

# If Your Child Is Having Mental Health Issues at College

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*Helen recalls those difficult weeks when her daughter called home from college almost every day in tears, struggling with panic attacks. “I felt so helpless. She was 6 hours away and I didn’t know how to help her.”*

*Daughter Ashley, however, claims mom did the right thing. “I know it was hard on both of us, but she really helped me through it. She remained calm, listened carefully without criticizing me, and helped me find help on campus. Her support of the counseling process was really important to me and helped me stick with the treatment I needed.”*

If you have a child at college who is not adjusting well or is struggling with mental health issues, these suggestions may help you both to cope.

## **Know the signs**

If you are getting calls and e-mails that make it clear your child is more upset than usual, how can you tell whether it’s a bout of homesickness, a response to a stressful week, or something more serious? It will help if you familiarize yourself with the signs of mental illness. In general, be alert to the following if they persist longer than 2 weeks:

- changes in mood such as sadness, nervousness or irritability
- changes in appetite, sleep and energy
- trouble attending class or completing school work
- withdrawing from friends and activities
- expressing paranoid or bizarre thoughts
- frequent thoughts about death or suicide

To learn more about the symptoms of mental illness and the warning signs of suicide, refer to the suggested items below as well as other related articles on this website.

## **Communicate regularly**

If you’re concerned that something might be wrong with your child, you may have to resist the urge to call him every hour of the day to check on him. Be open. Let him know if you think something is wrong and work together to arrange reasonable ways and times to check in with him. Perhaps a brief daily text or e-mail just to touch base will help you both feel better until a scheduled weekly phone call.

Russ Federman, PhD, director of Counseling and Psychological Services at the University of Virginia, says that the amount of checking in will depend on your relationship with your child as well as the nature of the problem. He explains, “If a college-age child is having some mild to moderate struggles, but overall is functioning well, then a parent speaking with their child weekly would seem quite appropriate. If, on the other hand, a child is really struggling, is feeling overwhelmed and is on the verge of having to withdraw from school due to emotional/psychological distress, then more frequent ‘checking in’ would be appropriate.”

When you do have time to talk, remember to:

- Listen without interrupting, trying to fix things or judging.
- Remain calm and ask questions that encourage your child to problem-solve.
- Express an accepting attitude of getting help from counselors and doctors.
- Don’t be afraid to ask your child if he is thinking about or planning suicide.
- If you believe your child is in immediate danger, call the campus police.

### **Helping from afar**

You may be feeling helpless to make things better for her. But you can help. Consider these suggestions:

- To help her grow, encourage her to look into the resources on campus that she may need such as a medical doctor, counselor or clergyman.
- If she finds this overwhelming, you may choose to make calls and visit the college website to help her create a list of contacts.
- If you learn that the campus counseling program does not provide enough sessions for your child’s situation, help her find a mental health professional in the surrounding town.

Dr. Federman points out that your child can sign a release allowing his counselor to communicate with you. For parents who are appropriately concerned and supportive, he feels that “having them become informed about treatment or even having them provide their own perspective to the counselor may be helpful to the student.”

Familiarize yourself with the student services office on campus. This will help if your child needs to apply for medical withdrawal from school, needs psychological testing or requires special accommodations due to a mental health disability. This could include a student who has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and needs to take tests alone in a testing center.

### **Bringing your child home**

Are there circumstances where parents might be advised to pick up their child and arrange a leave of absence? Dr. Federman says, “There are times when coming to rescue your child and bringing him or her home may be a good choice. We typically see this occur when mood and behavior have deteriorated and a student is no longer effectively meeting the requirements of his or her life. However, the final choice to take a leave or a medical withdrawal has to be made by the student.”

## **Take care of yourself**

Be sure to:

- Get adequate rest, nutrition and recreation.
- Take occasional breaks from thinking and talking about your child's problems.
- Seek professional help if the crisis is too much for your own mental health.

Dr. Federman adds this final advice: "Gradually letting go of the young adult is not easy for most parents, and yet in many respects they don't have much choice. ... Parents need to work on adjusting to this new reality."

## **Resources**

JED Foundation

[www.jedfoundation.org/parents](http://www.jedfoundation.org/parents)

National Alliance on Mental Illness

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

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