

Schools Take On Stress

Colleges are finding new ways to promote students' social and emotional well-being.



The heart of Wake Forest has been re-engineered for fun.

By Beth Howard Sept. 22, 2014

The quad at Wake Forest University in North Carolina once existed to showcase the handsome brick Georgian buildings; the broad lawns were even cordoned off to student traffic. Now, students gather here at café tables, sit and play the outdoor piano, grab a Frisbee or a football from a pile of equipment for some impromptu play, and read magazines from an al fresco library while sipping coffee from a nearby cart.

Engineered by Dan Biederman, the man who revitalized New York City's once drug-ridden Bryant Park, the campus redo was executed expressly to help harried students take some down time and mingle – and breathe.

“You used to see students checking emails on their smartphones when they walked from one part of campus to another,” says Elizabeth Law, a May grad in communications. “This encourages you to unplug a little bit. More people are making eye contact and stopping to actually talk to each other.”

The Wake Forest project is one example of the myriad ways colleges and universities are working to relieve student stress and to prevent or tackle anxiety and depression, lately at record highs. According to the 2013 National College Health Assessment, almost a third of college students said they felt so depressed during the previous year that it was difficult to function, and more than half had experienced overwhelming anxiety. Almost 8 percent seriously considered suicide.

“Mental health disorders are the most common health problems on college campuses outside of colds and allergies,” says Jerald Kay, chair of the department of psychiatry at Wright State University in Ohio and co-author of “Mental Health Care in the College Community.” While suicide rates have not been rising, Kay says, that is small comfort: Suicide is still the second-leading cause of death among college students, after vehicle accidents. The University of Pennsylvania, shaken by three suicides in four months this past year, has convened a task force to confront the vexing problem.

To nip stress before it leads to bigger problems, a growing number of schools, including New York University, Harvard, and the University of Missouri, are offering training in meditation and mindfulness to quiet the tendency to worry about all sorts of potential catastrophes; after students at Santa Clara University in California took an eight-week meditation class, they reported greater reductions in stress than those who did not take the class.

During finals, staff, faculty and alumni of Macalester College in Minnesota bring their pooches to campus for cuddling breaks and camaraderie. Says senior Kenzie Ellis, a Russian studies major: “There’s that look you get from other students that says, ‘Hey, we’re both freaking out about finals right now, but at least we’re petting dogs, isn’t this great?’” Kent State University in Ohio has a similar program.

Besides the prevention efforts, counseling departments are trying innovative approaches to meet the growing demand for their services. “More schools have walk-in hours so that students don’t get wait-listed,” says Josh Gunn, director of counseling and psychological services at Kennesaw State University near Atlanta and president of the American College Counseling Association. With budgets stretched thin, he notes, students at some colleges have to wait days or weeks to see a counselor. Many schools, including Kennesaw and Wake Forest, have added the option of group therapy to that of private sessions. The University of Florida offers a seven-week anxiety education class to give students tools for taming their tension. Schools are also experimenting with technology, using web-based resources to teach students how to cope, for instance.

Going to college has always involved the stress of making new friends and learning to regulate one's sleeping, eating, studying and partying. Yet today's students face a unique set of emotional challenges in the still-sputtering economy.

"There's tremendous pressure to succeed," says Victor Schwartz, medical director of The JED Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes emotional health on campus founded by Phil and Donna Satow after their son took his own life in 1999 as a sophomore at the University of Arizona. "Students anticipate stiff competition when it comes to getting a job after graduation, and, with soaring tuitions, there's more financial pressure on them."

The result, he says: A need to "work the résumé and do well at every endeavor." And when you compare yourself "to everyone else's highlight reels," it's easy to feel "like you're not measuring up," says Kaitlin Gladney, a recent Duke University grad who has experienced anxiety and depression and received counseling on campus. The Duke Endowment is funding a four-year Student Resiliency Project at Duke and several other schools that will investigate ways colleges can foster an ability to bounce back from reversals.

Ironically, hovering "helicopter" parents seeking only to help their college kids, by mediating disputes between roommates and calling professors about grades, say, may be making matters worse. A new study in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* shows that children with overinvolved parents were more prone to depressive symptoms. Helicopter parenting undermines students' sense of competence, explains study author Holly Schiffrin, a psychology professor at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia. "It tells students that parents don't think they're capable of handling problems, and it prevents students from practicing the very skills they need to feel confident."

Other relatively new factors colleges face include the growing population of students with conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder who can attend school thanks to improved therapies, and an expected wave of veterans, many of whom will be bringing issues to campus that colleges are not accustomed to seeing, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. More than a million vets have tapped the GI bill to attend college since 2009. Being older, soldiers are less likely to find social support on campus. "The vet population is one of our biggest challenges now," Kay says.

Families have a big role to play in safeguarding their students' mental health. At the college research stage, it's possible to find out what resources are offered by talking to admissions officers and checking out school websites. "School programs vary tremendously, from comprehensive and robust to having next-to-nothing," Schwartz says. One measure: participation in the JED Campus Seal program, which signifies comprehensive mental health and suicide prevention programming.

So far, 30 schools, including Cornell, Columbia and Alfred University in New York; Pennsylvania State University in Altoona and Emory University in Georgia, have the JED Seal. Anyone who has

struggled or is taking a psychiatric medication can let the school know without repercussions once accepted – and should, experts say. Work out a plan if you decide to transition care to campus, and at the very least make sure someone there is keeping the student “on the school’s radar,” Schwartz advises.

Starting well before college, parents should be conscious of promoting their child’s independence and autonomy, experts advise. Instead of jumping in to take care of everyday issues, Schiffrin says, offer support by, for example, role-playing tricky conversations a student might need to have with a high school teacher, professor or peer: “ ‘What would you say when X?’ and ‘And how would you respond if Y?’ ”

But do keep the lines of communication to campus open, experts advise. “No one knows a child better than a parent,” says Penny Rue, vice president for campus life at Wake Forest. “Look for a change in their energy levels and listen for changes in vocal modulation. Probe a little about their sleep and nutrition habits. Both too much and too little sleep are signs of depression.”

Students can inoculate themselves in a couple of ways. One good step is to seek out a niche from the start where you feel you fit in, perhaps by choosing to live in a learning community or by joining an organization that suits your interests.

Another healthful measure: Get some exercise. Charlie Shuford, a sophomore studying music and art at Appalachian State University in North Carolina who has battled depression, keeps symptoms at bay by competing on the cycling team. A 2013 University of Minnesota study showed that students who engaged in vigorous exercise for 20 minutes at least three times a week were less likely to report poor mental health and stress.

Shuford is cautious about loading his schedule, too: “I’m thinking of going to college for five years instead of four so I don’t allow myself to get too stressed out.”

Beyond the anti-anxiety and meditation workshops, many students who feel vulnerable swear by support groups such as those sponsored by Active Minds, an advocacy group on 453 college campuses. At Duke, Gladney started a chapter of the national nonprofit To Write Love on Her Arms, aimed at supporting people coping with depression, addiction and self-injury. It’s not therapy. But “students have told me that it’s created a safe space where they’re comfortable discussing the topic, free from fear of rejection or stigma,” Gladney says.

When a student experiences a bout of depression or another issue, it’s important to reach out for counseling services. There are people on most campuses whose sincere wish it is “to make sure you are emotionally well and socially adjusted,” says Gunn. Don’t wait, he cautions, until you feel hopeless.