Helping Students Navigate the Return to College

Patricia Obilo-Azandegbe, M.Ed., LPC & Whitney Robenolt, Psy.D.

Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2019, the world has experienced drastic changes in all aspects of life: suspended travel, loss of jobs, economic instability, and virtual schooling to name a few. These changes occurred on a global, institutional, and individual level, affecting millions of people all over the world. Among those affected were college students. Unfortunately, the college experience of those entering in the ‘19- ‘20 and ‘20- ‘21 academic years were quite different than what was historically the norm. Many students were forced to return home, unable to fully immerse themselves in the college experience. As a result, Sophomores may, at some level, still feel like Freshmen due to the lack of exposure to campuses this past year. Others decided to hold off on starting college in hopes that the world would quickly return to some level of normalcy. Unfortunately, that has not happened as quickly as many hoped, leaving many students and universities unsure of what the college life will look like this fall semester.

These changes encouraged some students to grow on an introspective level, (August & Dapkewicz, 2021), while others still struggled immensely, having difficulty managing daily tasks, keeping up morale, and navigating virtual learning spaces for the first time. Research exploring the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of first-year college students in a North Carolina university, found an increase in the prevalence of anxiety (18.1% - 25.3%) and depression (21.5% to 31.7%) among the 419 students surveyed; Difficulties with distance learning and self-isolation were associated with these increased rates (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). A survey of 303 college students in the Philippines which found loneliness to be prevalent during the mandatory lockdown also found personal resilience to be low (Labrague et al., 2020). Overall, the prevalence of COVID-19 has undoubtedly impacted the mental health of many individuals.

Despite these challenges and the creation of new norms, it is important that we encourage the use of effective strategies to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on mental health. As we approach the upcoming semester, here are some potential recommendations to help promote resiliency in our students across campuses:

**Be Aware of Resources on Campus:** Encourage student awareness, not only of mental health resources, but additional offices and resources on campuses that students can easily access. Be sure to promote reminders of these services throughout the year.

**Encourage Students to Ask for Help:** Encourage students to express when they need help! Maintain safe and reliable supports on campuses, as these will be essential in allowing students to build this comfort.

**Promote the Development of Support Systems:** It is important that we encourage healthy socialization opportunities on campus, as utilizing healthy support systems can be highly beneficial in reducing isolation.

**Promote Self-Care:** Self-care is essential in limiting distress/managing stress. Educate students about the importance of self-care and methods that can be utilized. It is also important to encourage faculty to promote self-care activities in their curriculum when possible. Go here for a full list of self-care activities – [https://www.developgoodhabits.com/self-care-ideas/](https://www.developgoodhabits.com/self-care-ideas/)

**References**

