

Impact of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health

Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its 10th month of global transmission, countries and communities worldwide struggle to contain it and reduce the number of infections. The coronavirus disease has infected more than 34 million people, and the global estimate of deaths exceeds 1 million lives. The United States (U.S.) remains an epicenter for transmission and mortality. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed disparities and exacerbates inequity and all forms of oppression, which contributes to growing social uprising.

Attention on Students

This policy brief focuses on the mental health of students in higher education with additional attention on U.S.-based students in healthcare programs of study. Faced with additional stressors in their pursuit of health care careers, these students include, but are not limited to, those in such programs as: psychology, psychiatry, social work, and nursing. Protecting students and their health is an essential public health concern.

Health care professional graduate students have multiple roles that require them to engage in training beyond their courses. These roles can include student, instructor, scientist, and clinician. Those students learning in areas hit hardest by the pandemic, first, have increased patient or client caseloads, potentially including COVID-19 patients, often without adequate supervision or clinical training. Second, many graduate programs do not offer students health insurance or funding for clinical training. Finally, there are times when clinical trainees risk their own safety to complete clinical requirements without proper personal protective equipment.

Safety as a Human Right

To optimize mental health outcomes, Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) must prioritize student safety in learning sites both on and off campus to create an environment that meets the basic human rights for health and safety. IHE can mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 by developing, supporting and implementing community/campus protocols and procedures that align with [CDC recommendations on COVID 19 management](#).

Young Adult Mental Health during COVID-19 Pandemic

- 2 out of 3 experience an anxiety or depressive disorder
- 1 in 4 *seriously considered suicide in the past 30 days*
- 1 in 4 use substances to cope with pandemic-related stress

Challenges Affecting Student Mental Health

- Financial and housing instability
- Worsening health and social disparities
- Safety concerns for self and loved ones
- Falling behind in academic milestones
- Exposure to COVID-19 through clinical work
- Lack of health insurance coverage
- Limited access to mental health services

Heading into a new school year 2020-2021 in which the pandemic shows no signs of abating, administrators, professors, graduate students, and university staff, policy makers, and stakeholders should move beyond speculation and create opportunities to dialog and define how the coronavirus pandemic will change higher education. The pandemic has changed the campus workplace, and some of these changes will be permanent moving forward. Student mental health, support, and retention are paramount in the pandemic chaotic times.

This policy brief was developed by the Global Alliance's Global Mental Health Task Force. For more information about the work of the Task Force, visit: www.bhjustice.org/global-mental-health.

The Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice (formerly the American Orthopsychiatry Association) is a compassionate community of individuals and organizations dedicated to the informing policy, practice, and research concerning behavioural health, social justice, and well-being. Learn more about our work at www.bhjustice.org.

Key Recommendations

- Communicate about work expectations to graduate students frequently
- Provide transparent and up-to-date resource databases for students, including: mental health services, short term jobs, grants, food security, housing resources, and open source software
- Explicitly recognize the vital roles health care professional students have in the university and community, from teaching to providing health care
- Institute flexible work or clinical learning sites (e.g., telework, virtual learning) and flexible work or learning hours (e.g., staggered shifts or classes)
- Encourage telework for faculty, staff, and students as possible
- Provide student support services for their health and mental health needs
- Encourage feedback and incorporate student recommendations into policies and practices
- Disseminate up-to-date scientific and practice information to appropriate stakeholders

References

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