

How do uni students maintain their mental health?

In recent years, mental health among students has become a growing concern for educators, parents, and society as a whole. The pressures of academic performance, social media, and expectations from peers and family can take a toll on young people's mental well-being. However, there are stories of hope and resilience among students who have faced mental health challenges and come out stronger.

Alex, 19, is a sophomore at a prestigious university in the United States. Alex had always been an achiever, excelling in academics and sports in high school. However, the transition to college was not smooth for Alex. The academic rigour was intense, and the social scene was overwhelming. Alex started experiencing anxiety attacks and would spend hours locked up in his room, feeling isolated and scared.

“I felt like I was drowning, and nobody could hear me screaming for help,” Alex recalls.

The pressure to perform well academically was the main trigger for Alex's anxiety. Alex was convinced that any grade below an A would ruin his chances of getting into a top graduate program. However, with therapy and medication, Alex learned to manage anxiety and develop a more realistic perspective on academic achievement.

“I realised that my worth is not defined by my grades, and it's okay to make mistakes,” Alex says.

Alex's story is not unique. According to the American College Health Association, more than 40% of college students report feeling anxious, and one in 10 students has contemplated suicide. The good news is that universities and colleges are becoming more proactive in addressing mental health concerns among students.

At Alex's university, there are multiple resources available for students struggling with mental health issues. There are counselling services, support groups, and workshops on stress management and mindfulness. There are also peer-to-peer programs, where upper-class students mentor freshmen and help them adjust to college life.

“I'm grateful for the resources available on campus. Without them, I don't know how I would have made it through my first year,” Alex says.

However, some students still face barriers in accessing mental health services. Stigma surrounding mental health issues, lack of awareness of available resources, and financial constraints can prevent students from seeking help (Weinstein, 2014; Stones & Glazzar, 2019).

Sarah is a 21-year-old senior at a public university in the States who struggled with depression and anxiety throughout high school and college. She was afraid of being judged and labelled as “weak” if she talked about her mental health struggles. Sarah did not know that her university offered free counselling services until her junior year.

She says: “I thought therapy was only for people with serious mental illnesses, and I didn't want to be seen as crazy.”

Sarah's story highlights the need for more education and awareness around mental health issues. Universities can do more to normalise conversations around mental health, encourage students to seek help; and provide financial support to those who cannot afford treatment.

The pandemic has exacerbated mental health concerns among students, with isolation, uncertainty, and fear affecting their well-being. However, there are also stories of resilience and creativity in the face of adversity.

Maya, a 20-year-old sophomore at a liberal arts college in the U.S. was devastated when her college shut down in-person classes due to the pandemic. She felt like she had lost the sense of community and connection that she cherished in college.

She says: “I felt like I was in a void, with no purpose or direction.”

However, Maya found solace in her love for music. She started a virtual music club with other students who shared her passion for singing and playing instruments. Maya and her club members would meet weekly over Zoom to share their favorite songs, collaborate on new compositions, and perform for each other.

“The music club gave me a sense of belonging and purpose. It was a reminder that even in the darkest times, we can find beauty and joy,” Maya says.

Maya's story is an example of how students can find creative ways to cope with mental health challenges. The pandemic has forced many students to adapt to new ways of learning and socialising, but it has also provided opportunities for self-reflection and growth (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2018).

According to Dr Rachel Kazez, a licensed therapist and founder of All Along, a mental health resource for college students, students who prioritise self-care and connection with others tend to do better mentally.

“Self-care can look different for everyone. It can be taking a break from social media, going for a walk, or talking to a friend. The key is to find what works for you and make it a habit,” Dr. Kazez says.

Dr. Kazez also emphasises the importance of seeking help when needed. “It takes courage to reach out for help, but it's a sign of strength, not weakness. There is no shame in asking for support,” she says.

As universities and colleges continue to grapple with the mental health crisis among students, it is essential to remember that behind the statistics and headlines are real people with unique struggles and triumphs. The stories of Alex, Sarah, and Maya show that with the right support and resources, students can overcome mental health challenges and thrive.

“I want other students to know that they are not alone. Mental health struggles are common, and it's okay to ask for help. There is no shame in taking care of yourself,” Alex says. As the world continues to navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic, it is more critical than ever to prioritise mental health and well-being. Students are the future of our society, and investing in their mental health and well-being is an investment in our collective future.