



Protecting Your Child's Mental Health: What Can Parents Do?

If your child is already in college:

- **Keep the lines of communication open.** Don't be afraid to talk to him/her if you think that something is wrong. You may be in the best position to notice and address any difficulties that your child is having. Be persistent!
- **Know the signs and symptoms of emotional disorders as well as the warning signs for suicide.** It is common for mental health problems to appear for the first time during the college years, so you may want to familiarize yourself with their signs and symptoms.
- **Encourage your child to go to the counseling center** if one or both of you think it is necessary. Sometimes students can be reluctant to seek help because they are afraid that someone will find out. Reassure your child that counseling services are provided confidentially and that you support them as they reach out for assistance.
- **Find out whom to call at the college if you're concerned about your child's emotional well-being.** It may be helpful to create a list of key campus contacts (form provided) and keep it in a convenient place. Always keep the list up-to-date.
- **Understand the circumstances under which the college will notify you** regarding your child's mental health.

If your child is applying to college:

- **Think about the "fit" between a college and your child's personality.** Academics are important, but other aspects of a college (e.g., size, location, diversity, extracurricular activities) can impact how well your child thrives in all areas of college life.
- **Understand what mental health services, policies, and programs exist at your child's prospective college(s), especially if s/he has an existing emotional disorder:**^{1,2}
 - What services are provided by the counseling center? Are there associated fees? Are there a maximum number of sessions allowed per year? Are there specialists (e.g., in treating eating disorders)? Is there a psychiatrist on staff? Does the counseling center provide off-campus referrals?
 - Is there a counselor on call 24 hours a day? If not, what after-hours emergency services are available?
 - Under what circumstances will the college notify you regarding your child's mental health? What happens if you call the college with a concern about your child?
 - Does the college train faculty, staff, resident advisors (RAs), etc. to identify and refer students in emotional distress?
 - What kinds of educational programming (e.g., workshops, talks) are provided to students around mental health and wellness?
 - What accommodations are available through disability services for students with emotional disorders?
 - What is the policy around taking leaves of absence?

¹ Based on the National Mental Health Association/The Jed Foundation. (2002). [Safeguarding your students against suicide](#). Alexandria, VA: National Mental Health Association.

² Adapted from the Anxiety Disorders Association of America. (2007). [Information for parents: helping a college student with an anxiety disorder](#).

- **Learn about other available support structures.** Ask about tutoring, academic and peer advising, education coaching, student activities, and career services. Understand how much support is available in the residence halls, such as the number of resident advisors. Find out how the college helps students to connect with one another.

If your child has been accepted into - but has not started - college:

- **Be honest on the college's medical history form about your child's current or past emotional issues.** These forms provide important information to the health/mental health practitioners (no less important than the rest of your child's medical history), and they are confidential!
- If your child is being treated for mental health problem before going to college, **transfer his/her care and records to the college's counseling center or a local community provider.** Your child may never need to visit a mental health professional, but the stresses of college can cause existing (or previous) mental health problems to worsen (or re-emerge). In other words, the start of college may not be the ideal time to stop treatment.
- **Find out what mental health services are covered when making decisions about child's health insurance.** You may decide to keep your child's existing health insurance or you may choose to purchase a health insurance plan offered by the college. When making this decision, consider the questions below:
 - Will your child's existing insurance cover an out-of-state provider?
 - Will s/he be able to fill out-of-state prescriptions?
 - What outpatient and inpatient mental health services, emergency care, and prescriptions are covered under each insurance plan?
 - What mental health services are covered by student health fees (e.g., number of sessions, psychiatric care, medication)?
- **Identify whether your child is eligible to register with disability services.** If your child has a diagnosed mental illness, s/he may be eligible to register with the disability services office to receive reasonable accommodations. This may include education coaching, academic accommodations, or other services.
- **Be familiar with the resources for parents** provided by the college and know whom to contact if you are concerned about your child. Many colleges have Web pages specifically designed for parents that may link to parent guides or information from a parent advisory council.
- **Read the college's student handbook.** This will often include a code of conduct that addresses issues such as alcohol or other drug use and plagiarism. It may also include information regarding confidentiality of records and leaves of absence.

*What can you do if you are concerned that your child may be thinking about suicide? * **Asking someone about suicide does not put the idea into his/her head.***

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow for the expression of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Be non-judgmental. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don't dare him/her to do it.

- Don't act shocked. This will put distance between you.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available, but do not offer glib reassurance; it only proves you don't understand.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Get help from individuals or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

*From the American Association of Suicidology Fact Sheet: [Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person](#).

Should you witness, hear, or see your child exhibiting any one or more of the following, get help IMMEDIATELY by contacting a mental health professional, calling the college's emergency number, or calling 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, for a referral. *

- Threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person

Should you witness, hear, or see your child exhibiting any one or more of the following, seek help AS SOON AS POSSIBLE by contacting a mental health professional, calling the college's emergency number, or calling 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, for a referral.

- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- Expressing no reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

** Individuals who are contemplating suicide often give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member. All suicide threats, gestures, and attempts must be taken seriously.*

From the American Association of Suicidology Fact Sheet: [Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person](#).

Additional Resources

- American Association of Suicidology: 202-237-2280, www.suicidology.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: 888-363-AFSP (363-2377), www.afsp.org
- American Psychiatric Association: 888-35-PSYCH (357-7924), www.psych.org
- American Psychological Association: 800-374-2721, www.apa.org
- The Jed Foundation: 212-647-7544, www.jedfoundation.org
- National Institute of Mental Health: 800-421-4211, www.nimh.nih.gov
- Mental Health America: 800-969-6MHA (969-6642), www.nmha.org
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800-273-TALK (273-8255), www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Parent Contact List

Contact List for (student's name):

Cell Phone

Dorm/Apartment Phone

Address at School

Address 2

City

State Zip

Counseling Center Phone

Health Center Phone

RA's Name/Phone or Dorm Reception Desk

Student Life or Student Affairs Contact

Student Life or Student Affairs Phone

Health Insurance Company

Health Insurance Company Phone

Health Insurance Policy Number

Primary Care Physician's Name/Phone

Mental Health Provider's Name/Phone

Campus Security/Public Safety Phone

If your child or someone your child knows is at risk for suicide, call:

Campus Emergency Number

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline:
1-800-273-8255 (TALK)
- 911

Student Contact List

Mom/Dad's Cell Phone

Mom/Dad's Home Phone

Mom/Dad's Address

Address 2

City

State Zip

Counseling Center Phone

Health Center Phone

RA's Name/Phone or Dorm Reception Desk

Student Life or Student Affairs Contact

Student Life or Student Affairs Phone

Health Insurance Company

Health Insurance Company Phone

Health Insurance Policy Number

Primary Care Physician's Name/Phone

Mental Health Provider's Name/Phone

Campus Security/Public Safety Phone

If you or someone you know is at risk for suicide, call:

Campus Emergency Number

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline:
1-800-273-8255 (TALK)
- 911