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FEATURED

## Mental health and today's society

Keira Gilmore

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The National Alliance on Mental Illness said exercise has been proven to help treat a variety of mental health illnesses, including anxiety and depression, helping to alleviate stress and bad moods.

Keira Gilmore

A female military veteran student finds herself taking care of her mental health in a way that anyone can: by journaling. Going outside with a blanket, a journal and a pen.

“If you just keep writing, it will come to you naturally to where you want to talk about your day,” said Brianna Torres, junior elementary education major.

Torres said she feels the best when she can ground herself to the earth, feel the grass between her toes and write about her day while enjoying the outdoors.

After being deployed in the United States Navy, Torres found herself struggling with post traumatic stress disorder and depression. However, with the help of journaling, friends, family and her dogs, she said she has found support for her mental health challenges.

“Knowing somebody and seeing them every day, and noticing the little things, the support like that is always appreciated,” Torres said.

According to the American Council of Education, in 2022, 80% of college students indicated that mental and emotional stress impacted their academic performance. The biggest increase was seen in symptoms of depression, from 21% in 2014 to 41% in 2023.

“It only takes a person to have symptoms of depression for two weeks to be diagnosed,” said Vanessa Stein, assistant director of Counseling and Psychological Services.

CAPS offers students a variety of support, such as group therapy, individual counseling, workshops and crisis intervention. It also offers virtual programs to students, staff and faculty that can help prepare them for real-world scenarios when helping someone in distress.

One of the programs is known as Kognito, where one can become a character in a simulation and develop communication skills that can be used in real life.

“A lot of prevention goes a long way, so learning ways to manage things can help prevent a crisis from happening,” Stein said.

Stein said being able to have an open conversation with someone can be one of the biggest steps in preventing a crisis from escalating, helping to persuade or refer them for support and care.

“Don’t run away from your feelings; face your feelings,” Torres said. “A lot of little things can start to get heavy, and now you’re carrying this big heavy rock on your back.”

Amanda Sellers, UCFPD public safety information officer, said that UCFPD is committed to supporting mental health and was the first agency in Central Florida to have 100% of its officers

trained in crisis intervention.

Sellers said they also take things a step further at the police station by providing ongoing in-house mental health refresher training, which has now become part of the annual training measures for officers at UCF.

At 63%, anxiety is the most-treated mental illness, followed by depression at 41% at UCF CAPS from 2022-2023.

Dr. Jennifer Katzenstein from Johns Hopkins Medicine said many of her patients share their biggest concerns with her, including climate change, gun safety, stressors associated with COVID-19 and future planning. These stressors have caused an increase in anxiety in today's society.

However, these aren't the only things affecting today's youth and young adults. Katzenstein said how increasing social media usage in teens and young adults has also caused an increase in social anxiety, depression and cyberbullying.

"It's really correlated in that we see greater rates of mental health concerns with greater utilization of social media," Katzenstein said.

Katzenstein said that an understanding of what someone is going through, or knowing about their past traumas and life experiences, is key to successful care and trauma-informed care with patients.

"Know that you're listening to hear rather than listening to respond because we're so ready to have a response that we forget to hear everything else that person is sharing with us," Katzenstein said.

Clinical psychology alumna Andrea Ubidia said that she has struggled in the past with mental health challenges.

"When people started to notice I was off, they approached me," Ubidia said. "You never know when someone is having a bad day, and just reaching out to them can make their day 10 times better."

Some people find it difficult to speak up for themselves when facing mental challenges. Katzenstein said it's important to be able to take a step back and have an empathetic understanding of someone's past and how that has shaped them.

“These days, people are judged for who they are and what they want to be,” Ubidia said. “It can be tough for kids to speak up at such a young age because they are still learning how to feel what they're feeling and learning how to speak up.”

Katzenstein shared that the key to successful communication with patients seeking mental health care is also communicating with family and being able to have open conversations with them.

Katzenstein and Torres agree that having healthy habits and a healthy balance when using social media can allow for better management of one's mental health challenges.

Journaling, sports or outdoor activities, and spending time with friends and family have been a common denominator for Torres and Ubidia when they find themselves struggling with mental health challenges.

“There is just something about doing those activities that stimulates my brain,” Ubidia said.

With a crisis hotline reachable at 741741 and a suicide and crisis prevention line at 988, mental health experts and help are just a call away.

“In order to have the highest quality of life, they have to have the best mental health too,” Katzenstein said.