

Depression, anxiety, loneliness are peaking in college students

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Dr. Sarah Ketchen Lipson is a Boston University mental health researcher and a co-principal investigator of the Healthy Minds Network nationwide survey
Credit: Cydney Scott, Boston University

A survey by a Boston University researcher of nearly 33,000 college students across the country reveals the prevalence of depression and anxiety in young people continues to increase, now reaching its highest levels, a sign of the mounting stress factors due to the coronavirus pandemic, political unrest, and systemic racism and inequality.

"Half of students in fall 2020 screened positive for depression and/or anxiety," says Sarah Ketchen Lipson, a Boston University mental [health](#) researcher and a co-principal investigator of the [nationwide survey](#) published on February 11, 2021, which was administered online during the fall 2020 semester through the Healthy Minds Network. The survey further reveals that 83 percent of students said their mental health had negatively impacted their academic performance within the past month, and that two-thirds of [college students](#) are struggling with loneliness and feeling isolated—an all-time high prevalence that reflects the toll of the pandemic and the social distancing necessary to control it.

Lipson, a BU School of Public Health assistant professor of health law, policy, and management, says the survey's findings underscore the need for university teaching staff and faculty to put mechanisms in place that can accommodate students' mental health needs.

"Faculty need to be flexible with deadlines and remind students that their talent is not solely demonstrated by their ability to get a top grade during one challenging semester," Lipson says.

She adds that instructors can protect students' mental health by having class assignments due at 5 pm, rather than midnight or 9 am, times that Lipson says can encourage students to go to bed later and lose valuable sleep to meet those deadlines.

Especially in smaller classroom settings, where a [student](#)'s absence may be more noticeable than in larger lectures, instructors who notice

someone missing classes should reach out to that student directly to ask how they are doing.

"Even in larger classes, where 1:1 outreach is more difficult, instructors can send classwide emails reinforcing the idea that they care about their students not just as learners but as people, and circulating information about campus resources for mental health and wellness," Lipson says.

And, crucially, she says, instructors must bear in mind that the burden of mental health is not the same across all student demographics. "Students of color and low-income students are more likely to be grieving the loss of a loved one due to COVID," Lipson says. They are also "more likely to be facing financial stress." All of these factors can negatively impact mental health and [academic performance](#) in "profound ways," she says.

At a higher level within colleges and universities, Lipson says, administrators should focus on providing students with [mental health services](#) that emphasize prevention, coping, and resilience. The fall 2020 survey data revealed a significant "treatment gap," meaning that many students who screen positive for depression or anxiety are not receiving mental health services.

"Often students will only seek help when they find themselves in a mental health crisis, requiring more urgent resources," Lipson says. "But how can we create systems to foster wellness before they reach that point?" She has a suggestion: "All students should receive mental health education, ideally as part of the required curriculum."

It's also important to note, she says, that rising mental health challenges are not unique to the college setting—instead, the survey findings are consistent with a broader trend of declining mental health in adolescents and young adults. "I think mental health is getting worse [across the US population], and on top of that we are now gathering more data on these

trends than ever before," Lipson says. "We know mental health stigma is going down, and that's one of the biggest reasons we are able to collect better data. People are being more open, having more dialogue about it, and we're able to better identify that people are struggling."

The worsening mental health of Americans, more broadly, Lipson says, could be due to a confluence of factors: the pandemic, the impact of social media, and shifting societal values that are becoming more extrinsically motivated (a successful career, making more money, getting more followers and likes), rather than intrinsically motivated (being a good member of the community).

The crushing weight of historic financial pressures is an added burden. "Student debt is so stressful," Lipson says. "You're more predisposed to experiencing anxiety the more debt you have. And research indicates that suicidality is directly connected to financial well-being."

With more than 22 million [young people](#) enrolled in US colleges and universities, "and with the traditional college years of life coinciding with the age of onset for lifetime mental illnesses," Lipson stresses that higher education is a crucial setting where prevention and treatment can make a difference.

One potential bright spot from the survey was that the stigma around mental health continues to fade. The results reveal that 94 percent of students say that they wouldn't judge someone for seeking out help for [mental health](#), which Lipson says is an indicator that also correlates with those students being likely to seek out help themselves during a personal crisis (although, paradoxically, almost half of students say they perceive that others may think more poorly of them if they did seek help).

"We're harsher on ourselves and more critical of ourselves than we are with other people—we call that perceived versus personal stigma,"

Lipson says. "Students need to realize, your peers are not judging you."

Provided by Boston University

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