

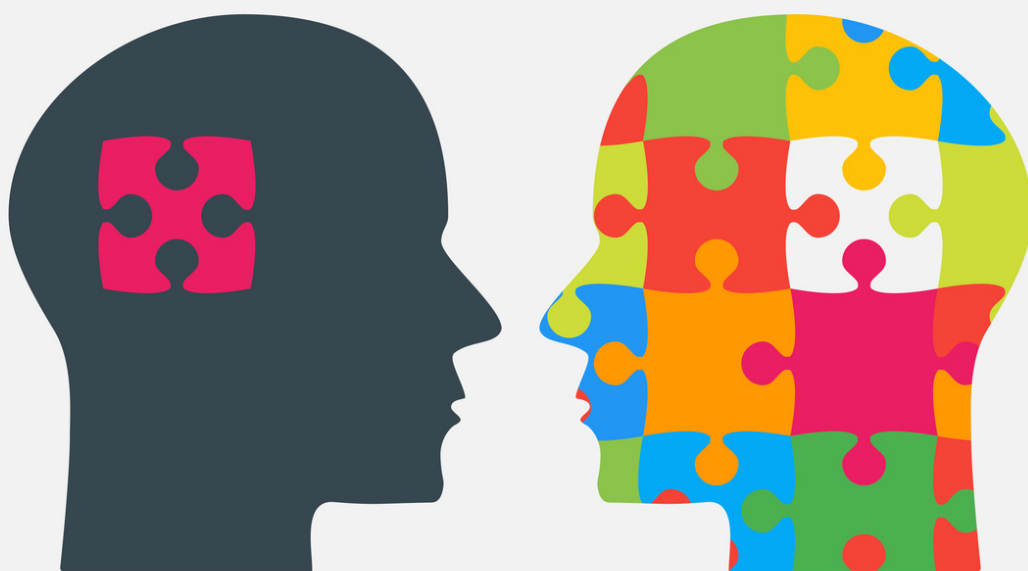
2026-27

A PARENT'S GUIDE

TO COLLEGE STUDENT

MENTAL HEALTH

ITHACA EDITION



The Sophie Fund

www.thesophiefund.org



THEY'RE EXCITED!

YOU'RE EXCITED!

Sending children off to college is an exciting experience for many parents.



Naturally, our focus is on the wonderful opportunities they will have, as we look with pride upon their promising passage into adulthood.

But these stressful times require parents to also fully grasp the serious mental health challenges their students *may* face, and be equipped to provide support.

WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW?

Though some may hide or downplay it, college creates a load of stressors for many young people including those whose identities are partly formed around past outstanding achievement. There's the stress of managing independence without the support of families and friends back home; the stress of fitting in with new peer groups and romantic relationships; the stress of meeting personal and family expectations amid tougher and more competitive academics; the stress of landing summer internships, applying to grad school, and finding career opportunities after graduation.

Rates of depression and anxiety are high among college students. In fact, many students carry suicidal thoughts. Sexual assault is prevalent among college students. Hazing violence as an initiation rite at fraternities and some student organizations is a serious problem.

All of these factors pose even greater risks for students who arrive on campus with a mental health or substance use disorder. College psychological counseling centers are typically overwhelmed by demands for appointments, and navigating community mental health services and insurance coverage can exacerbate stress.

In short, many parents cannot imagine that the happy and excited kid that they dropped off at the campus dorm could develop a serious mental health problem while at college. Yet, failure to understand the realities of college student life today, and to help with challenges that may arise, can lead to serious consequences.

"Mental health problems can affect many areas of students' lives, reducing their quality of life, academic achievement, physical health, and satisfaction with the college experience, and negatively impacting relationships with friends and family members," says the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center \(SPRC\)](#). "These issues can also have long-term consequences for students, affecting their future employment, earning potential, and overall health."



FAST FACTS

College Student Mental Health

-  75 percent of mental illness cases begin by age 24, according to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#).
-  Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15-24 years, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).
-  Almost half of college students surveyed reported academic problems or challenges in the past 12 months, and 84.4 percent of those students reported academics causing moderate to high levels of distress, according to the [2025-2026 National College Health Assessment](#).
-  34.1 percent of surveyed college students seeking counseling in the 2024-25 academic year had experienced “serious suicidal ideation,” according to the [Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2025 Annual Report](#); 11.3 percent of the students seeking counseling had actually made a suicide attempt.
-  37 percent of surveyed college students reported moderate or severe depressive symptoms, and 33 percent reported moderate or severe anxiety symptoms, according to the [Healthy Minds Study 2024-2025](#).
-  22.4 percent of female seniors (or higher) participating in the [Association of American Universities 2019 Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct](#) reported being raped (“completed penetration using physical force or the victim was unable to consent or stop what was happening”) since enrolling in college.
-  55 percent of college students involved in clubs, teams, and organizations experience hazing, according to [“Hazing in View: College Students at Risk.”](#) Since 2000, 125 college students have died from hazing-related incidents, according to [hazinginfo.org](#).
-  In the past month, 22.5 percent of college students used illicit drugs, and 33 percent engaged in binge alcohol drinking, according to a [2019 study](#) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

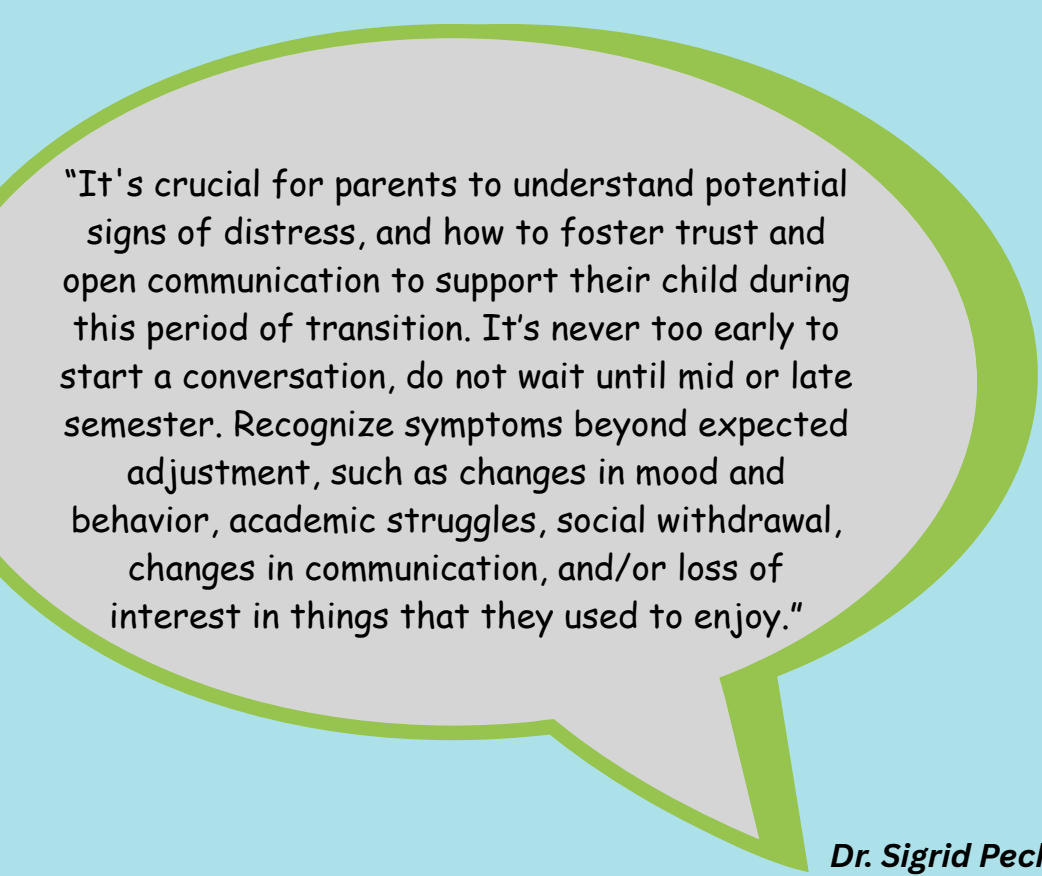
WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

When parents do fully grasp the scope of the challenges, they are more attuned to how their student is handling the major life transition from home to college. Parents especially need to understand the risk factors and warning signs for a mental health crisis, and how to support their student if they should exhibit cause for concern.

Help can range from staying connected with moral support and positive encouragement to evaluating and navigating mental health treatment options at the college counseling center, in the community, or back home during a health leave of absence.

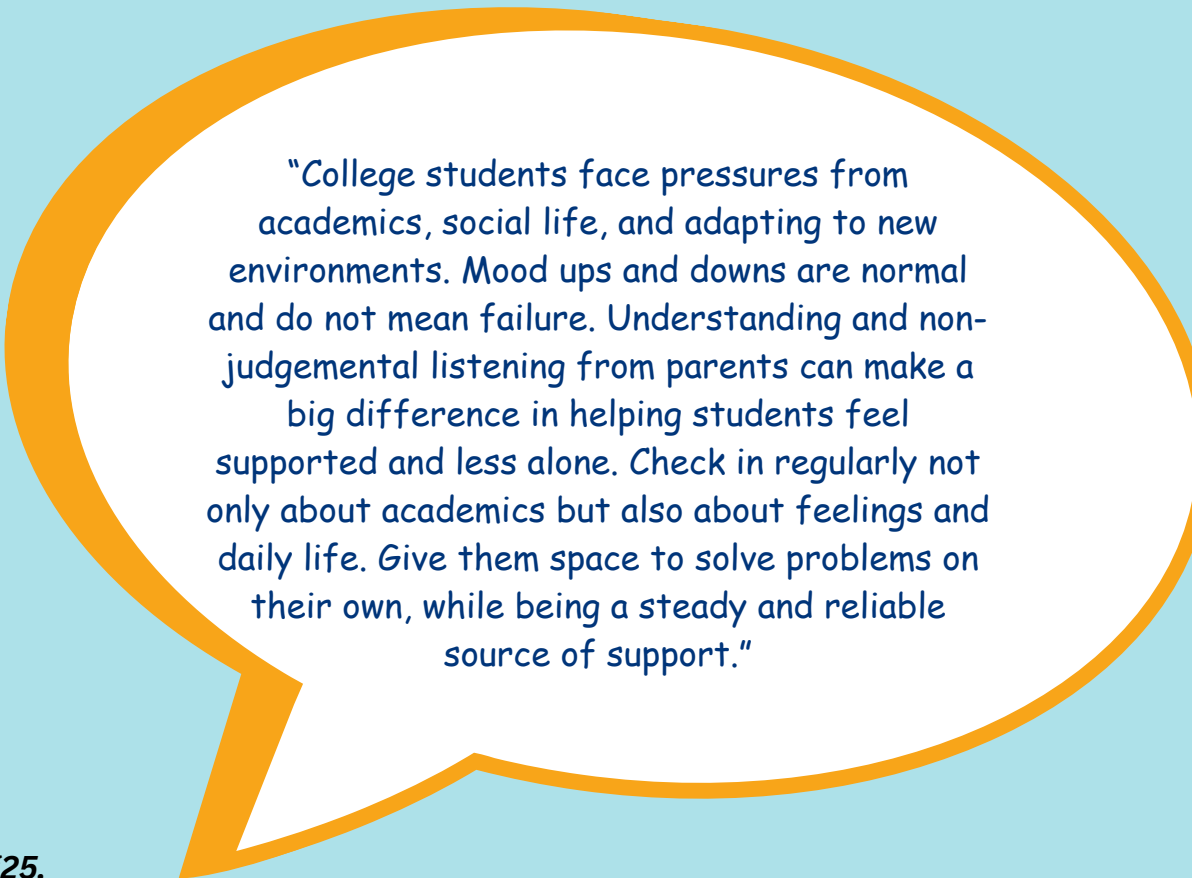
Tips for parents from McLean Hospital, a psychiatric teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School

- **PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR THE UNEXPECTED**
- **THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING IN TOUCH AND VALIDATION**
- **ENCOURAGE HEALTHY HABITS**
- **MAKE ROOM FOR MISTAKES**
- **HAVE A PLAN FOCUSED ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH**
- **LEARN ABOUT COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**
- **IF A STUDENT IS STRUGGLING, GET HELP IMMEDIATELY**



"It's crucial for parents to understand potential signs of distress, and how to foster trust and open communication to support their child during this period of transition. It's never too early to start a conversation, do not wait until mid or late semester. Recognize symptoms beyond expected adjustment, such as changes in mood and behavior, academic struggles, social withdrawal, changes in communication, and/or loss of interest in things that they used to enjoy."

***Dr. Sigrid Pechenik, Clinical Psychologist,
former Associate Director of Counseling &
Psychological Services, Cornell University***



"College students face pressures from academics, social life, and adapting to new environments. Mood ups and downs are normal and do not mean failure. Understanding and non-judgemental listening from parents can make a big difference in helping students feel supported and less alone. Check in regularly not only about academics but also about feelings and daily life. Give them space to solve problems on their own, while being a steady and reliable source of support."

***Penny Shen, '25,
School of Hotel Administration,
Cornell University***

RESOURCES

College Student Mental Health

Mental Health

[Risk Factors, Protective Factors, and Warning Signs](#), American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

[Mental Health Conditions](#) (and Treatments for Them), National Alliance on Mental Illness

Parents

[Parent and Family Guide: Supporting Your College Student Through Mental Health Challenges](#), Forefront Suicide Prevention

[Set to Go: For Families](#), The JED Foundation

[Set to Go: College Transition](#), The JED Foundation

[A Parent's Guide to College Student Mental Health](#), McLean Hospital

[Mental Health in College](#), National Alliance on Mental Illness

[Life on Campus](#), Mental Health America

[College Depression: What Parents Need to Know](#), Mayo Clinic

Cornell University, Ithaca College, Tompkins Cortland Community College

Cornell University: [Mental Health at Cornell](#)

Cornell University: [Especially for Parents & Families](#)

Cornell University: [First Year Families](#)

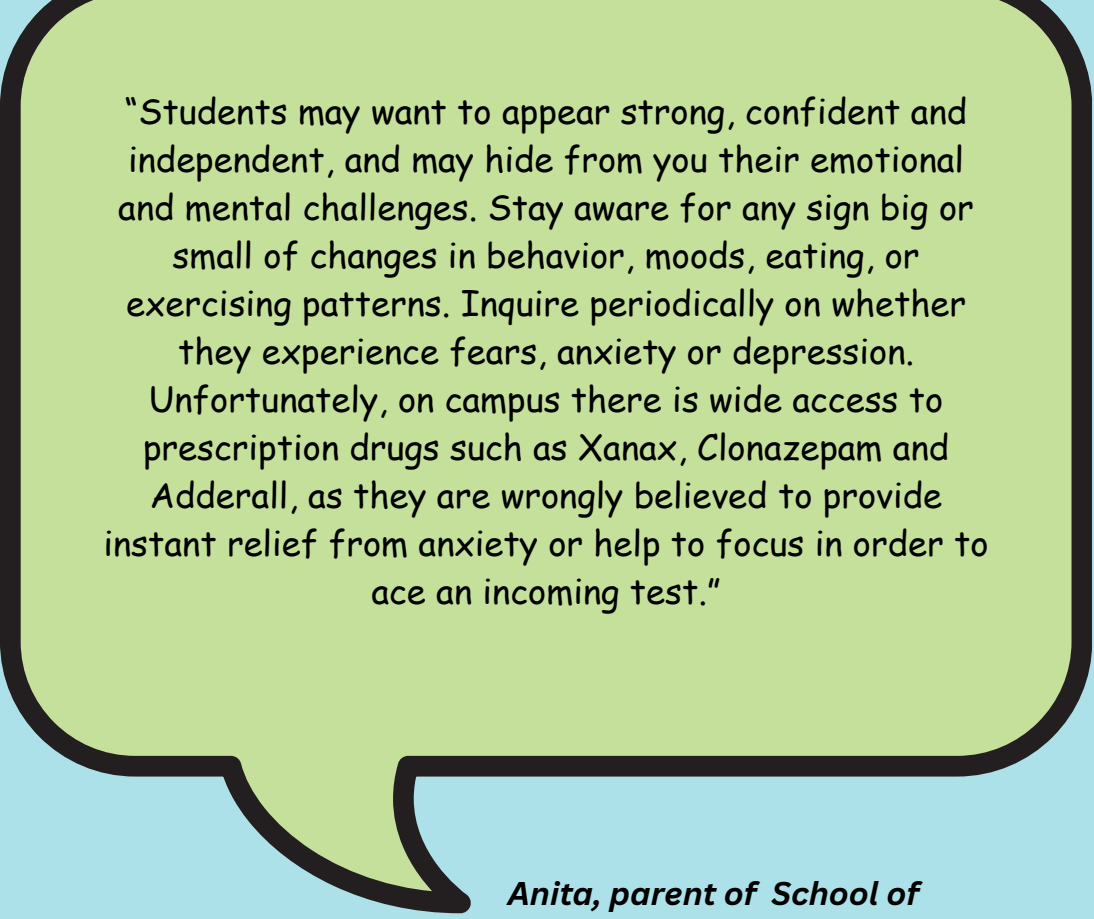
Cornell University: [Family Guide 2020-2021](#)

Ithaca College: [Family Guide](#)

Ithaca College: [Supporting Your New Student](#)

Tompkins Cortland Community College: [Health and Wellness](#)

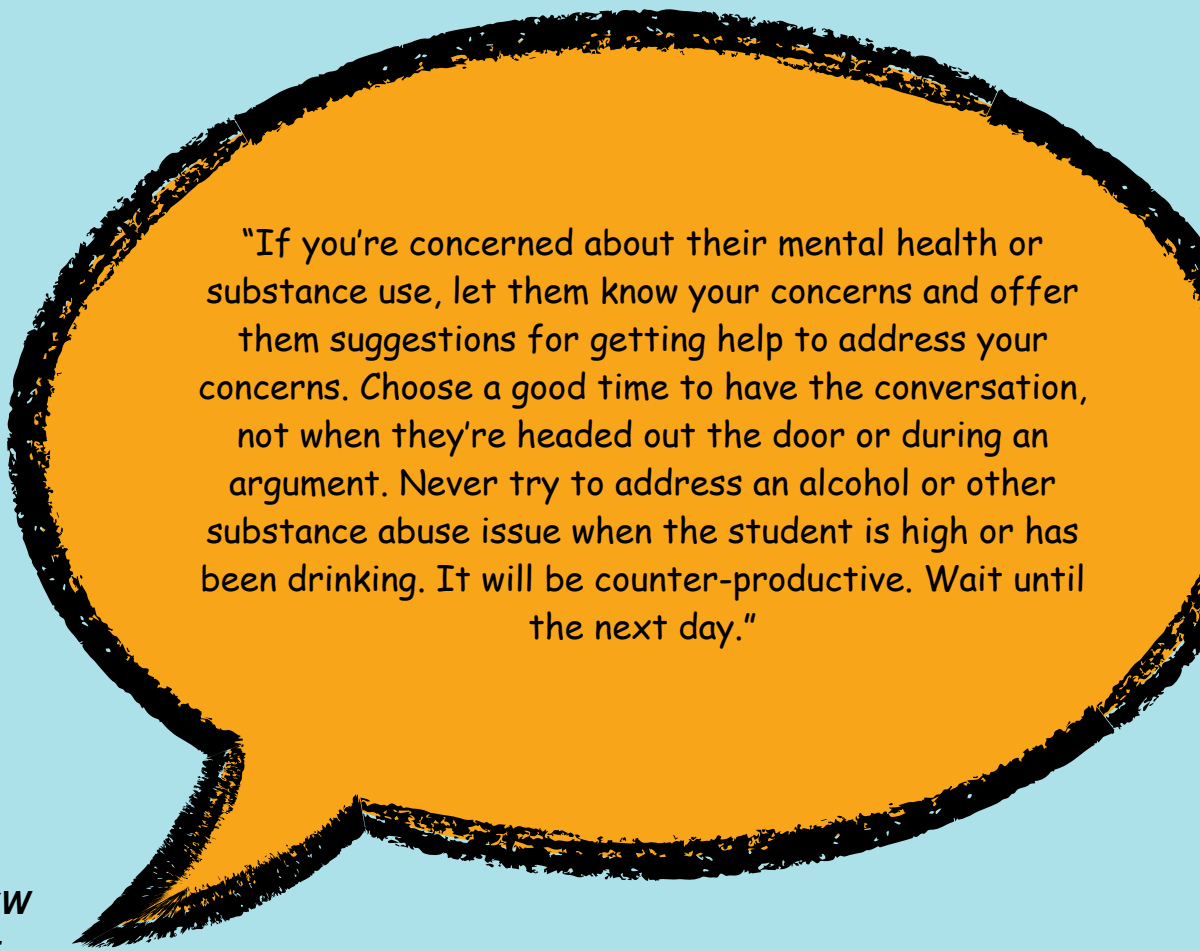




"Students may want to appear strong, confident and independent, and may hide from you their emotional and mental challenges. Stay aware for any sign big or small of changes in behavior, moods, eating, or exercising patterns. Inquire periodically on whether they experience fears, anxiety or depression.

Unfortunately, on campus there is wide access to prescription drugs such as Xanax, Clonazepam and Adderall, as they are wrongly believed to provide instant relief from anxiety or help to focus in order to ace an incoming test."

*Anita, parent of School of
Hotel Administration student '18,
Cornell University*



"If you're concerned about their mental health or substance use, let them know your concerns and offer them suggestions for getting help to address your concerns. Choose a good time to have the conversation, not when they're headed out the door or during an argument. Never try to address an alcohol or other substance abuse issue when the student is high or has been drinking. It will be counter-productive. Wait until the next day."

*G.P. Zurenda, CSW
Ithaca therapist*

PLANS, REPORTS, SURVEYS

College Student Mental Health

Commitment to Care: Dartmouth's Strategic Plan for Student Mental Health and Well-Being October 2023, Dartmouth University

Mental Health Review Final Report April 2020, Cornell University

Recommendations for Improved Student Mental Health at Cornell University, The Sophie Fund

Report of the Task Force on Managing Student Mental Health July 2020, Harvard University

The Healthy Minds Study 2024-2025, The Healthy Minds Network

Depression, Anxiety, Loneliness Are Peaking in College Students, The Brink, Boston University

Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2025 Annual Report

Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD). Annual Survey 2024-2025

National College Health Assessment 2025-2026, American College Health Association

Prevention and Treatment of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors Among College Students, SAMHSA



TOPICS

College Student Mental Health

Suicide

Suicide among College and University Students in the United States, Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Consequences of Student Mental Health Issues, Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Sexual Assault

Association of American Universities 2019 Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct, Association of American Universities

Campus Sexual Violence, Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)

Hazing

Hazing in View: College Students at Risk, National Study of Student Hazing 2008

Hank Nuwer's Unofficial Hazing Deaths Clearinghouse

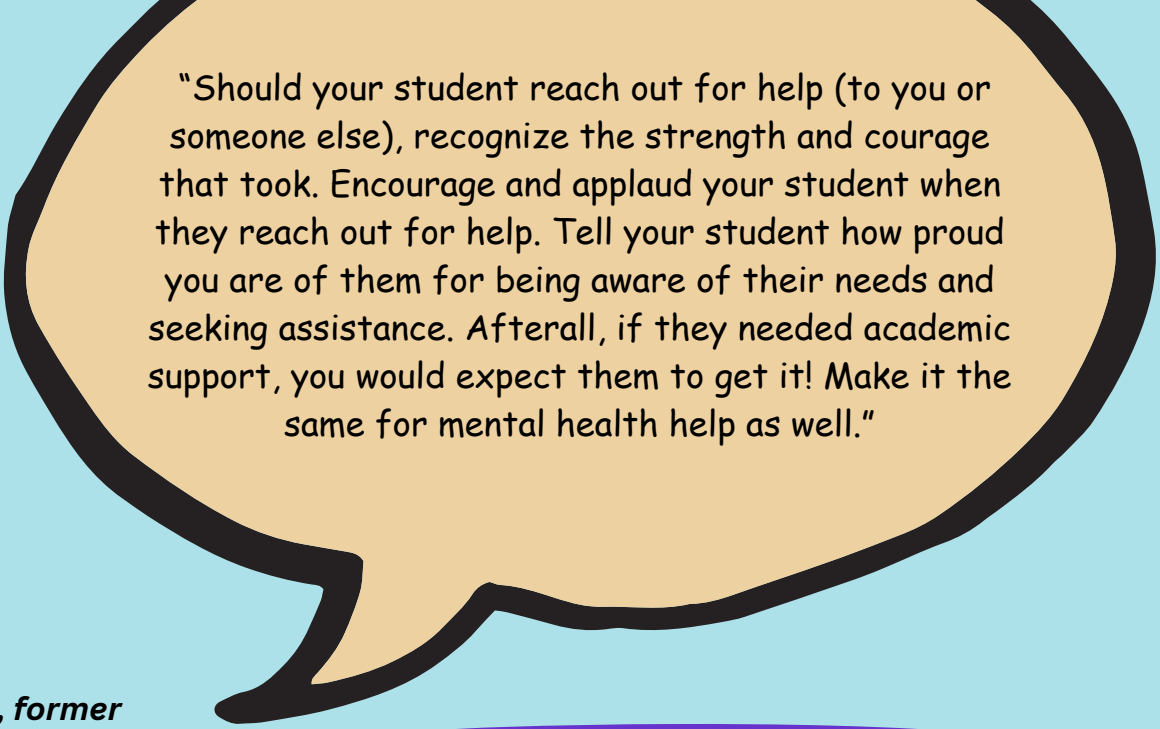
Hazing.org Database

Substance Use

College Drinking, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

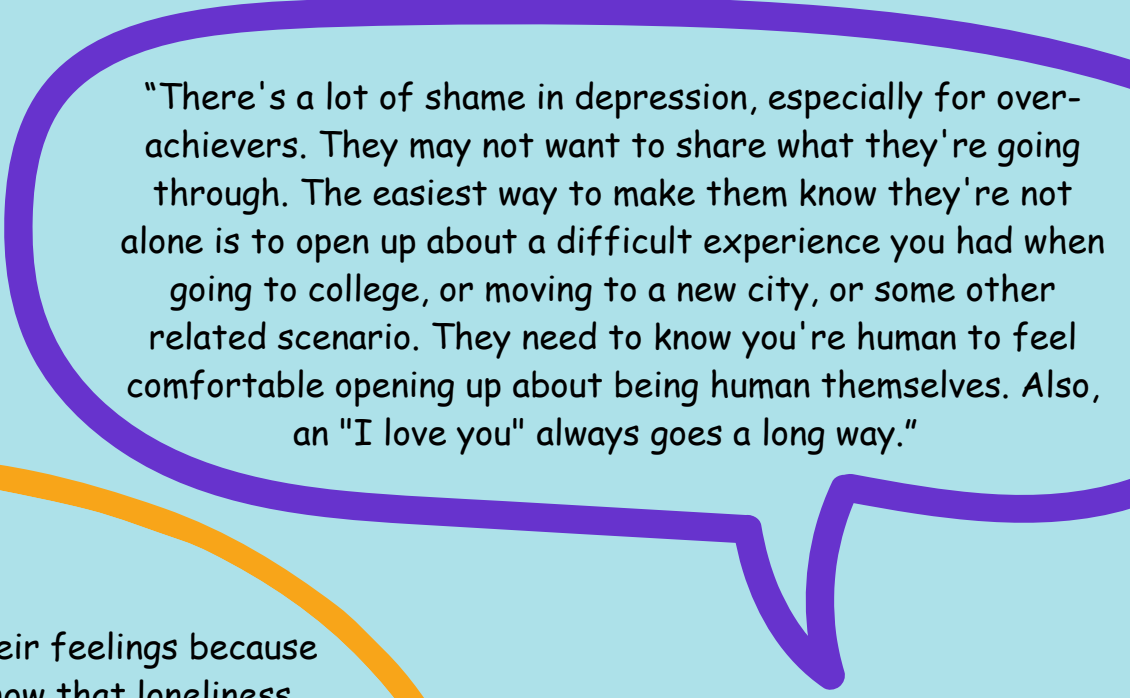
Substance Abuse In College Students: Statistics & Addiction Treatment, American Addiction Centers





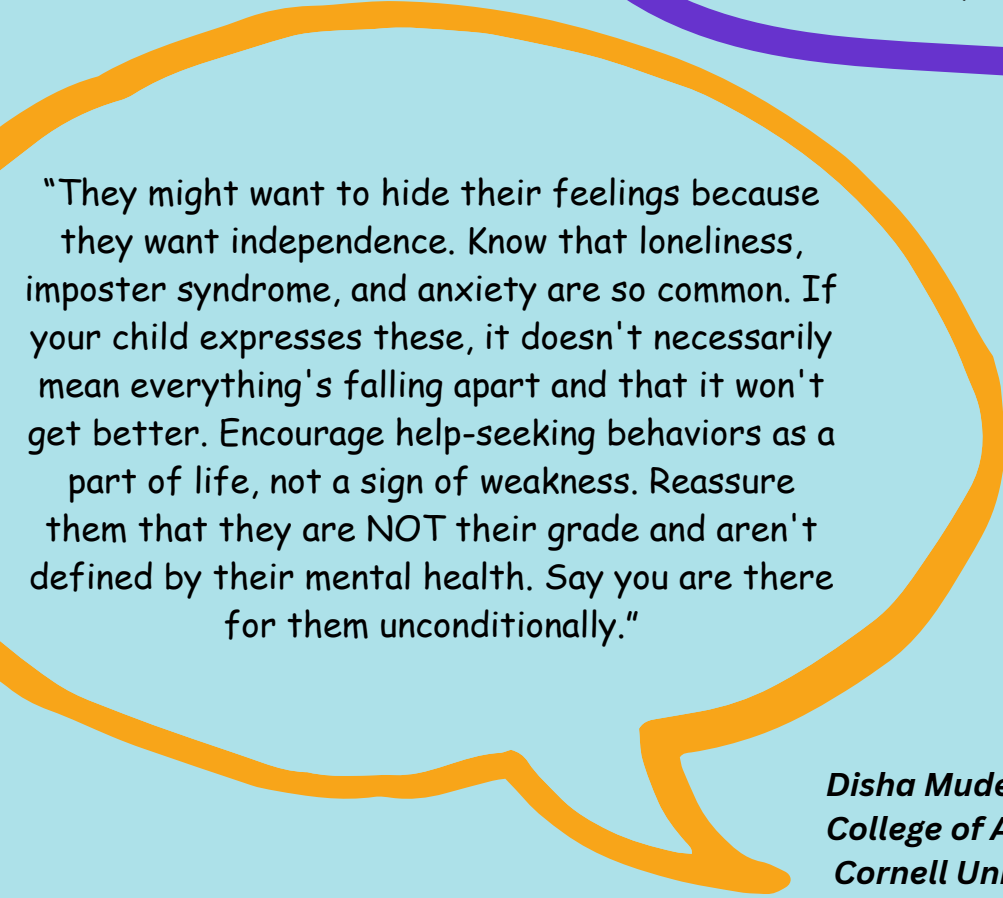
"Should your student reach out for help (to you or someone else), recognize the strength and courage that took. Encourage and applaud your student when they reach out for help. Tell your student how proud you are of them for being aware of their needs and seeking assistance. After all, if they needed academic support, you would expect them to get it! Make it the same for mental health help as well."

***Reba McCutcheon, former
Associate Dean of Students,
Cornell University***



"There's a lot of shame in depression, especially for over-achievers. They may not want to share what they're going through. The easiest way to make them know they're not alone is to open up about a difficult experience you had when going to college, or moving to a new city, or some other related scenario. They need to know you're human to feel comfortable opening up about being human themselves. Also, an "I love you" always goes a long way."

***Jon Zucker '14, Charles H. Dyson
School of Applied Economics and
Management, Cornell University***



"They might want to hide their feelings because they want independence. Know that loneliness, imposter syndrome, and anxiety are so common. If your child expresses these, it doesn't necessarily mean everything's falling apart and that it won't get better. Encourage help-seeking behaviors as a part of life, not a sign of weakness. Reassure them that they are NOT their grade and aren't defined by their mental health. Say you are there for them unconditionally."

***Disha Mudenur '28,
College of Arts and Sciences,
Cornell University***

ADVOCACY

College Student Mental Health

Navigating mental health support services can be a daunting experience, especially in a mental health crisis. Students and parents are encouraged to become knowledgeable about local providers, whether they believe they will need to access them or not.

IMPORTANT TO KNOW: Ithaca campus counseling centers, community clinics, and private therapists typically have wait lists to receive care. The Ithaca region currently lacks an Intensive Outpatient Program and a Crisis Stabilization Unit that can be essential in acute cases.

University administrators have a “duty of care” to their students, a legal obligation to maintain safety through services and support. Students and their parents should never hesitate to demand action or explanations when needs are not being met. ALWAYS advocate for your student and yourself.

Two federal laws provide privacy protection even from parents for the medical and academic records of college students: the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Despite their merits, HIPAA and FERPA can pose barriers to parents seeking to support their student in the event of a mental health decline—or even to know about the decline at all. Although FERPA allows colleges to share academic records with parents in some instances without a student’s consent, including if they are a dependent, administrators typically refuse to make exceptions.

A SUGGESTION

Parents should consider having a discussion about a HIPAA Authorization and a FERPA Waiver before their student begins an academic year. This would entail an open and honest conversation about their student's comfort level in allowing parental access to their medical and academic information. Students will naturally want to guard their privacy and assert their independence. But many would understand the value of having that parental support, especially if the student is attending college a distance from home. Students can explore options such as limiting HIPAA authorization to emergencies and partial FERPA waivers.

Advocacy Toolkit

FERPA Waiver and Other Legal Documents College Students Shouldn't Leave Home Without, Road2College

A Parent Guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), United States Department of Education

College Student Mental Health Action Toolkit, The Healthy Minds Network, Active Minds, and JED Foundation

Supporting Students: A Model Policy for Colleges and Universities, Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Students on College Campuses, Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

Mental Health on College Campuses: Investments, Accommodations Needed to Address Student Needs, National Council on Disability

MENTAL HEALTH LEAVES OF ABSENCE

Hundreds of Ithaca-area college students take leaves of absence every year to better address mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Students should feel no shame in doing so. Parents should respect their student's choice to prioritize mental health. Students should not rush—or be rushed—into taking a leave. Ideally, they should make a decision after consulting with their academic department, mental health provider, and parents. For many students, pausing studies will enable them to return to campus and thrive. For others, being abruptly disconnected from school friends and campus routines can hurt self-esteem, cause loneliness, stoke anxiety about finances, interrupt therapy treatment, and create uncertainty about the future. Students can request an accommodation such as a reduced course load that allows them to remain in school. It is important to know that under the Americans with Disabilities Act, colleges must not pressure students to withdraw for mental health reasons, impose punitive consequences on students on leave, or erect discriminatory barriers to a student's return to campus.

NEWS CLIPS

College Student Mental Health

"A suspended CMU student died by suicide. His parents are pushing for a mental health review at the university," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, June 22, 2025

Mental Health at College: What to Know," U.S. News and World Report, June 3, 2025

"Survey: 'Everything' Stresses Students Out. How Can Colleges Help?," Inside Higher Ed, August 8, 2024

"Universities Acknowledge a Mental Health Crisis. Why Is Action So Complicated?," The Harvard Crimson, April 20, 2024

"The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses," NEAToday, March 29, 2024

"Survey: Half of College Students With Mental Health Issues Haven't Accessed Care," Inside Higher Ed, May 26, 2023

'What if Yale finds out?,' Washington Post, November 11, 2022

The Sophie Fund

We are an award-winning nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and enhancing the mental well-being of young people in the greater Ithaca community. The Sophie Fund was established in 2016 in memory of Sophie Hack MacLeod, a Cornell University student who died by suicide in Ithaca that year. We are a co-founder of the Tompkins County Suicide Prevention Coalition and the Tompkins County Bullying Prevention Task Force. With our donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation of Tompkins County we have provided more than \$86,000 in grants to community and college organizations for mental health programming and training. We serve on the New York State Suicide Prevention Council.

Learn more: www.thesophiefund.org
Contact us: thesophiefund2016@gmail.com

**Dr. Danielle Eiseman,
Associate Director,
Health Impacts Core,
Cornell University**

"Check in with your students, look for any warning signs that may signal a mental health problem, and create an open environment for your college student to share what they are going through without judgement or pressure to achieve certain milestones."

"Stay true to your student's unique experiences. Maintain communication and check-ins. Celebrate progress and acknowledge what might feel challenging. Create space for authentic conversation so that your child does not feel trapped under the weight of unrealistic expectations."

**Alex Kabat '24
School of Humanities and Sciences,
Ithaca College**

"Mental health challenges are common in college and often emerge subtly. Stigma may prevent students from asking for help, even when they need it most. Check in often, ask open-ended questions, and listen without judgment. Reassure your student that seeking help is a strength and that you're in their corner no matter what."

**Dr. Aaron Rakow,
Executive Director,
MindWell Psychology,
Ithaca**

ITHACA DIRECTORY

College Student Mental Health

Emergency

Ithaca Police Department (607) 272 9973

Cornell University Emergency Assistance (607) 255 1111

Ithaca College Emergency Assistance (607) 274 3333

Tompkins Cortland Community College Emergency Assistance (607) 844 6511

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Call or Text 988

Crisis Text Line 24/7 Text "Home" to 741-741

Veterans Crisis Line Dial 988 then press 1 or send a text message to 838 255

The Trevor Project (866) 488 7386 or text START to 678 678

Campus Mental Health Support

Cornell University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (607) 255 5155

Ithaca College Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (607) 274 3177

Tompkins Cortland Community College Mental Health Services (607) 844 6577

Community Mental Health Resources

Tompkins County Mental Health Services (607) 274 6200

Family & Children's Service of Ithaca (607) 273 7494

MindWell Psychology (607) 260 3100

The Reach Project (607) 273 7000

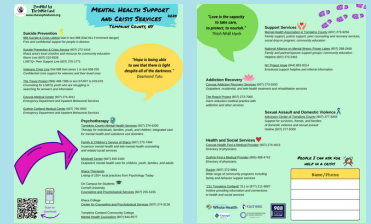
Cayuga Addiction and Recovery Services (607) 273 5500

National Alliance on Mental Illness Finger Lakes (607) 288 2460

Mental Health Association in Tompkins County (607) 277 7337

Advocacy Center of Tompkins County (607) 277 5000

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) (800) 656 4673



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