

Are you mentally well enough for college?

September 6 2019, by Nicholas Joyce



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Last spring an 18-year-old college freshman who got straight A's in high school—but was now failing several courses—came to my office on the campus where I work as a psychologist.

The student was seeking a [medical exception](#) so that he could withdraw from the classes he failed instead of taking the F's and dragging down his GPA.

I evaluated the student and determined—based on information from prior visits—that the student was depressed. This condition was zapping the student's motivation and energy. Consequently, the student missed classes, didn't study much and ultimately did poorly in class. I completed a medical exception form to enable the student to withdraw from the classes he failed so that he could keep his GPA from plummeting.

This happens more than you may think. At the end of every semester, I complete dozens of these medical exception forms for students who failed their classes due to mental health reasons.

From my vantage point as a licensed psychologist who has worked in [college](#) mental health for a decade, this outcome points to what I believe is a bigger problem in higher education. And that is, at a time when parents and society are putting increased [pressure](#) on students to go to college in order to have a successful life, students' mental health and overall readiness for college—both of which have [greatly diminished in recent years](#) – are being overlooked.

Problems are prevalent

Anxiety and depression afflict as many as 1 in 5 [college students](#), and students are seeking mental health treatment on campus [at record levels](#).

For instance, in the 2017 to 2018 school year, [179,964](#) college students sought mental health treatment. Although it could be due to changes in reporting, the figure represents an increase over the prior two years, when [161,014](#) and [150,483](#), respectively, sought mental health treatment, according to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health.

In the case of the 18-year-old who was depressed, although the student struggled with [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#), or ADHD, in high school, back then the student's life was managed by a parent who made

sure everything was done completely, correctly and on time. Now the student was on his own for the first time.

A temporary fix

For those who get medical exceptions in order to avoid a failing grade, the move might save their GPA. However, it also pushes their graduation date back and requires students to spend more time and money to complete their degree.

More importantly, getting a medical exception does not resolve the underlying issue that led to the failure in the first place. In my experience, many students who get the medical exception return the next semester without addressing their mental health needs and end up failing more courses.

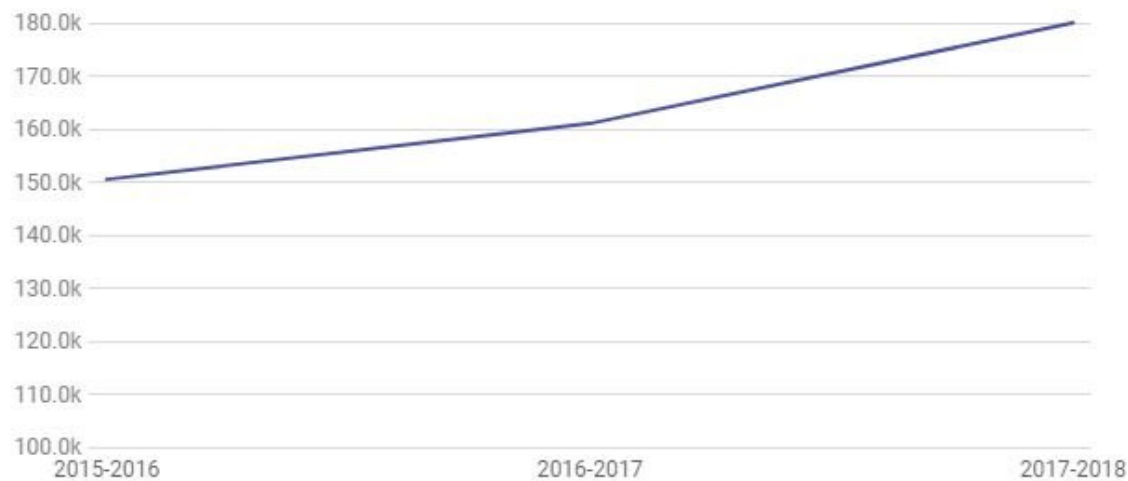
In order to avoid being one of the many students who seek a medical exception due to mental illness, I would recommend that students and families focus on the following things:

Problems are prevalent

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College students seeking mental health treatment

The number of students who sought mental health treatment on campus has been steadily climbing.



Credit: The Conversation

1. Manage your life

Many students come to me after years of having parents who basically manage their time for them. The parents set their schedule, checked to make sure their homework was done, ensured they were doing their work and got to places and various appointments on time.

This might have worked well to help the student succeed in high school. But when students no longer have that kind of support once they transition to college, they often have no idea on how to do these things

on their own.

This leads to procrastination, which in turn leads to a host of other problems for the [student](#), such as [increased stress](#), anxiety, depression and other things that can hinder success.

2. Determine your purpose

Why are you going to college in the first place? Students who visit me often reveal that they went to college because they were told—by parents and society—that's what they should do. But they are often unmotivated, bored and failing. They might be pursuing a major that their parents said was the right one for them. But many simply do not know what they want to study or do for a living. They have no internal motivation for what they are doing, which contributes to the reason why they fail. Without internal motivation, it's hard to stick with college when things get hard.

3. Ask for help

Most colleges and universities have a variety of academic and non-academic resources—from counseling to tutoring—to help students. Still, I meet many students who are so worried about how they will look if they ask for help that they won't take advantage of those services, such as free tutoring.

Students have to come to terms with the fact that they need help—whether that be academic or with mental health issues or something else—and be OK with asking for it.

4. Don't expect college to fix mental health issues

Many of my students tell me they had to wait to attend college to finally address their mental health needs. For these students, they were long aware of their condition—be it anxiety, depression or something else—but their family either did not believe in mental health treatment or denied that anything was wrong.

Other students have had these conditions for years but had no idea they were treatable or preventable. The conditions then get exacerbated at college due to increased academic pressure.

For all these reasons, it is important for students to get help with [mental health](#) issues before college begins. Otherwise, students could end up failing a class and seeking a medical exception for a problem that could have been addressed before things got to that point. A medical exception may save your semester, but it's not a cure for what brought you there in the first place.

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