

College students are on a mission to help their peers struggling with mental health issues.

"College is a place where you're feeling very isolated from family, and everyone is doing their own course of work," said Dr. Viviana Coles, a psychotherapist who often counsels and provides internships for college students. "It can feel very singular and individual, even though you might be at a larger campus."

Although the stigma surrounding mental health has decreased in recent years, psychotherapists say they still believe that many students feel alone in their internal struggles. According to the Healthy Minds Study, more than 60% of college students have reported fighting at least one mental health problem. Students who participated in the peer support group Cassidy Joined for Hope at College Park High School in The Woodlands, Texas, are working to bring chapters of the group to college campuses across the United States to prevent suicide.

"Because I had lived in the same place my whole life, people around me knew how to bring me out of my shell and make sure that I wasn't isolating myself," said Linden Burns, Louisiana State University student. "One of the hardest things for me was not having this amazing fallback community that knew exactly what to do when I would go off the rails."

Burns was on the board for Cassidy Joined for Hope at her high school in The Woodlands and is now working to receive approval to make it an official club at LSU. In high school, she helped record a suicide awareness video, spoke at pep rallies and participated in projects that reminded students they are loved. She said peer organizations are important because they connect those seeking community with people trained to properly deal with depression and anxiety.

"I think being involved in CJH genuinely saved my life," Burns said. "Everyone thought I was leading this perfect life, but one day I realized how much it was draining me. That's when I knew I had to speak up."

From releasing a 30-minute testimony about her struggles with eating disorders, depression, and anxiety to speaking at Greek life events, Burns is now taking steps to make a difference at her college. Although she said she was worried about facing backlash, students are responding with gratitude.

"I was at a party and a frat guy came up to me to say thank you," Burns said. "At first, I was confused, and then he explained how cool it was to see someone step out of their comfort zone and speak up about something that no one wants to talk about. It was really touching."

The movement to support students with mental health obstacles is also spreading to the University of Texas. Diana Darvishi, biology student and co-founder of CJH at UT has also vowed to make a difference after the effects of suicide touched her life.

“I want to bring CJH here to educate my peers on how to help your friends when they're going through a rocky time,” Darvishi said. “It's heartbreaking to watch the people you want to be in your wedding struggle without knowing how to help.”

The National Institutes of Health reports that every year in the United States, approximately 1,100 college students die by suicide while nearly 24,000 students attempt it. The mission of CJH is to promote hope, kindness and open discussions about mental health. Burns and Darvishi have both said they want to keep this mission alive by creating a more supportive college environment.

“Peer support systems kind of plant that seed to say, ‘Oh, I'm not a unicorn.’” Coles said. “This is not just me. I'm not as alone as I thought I was.”