

Information for Parents

It is challenging for any parent to watch his/her son or daughter go off to college, but this experience is magnified if a parent has concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of his/her student. Mental health concerns and mental illness often arise or worsen during the college years for several reasons. Students may be faced with increased stress, ready availability of drugs and alcohol, and decreased contact with family and social supports during a time when many individuals are biologically most prone to developing mental illness.

The good news is that mental health concerns can be effectively treated using counseling, medication, or a combination of the two. It is important for you, as a parent, to know what to watch for and what to do if you are concerned about your son or daughter. First, you must strive to **establish and maintain open communication** with your child. If you notice any behaviors or changes that concern you, openly address these concerns with him or her. Through persistence, you may be best able to help your child.

You should also **be aware of signs and symptoms of emotional distress**. Symptoms such as the following could indicate the development of mental health concerns:

- *A sudden worsening of school performance.* Good students who suddenly start ignoring assignments and cutting classes may have problems that can put them at risk of suicide.
- *A fixation with death or violence.* People may develop an unusual interest in death or violence, expressed through poetry, essays, doodling, or artwork; an obsession with violent movies, video games, and music; or a fascination with weapons.
- *Unhealthy peer relationships.* Students who do not have friends, or suddenly reject their friends, may be at risk.
- *Violent mood swings or a sudden change in personality.* Individuals who become sullen, silent, withdrawn, angry, and/ or engage in acting out behavior may have problems that can lead to suicide.
- *Signs of an eating disorder.* An eating disorder is a sign that someone needs help. A dramatic change in weight that is not the result of a medically supervised diet may also indicate that something is wrong.
- *Difficulty in adjusting to gender identity or sexual orientation.* Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have a higher incidence of suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- *Suddenly increasing use of alcohol or other substances, such as illicit drugs or misuse of prescription medications.*
- *Depression.* The following signs indicate that someone may be depressed:
 - Depressed mood, expressions of sadness or hopelessness
 - Lack of enjoyment from previously enjoyed activities or withdrawal from friends and extracurricular activities
 - Changes in appetite or weight loss or gain
 - Changes in sleeping patterns, either sleeping too little or too much
 - A sudden, unexplained decline in enthusiasm and energy
 - Restlessness and agitation
 - Seeming to feel tired all the time, for no apparent reason
 - Lowered self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, or excessive feelings of guilt
 - Indecision, lack of concentration, and forgetfulness
 - Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

If you are concerned about your son or daughter and believe that he/she needs professional intervention, you should **encourage him or her to go to the University Counseling and Testing Center**. Counseling services are provided free of charge to all actively enrolled students. You can reassure him or her that counseling services are provided confidentially and seeking help is a positive choice for his or her own wellbeing that may help them reach their personal and educational goals and not a sign of weakness. If you are interested in obtaining counseling services in the community instead of through the University, please refer to the “Resources Links” link located to the left.

You can also **call the University Counseling at Testing Center** directly (269-387-1850) if you are concerned about your student’s mental health. While Western Michigan University will not generally notify you about your son or daughter’s behavior or emotional health, if your child is 18 years or older, however, **you may be notified** under the following three circumstances:

1. He/she gives the University permission to contact you
2. He/she is deemed to be in imminent danger of harming him/herself or others
3. He/she violates the University alcohol and/or drug policy.

If your son or daughter states that he or she is depressed or considering suicide, take action. Show your child that you care by discussing your feelings and his/her feelings. Do not be afraid to ask directly about suicide; this will not place the idea in his/her head or increase the chance that he/she will consider suicide.

The following warning signs indicate that your son or daughter needs intervention:

- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky behaviors
- Feeling trapped
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Anxiety, agitation, being unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- Expressing feelings that life is meaningless or that there is no reason to live

If you witness these warning signs, **call for help**. You can call the University Counseling and Testing Center at 269-387-1850 Monday through Friday 8am-5pm. After hours, call (800) 273-TALK (8255). This National Suicide Prevention hotline is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and is answered locally.

Additionally, the following warning signs indicate that your son or daughter needs immediate intervention:

- Threatening to hurt/kill him or herself, talking about harming him or herself, or announcing that he/she has made a plan to kill him or herself
- Obtaining a weapon or other items that they could use to hurt themselves (such as prescription medications)
- Talking or writing about suicide or death

If your student exhibits any of the above warning signs, call 9-1-1.

If your child has expressed an immediate plan to end her or his life, or has access to a gun or other potentially deadly means, do not leave him or her alone; get help immediately. Remove the potentially deadly means from his/her environment, at least temporarily during this crisis.

There is hope. Suicide can be prevented. If we all work together and create a community of caring, we can protect and improve the mental health of your son or daughter and increase the likelihood that he or she can reach their future goals

American Association for Suicidology. (2007). *The American Association for Suicidology's warning signs for suicide prevention*. Downloaded January 17, 2008 from http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/bpr/PDF/AASWarningSigns_factsheet.pdf.

The Jed Foundation. *Protecting your child's mental health: What can parents do?* Downloaded January 17, 2008 from <http://www.jedfoundation.org/parentsguide.php>.