

What is mental health?

This may be defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease.

Wellness is when you feel the sense of purposefulness and satisfaction with life in the work that you do or study you partake. It is also having a healthy living environment and when your relationships bring happiness in your life. However, it is not just the absence of disease, illness or stress.

Our emotional, psychological, spiritual and social well-being normally affects how we think, feel, and act. They also help determine how we handle stress, our relationships with others, and the choices that we make in life. Mental health is important at every stage of our lives from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Over the course of your life, if you experience mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behavior could be affected. Many factors usually tend to contribute to mental health problems, including:

- Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry.
- Life experiences, such as trauma or abuse.
- Family history of mental health problems.

Mental health problems are very common but help is available. People with mental health problems can get better and many recover completely.

Mental Health and Wellness

Taking care of your mental health allows one to:

- ✚ Realize their full potential in life
- ✚ Cope with the stresses that life throws on you on day to day activities
- ✚ Work productively
- ✚ Make meaningful contributions to their communities
- ✚ Develop healthily through their various stages of life e.g. childhood to adulthood.

Early Warning Signs

It's normal to not be sure if you or someone you know is living with mental health problems.

Going through one or more of the following feelings or behaviors can be an early warning sign of a problem:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and usual activities

- Having low or no energy
- Feeling numb or like nothing matters
- Having unexplained aches and pains
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual
- Feeling unusually confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared
- Yelling or fighting with family and friends
- Experiencing severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Having persistent thoughts and memories you can't get out of your head
- Hearing voices or believing things that are not true
- Thinking of harming yourself or others
- Inability to perform daily tasks like taking care of your kids or getting to work or school

The above symptoms are usually a sign that you should see a professional in the field of mental health to help you address whatever mental challenge that may be affecting your state of wellness.

Mental Disorders to look out for in the University

Some of the prevalent mental health issues experienced by college students are;

- ✚ Mood Disorders e.g. Depression
- ✚ Suicide
- ✚ Anxiety Disorders
- ✚ Addiction to psychoactive substances such as alcohol, bhang and cigarettes.
- ✚ Addiction to gambling
- ✚ Eating disorders.

We will briefly cover the 4 conditions highlighted in the above list because they are the most prevalent amongst university going youth.

1. Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that involves persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities.

People experiencing depressive episodes may also experience mood swings, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, headaches and body pains that have no apparent physical cause.

Mental health professionals stress the importance of talking about such issues, but students tend to consider these stresses a normal part of college life. In other cases, they may lack the time, energy, will, and/or money to seek the support they need.

Symptoms

Symptoms for depression differ from person to person. Ultimately, depression is a result of a chemical imbalance in our brains.

The way one person displays signs of depression is not necessarily the way symptoms emerge in others. They include (but are not limited to) the following:

- ✚ **Physical well-being symptoms;** Changes in sleep habits and appetite changes.
- ✚ **Emotional symptoms;** Sadness, feelings of being overwhelmed, feelings of hopelessness, and feelings of powerlessness.
- ✚ **Thinking symptoms;** having trouble concentrating and paying attention, difficulty reading and completing work tasks.

Displaying some of these symptoms does not necessarily mean that you are depressed. However, if you begin to experience these symptoms with some regularity, you should seek assistance from the Students' Centre, if only to be on the safe side.

Identifying these issues in others can be tricky, as students often downplay or simply never talk about things deeply bothering them. Students often stay quiet due to insecurity, fear of standing out, or embarrassment. Furthermore, peers can easily misdiagnose one another, sometimes making matters worse.

As such, if you experience these symptoms, seeing a mental health professional is this best course of action.

Recognizing the Signs

Recognizing signs of depression in yourself and others can be difficult. Everyone has off days or times when they become overwhelmed with life. However, when days become weeks and simply getting out of bed becomes a struggle, this is cause for concern.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU START TO NOTICE SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN YOUR FRIEND?

Here are some signs of depression to look for in friends:

1. They are not enjoying activities they once loved
2. They no longer attend classes or social outings
3. They are experiencing extreme anger or sadness over a relationship in their life
4. They react negatively or with apathy to most things
- 5. They often talk about death or suicide**

Show your friend you are a source of support through constant words of encouragement. Avoid telling your friends to "cheer up" or "snap out of it." Many

people experiencing depression are aware of their condition, and telling them to get over it is not helpful.

If you feel your friend is at risk, gently encourage them to seek help from the Students' Centre and offer to accompany them. While talking through their issues with you may be helpful, it is not a substitute for treatment.

Lack of proper management may most a times lead to cases of suicide, which is the act of intentionally causing one's own death.

Seek immediate assistance when your colleague or friend is;

- Threatening or talking about wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide

How Can I Help Someone Who May be Suicidal?

- Show interest and be supportive.
- Be direct; ask them if they are considering suicide or have a plan.
- Don't be judgmental, give advice, or try to talk them out of suicide.
- Don't swear to secrecy.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available.
- Don't leave the person alone.
- Take action, remove means, and assist them in getting the help they need.
- **Consult with a counselor as needed immediately.**

2. Anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. However, mounting, ongoing feelings of worry, tension, and panic can interfere with daily life. When your daily life is disrupted, anxiety crosses the line to become a medical condition.

Symptoms

Symptoms of anxiety disorders may sometimes be mistaken for everyday stress or simply written off as someone worrying too much.

Depending on how your body responds to increased levels of certain chemicals, panic attacks may be mistaken as a physical ailment, such as a heart attack or a

tension headache. Symptoms manifest differently in each person, so what is true for you won't necessarily be true for a friend.

Symptoms for anxiety disorders include the following:

- a) Inability to control feelings of worry and stress
- b) Restlessness or edginess
- c) Fatigue
- d) Difficulty concentrating
- e) Sleep problems
- f) Shortness of breath
- g) Irritability
- h) Irregular heartbeat
- i) Muscle pain and tension
- j) Fearfulness
- k) Headaches
- l) Sweating and dizziness
- m) Frequent upset stomach or diarrhea

Recognizing the Signs

Brief and occasional flashes of anxious feelings or behavior do not automatically indicate a mental illness. However, if anxious feelings persist, or if they begin to manifest in obsessive behavior or an overwhelming sense of fear, then it's time to seek help.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU START TO NOTICE SIGNS OF AN ANXIETY DISORDER IN A FRIEND?

Your friend may have an anxiety disorder if they display these behaviors:

- 1) Have experienced a tragic event and do not develop healthy coping habits
- 2) Appear to live in constant fear of failure — academically or socially
- 3) Are uncomfortable and extremely anxious in social atmospheres
- 4) Have trouble concentrating or seem to have a blank mind
- 5) Seem plagued with guilt or stress
- 6) Have visible panic attacks

Avoid criticizing or belittling the severity of your friend's symptoms and encourage them to try coping strategies that avoid causing further anxiety. Encourage your friend to visit the Students' centre and discuss their troubles with a professional.

3. Addiction to drugs

Starting out in college produces some natural social anxiety for many students. The temptation to drink is strong because college students overwhelmingly find that alcohol makes socializing easier. Not all college students immediately start binge drinking and doing drugs, but routinely drinking to have more fun leads many students toward addiction.

Why Do College Students Turn to Drugs?

The high rates of drug abuse among university students can be attributed to a number of factors in their day to day pursuit of academic demands, including:

- Stress. As students are facing the high demands of coursework, part-time jobs, internships, social obligations and more, many turn to drugs as a way to cope.
- Course load. More students than ever are taking stimulants over the counter, to help them stay awake long enough to study or complete assignments by their due dates. All too often, these prescription drugs are obtained without a legitimate prescription.
- Curiosity. College students are exploring many new aspects of their lives in personal and professional realms. It's not uncommon for that self-exploration to dip into drug experimentation.
- Peer pressure. College students who are surrounded by other people experimenting with recreational and performance-enhancing drugs are more likely to try these substances for themselves.

What Drugs of Choice Are Common in College Campuses?

Trends change over time and no drug is immune to college experimentation. However, there are a few substances that are consistently abused among college students. Top two of them include:

- Alcohol which makes up the vast majority of substance-related problems on college campuses. Because drinking is often socially acceptable, recognizing a problem in college students who drink can be difficult.
- Bhang or weed which has grown to be very popular amongst the young generation with more college students turning to pot as their drug of choice. On some campuses, marijuana use outweighs even that of alcohol.

The Effects of Alcohol and Drugs on College Students

Alcohol is the most popular and dangerous drug on college campuses by far. To many, drinking is synonymous with the college experience; alcohol is nearly always present at house parties, sporting events and student get-togethers. Because the use of alcohol during college is widespread and often condoned, many college students end up drinking more alcohol more frequently than their peers who aren't in college.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU START TO NOTICE SIGNS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN A FRIEND?

Don't

- **DON'T** talk about the subject of addiction or getting help when the person is under the influence.
- **DON'T** guilt or insult them about their substance abuse.
- **DON'T** force them to cooperate.
- **DON'T** use confrontational phrases or sentence structures, like "you do" or "you are" phrases.
- **DON'T** approach them without a solid, well-thought plan, including what to say if they justify their actions. **DO** create proactive steps for the two of you can take right away.
- **DON'T** be wishy-washy or vague when discussing why their addiction is upsetting or a problem.
- **DON'T** get discouraged if they deny your help.

Do

- **DO** wait until they're sober, but while the effects of drinking or drug use are still fresh and on the mind of the person using.
- **DO** be open, and express concern delicately. Focus on how their habits make you feel.
- **DO** make it clear that you are there for them when they decide to get help. Research and plan so it's easier for them to say yes.
- **DO** use "I" statements. Focus on your feelings and perceptions rather than what they do or should/shouldn't do.
- **DO** be clear that you have reasons to believe they have a problem, and provide specific examples. Be firm in your presentation without being confrontational.
- **DO** keep an open line of communication. Be an example by taking care of yourself, and avoid enabling. Encourage them and plan fun, sober activities to do together.

- **DO** understand that they might already be aware of their problem but aren't necessarily ready to confront it.

Ways to maintain positive mental health include:

If you want to maintain your mental wellbeing through your academics in the campus;

- Get professional help from the Students' Centre if you feel your not the normal you.
- Connect with others and establish a peer support system.
- Stay positive in life to influence how you perceive life and its challenges.
- Get physically active through exercises to boost psychological fitness.
- Help others in need by being there or word of encouragement through the challenges that come with university studies.
- Get enough sleep to relax your mind.
- Eat proper food and a good diet.
- Develop healthy coping skills to the academic stressors.