

## Mental health problems on the rise at college campuses

Coming on the heels of last year's Virginia Tech tragedy, the latest campus violence at Northern Illinois University serves not only as a reminder of issues revolving around campus safety and security but raises larger questions concerning the status of mental health on college campuses.

Surveys have documented the increase in mental health problems at college campuses around the country. Nearly 92 percent of college counselors reported that the recent trend toward greater numbers of students with severe psychological problems continues to apply to their campuses, according to an International Association of Counseling Services 2007 survey.

Causal factors behind the increase in mental health problems include:

- Social-cultural factors such as abuse, family instability, and weak social support systems.
- More serious psychological disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, and clinical depression, which tend to manifest themselves in late adolescence or early adulthood.
- Newer medications, which make it possible for students with severe psychiatric disorders to attend college
- The fact that more students enter college more vulnerable and damaged than in previous years.

Some signs of distress that may signal mental illness include:

- Dramatic decline in academic performance.
- Erratic behavioral changes.
- Threats regarding oneself or others. An important point to bear in mind is that mental illness does not automatically make a person dangerous. In the NIU incident, the assailant had unfortunately quit taking his medication.
- Lethargy, withdrawal, and related symptoms, such as poor class attendance and deterioration in personal hygiene.

Increasing campus mental health problems have several implications:

- Higher levels of psychological distress will likely impair students' academic and extracurricular performance.
- Student problems can disrupt and adversely impact other people around the student.
- Schools may need to hire additional staff to meet increased requests for mental health services.
- Many college counseling centers have gone to a brief therapy model as a viable treatment option to manage student needs and demand.

Dr. Gary Petiprin, director of Bellarmine University's Counseling Center, participated in the 2007 survey and confirms that local patterns are consistent with national trends. "What explains it is unclear, but we do see that pattern", he said. Whether a student entering college does or does not have a prior mental health history, Dr. Petiprin encourages parents to "check out in advance a college's counseling services center to help their student draw that connection in the event such services need to be readily accessed in the future." Dr. Petiprin said that "25 percent of the general population has mental health issues somewhere along the way, and the college population simply mirrors this pattern."

As parents and their college-bound students begin to explore colleges of choice, it is important to recognize that other resources exist to help families and students address mental health concerns and access services.

- Relevant web sites include the National Alliance for Mental Illness ([nami.org](http://nami.org)) and the National Institute of Mental Health, ([nimh.nih.gov](http://nimh.nih.gov)). Dr. Petiprin recommends Campus Blues ([campusblues.com](http://campusblues.com)) and The Jed Foundation, ([jedfoundation.org](http://jedfoundation.org)).
- JFVS (452-6341) is equipped to assess a student's psychological capacity to adjust and cope with college life. JFVS uses a brief counseling model designed to help college students effectively address issues pertinent to college adjustment.

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