

communities beyond. Even if only the most vulnerable students are openly breaking down, they still comprise a significant portion of the college population and affect the atmosphere in which everyone exists. However well it once functioned, higher education is increasingly failing to meet the emotional and psychological needs of its students.

Any fixes that are ultimately selected must incorporate current lessons of brain science. A revolution is occurring in understanding the human brain with enormous implications for childrearing, education, and the environments and experiences we design. One of the most striking revelations of the neuroscience revolution is that it is highly artificial to separate the cognitive from the emotional in the cortex, the thinking brain. The encoding of information and its storage and retrieval—to say nothing of attention, decisionmaking, and risktaking—are highly influenced by emotional states. How people regulate their own emotions has a powerful impact on the level of stress they experience and how well they can learn. Educational institutions must create conditions in which the whole mind works together through new kinds of courses and new ways of teaching. **LE**

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