

Understanding Mental Health and Academics

Students' academic performance and their emotional / mental health are closely linked. Many AU students come to AU with history of academic success often accompanied by confidence in their academic abilities. They seek a positive future through their studies at AU. Decline in academic performance may discourage students and add to their mental vulnerability. Similarly, other emotional or relational problems may impair academic functioning, in turn adding to students' stress. Below we highlight how stress, mental health concerns and academic performance relate to one another and what you can do for your student to help them navigate through higher education successfully.

Stress and Academic Performance

Pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree is often stressful. Common stressors when pursuing an academic degree include:

- Academic demands
- Financial responsibilities
- Being on their own in a new environment
- Changes in social and family relations
- Changes in environment and culture
- Social pressures and expectations
- Loss of comfort of familiarity
- Exposure to new people and ideas
- Preparing for life after graduation

A [survey](#) conducted in 2009 suggested that 85% of college students reported experiencing stress on a daily basis. Academic concerns like school work and grades were the most commonly noted contributors of stress (even more so than financial strain!). In return, stress (yet again) was found to be interfering with academic performance: Six out of 10 students endorsed that stress interferes with their getting work done on one or more occasions.

AU students would highly benefit from learning to how to manage stress and live a balanced life while at college. Counseling Services is available to help students manage stress and other issues that are negatively impacting their academic success. If unattended, chronic stress may lead to more serious mental health concerns.

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues on Campus

Mental health issues are increasingly more common on college campuses. College counseling centers observe an increase in the prevalence and severity of mental health concerns experienced by students. On their website, [National Mental Health Alliance \(NAMI\)](#) provides important facts and stats including the following:

- "One in four young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a diagnosable mental illness.
- More than 25 percent of college students have been diagnosed or treated by a professional for a mental health condition within the past year.
- 75% of lifetime cases of mental health conditions begin by age 24.
- Almost 73 percent of students living with a mental health condition experienced a mental health crisis on campus. Yet, 34.2 percent reported that their college did not know about their crisis."

Mental Health Concerns Impair Academic Performance

Mental health concerns affect students' ability to attend classes, focus on academic material, and learn effectively. Mental disorders may hinder motivation and/or induce feelings of discouragement and hopelessness. When unattended, students with mental health diagnoses are more likely to receive lower GPAs than their peers without such challenges. American College Health Association released a report in 2011 identifying depression and anxiety as the top impediments to academic performance.

When unattended, mental health concerns may also lead to students' leaving college. NAMI's 2012 survey revealed that 64% of young adults who dropped out of college identified mental health as their reason for not attending college with depression, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder being most commonly cited diagnoses of these young adults.

What Can You Do?

Faculty and staff hold considerable power over students and can be an important resource to overcome emotional challenges. Familiarize yourself here (**LINK to "When to Refer" on homepage**) on signs of emotional distress and how to address it with your student when you are concerned. Invite your student to talk with you and work together to build an action plan to improve their skills and overcome existing challenges. Seek consultation with your supervisor, Counseling Services staff or Dean of Students Office staff. Remember that you are not alone but you may be in a very advantageous position to help a student in distress. Thank you for your interest and cooperation in supporting our students in their holistic development.