



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 no 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

- § 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
