Crisis U

By Hara Estroff Marano
86% of college students have felt overwhelmed.

81% of college students have felt exhausted.

30% of college students have felt too depressed to function.

6.6% of college students have serious mental health issues.
When you invent the ship you also invent the shipwreck.

Paul Virilio
Crisis on the Campus

Ten or so years ago, college counseling centers were pleasant little islands in the mental health system, helping students cope with roommate conflict and adjustment to college. No more.

Today they are the newest front line in the war against mental illness, struggling to manage swarms of students with serious depression and anxiety disorders. And generally facing a growing demand for their services in a world of shrinking resources.

The middle of the night may find a SWAT team of counselors calming down a dorm wing after having crisis-managed an acute manic episode or yet another incident of self-mutilation. Morning will certainly find the staff administering psychotherapy to students struggling to overcome histories of trauma such as childhood sexual abuse, relationship problems including date violence, and that dormitory staple, eating disorders. Did we mention substance abuse?

Action Strategies

Almost all colleges are seeing more students with severe problems.

The clinical experience of many psychologists with college students suggests there is a crisis on campus, but that it is often invisible. College personnel disguise it to parents; they don’t always want them to know how much their children are struggling.

From the findings of a task force of the American Psychological Association on Women and Depression, we know that depression is rampant, not only among females but among males. For the first time, the gender distinction in prevalence is disappearing; rates among men 18-

When Romance Is a Bad Proposition

It’s tempting enough to be young and depressed, but for females of college age help is least likely to come from where it’s generally expected. Depressed young women who seek advice from a boyfriend are not only unlikely to get it, they’re apt to stay depressed as a result. They do much better crying on the shoulder of their girl pal. It’s a case where friends are better than boys, finds Shannon E. Daley, Ph.D., of the University of Southern California, who followed 138 high school seniors over a five-year period, half of them through bouts of depression.

The more depressed a girl became, Daley reports in the Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, the less supportive her boyfriend, and the more supportive her best girlfriend. In fact, the depressed women were more likely to hook up with guys who disengaged from the relationship at times of stress due to a lack of empathy.

And that launches a pernicious pattern. Her lack of support adds to her stress, and that exacerbates depression.

Daley advises young women with a tendency to depression to avoid falling for men with similar problems. And to cherish their girlfriends.
The world isn’t getting crazier. College is simply getting more like the real world around it.

Crisis on the Campus

April is the cruelest month. College counseling centers really feel the crunch. Students who pull off counseling programs sometimes overwhelm the counseling skills they have yet to develop. "Many students who wouldn’t have gotten to an elite college before are getting here because they were treated when they were younger," observes Harvard’s Dr. Kadison. "They need ongoing, intensive care," which not every school has the resources to supply. Many students fall apart given the loosened environment, erratic sleeping patterns and added stress of college.

Many others experience their first onset of disorder. There is the indisputable fact that age 18 to 25 is prime time for eruption of mental illness, making college, with its concentration of 18- to 20-year-olds, the prime place, increasingly, for mental health professionals to recognize that depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar illness, personality disorders and schizophrenia are conditions that first arise in young adulthood.

Catching them quickly is critical, as early management strongly influences how they play out and develop.

And so it is that increasingly, colleges are the first best hope for reaching the minds of America’s future. But what no one ever imagined was that colleges would also face themselves the last best hope of mental health care in America.

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Up Against the Ivy Wall in 2004

The hottest place on college campuses these days is not the local brewpub, the athletics center or the famous architect-designed student union. It's the campus counseling center. Through its doors are likely to march at least 10% of the student body in any given year. The vast majority of the nation's college counseling centers report they are under siege, trying to meet the demands of unprecedented numbers of students with a range of serious psychological problems. From major and manic depression to eating disorders to self-harm to substance abuse, campus mental health centers are increasingly dealing with conditions that have life and death consequences. Shedding their reputation as the Rodney Dangerfield of college services, counseling centers are now seen as critical to the core mission of the university—relieving the mental burdens that impede students from learning and creating a civil society.

As a result, the issues that campus counseling centers face reach into the highest offices of higher education. There is no meeting of college presidents where the subject of student mental health doesn't come up, observes Steven Hyman, as provost, the second highest officer of Harvard University and a psychiatrist who was formerly director of the National Institute of Mental Health. "It's an important, nationwide problem in higher education," he says.

Attention Students: The CD-ROM Will See You Now

With campus counseling centers reeling under the burden of one-on-one treatment for ever more students with ever more serious psychological problems, a new interactive CD might be just what the doctor ordered. And clinical trial of the program, called Food, Mood and Attitude, demonstrates that it can help prevent eating disorders among college women. In tests on 240 freshmen, those who engaged with the two-hour program had decreased shape and weight concerns and a lower frequency of overall exercise and purging behaviors three months later, compared with a control group.

Drawing on the power of social influence in the development of bulimia, the multimedia program, developed by Newmind, Massachussetts-based Inflexion Inc., pairs users in the position of peer counselors to a simulated student whose eating issues mirror their own. Says Sarah Lord, Ph.D., Inflexion's director of college health programs, "during freshman year, women who have roommates with bulima are 14 times more likely to develop bulima than those whose roommate does not have disordered eating. We decided to harness the power of such social influence in a positive way, by using peer stories and the user as a resident advisor."

Laura Mintz, Ph.D., of the University of Missouri, who tested the program, finds it is "likely to have a wide applicability on university campuses. Estimates vary, but eating disorders are said to affect up to 5% of college-age women. As many as 40% of students engage in disordered eating and are deemed at risk of the disorder during their college years."
The dorm community of a competitive university is not a safe place to expose personal weaknesses; it's just too adversarial.

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A NATION OF WIMPS

Parents are going to ludicrous lengths to take the lumps and bumps out of life for their children. However well-intentioned, parental hyperconcern and microscrutiny have the net effect of making kids more fragile. That may be why the young are breaking down in record numbers.

BY HARA ESTROFF MARANO  PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARJEAN LEVINE
CRISIS

Step by well-meaning step, colleges are being transformed into something more akin to mental health wards than citadels of learning.

by Hara Estroff Marano
photographs by Adam Levey
Problems are more urgent than ever:

“I’m cutting.”

“I’m anorexic.”

“I’m suicidal.”

“I’m alcoholic.”

“I’m bipolar.”
The mental fragility of students is eroding the core mission of the university.
“The end of relationships feels harder to tolerate and manage.

Students have more trouble starting and sustaining them.

No relationship works like a finger swipe across a screen.”
In the old days, drinking was done in a spirit of euphoria.

Today it’s aimed at the obliteration of consciousness.
How did we get here?

- Culture-wide anxiety about the future.
- Young people are pushed for early success.
- Loss of free play.
“We are obsessed with social media.”

But it magnifies the social comparison factor. Almost everyone is stuck in negative self-evaluation.
How did we get here?

- Culture-wide anxiety about the future.
- Young people are pushed for early success.
- Loss of free play.
- Rise of social media as a distorting lens on life.
- Children grow up under constant scrutiny, fear messing up.
- Children grow up with weakened ability for self-regulation.
- Everyone views stress as a plague.
“If you are dedicated to the life of the mind, it is predicated on the health of the mind.”
Exhibit A of infantilization might be Puppy Day.
According to the CCMH 2015 annual report survey of 93 institutions for 2009-2010 through 2014-2015. See the chart on page 7 of the report.

SOURCE: ccmh.psu.edu  DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC
A pill is not a skill.
“We’re pulling people out of the river when we need to be stopping them upstream.”
Kids are great at solving problems.