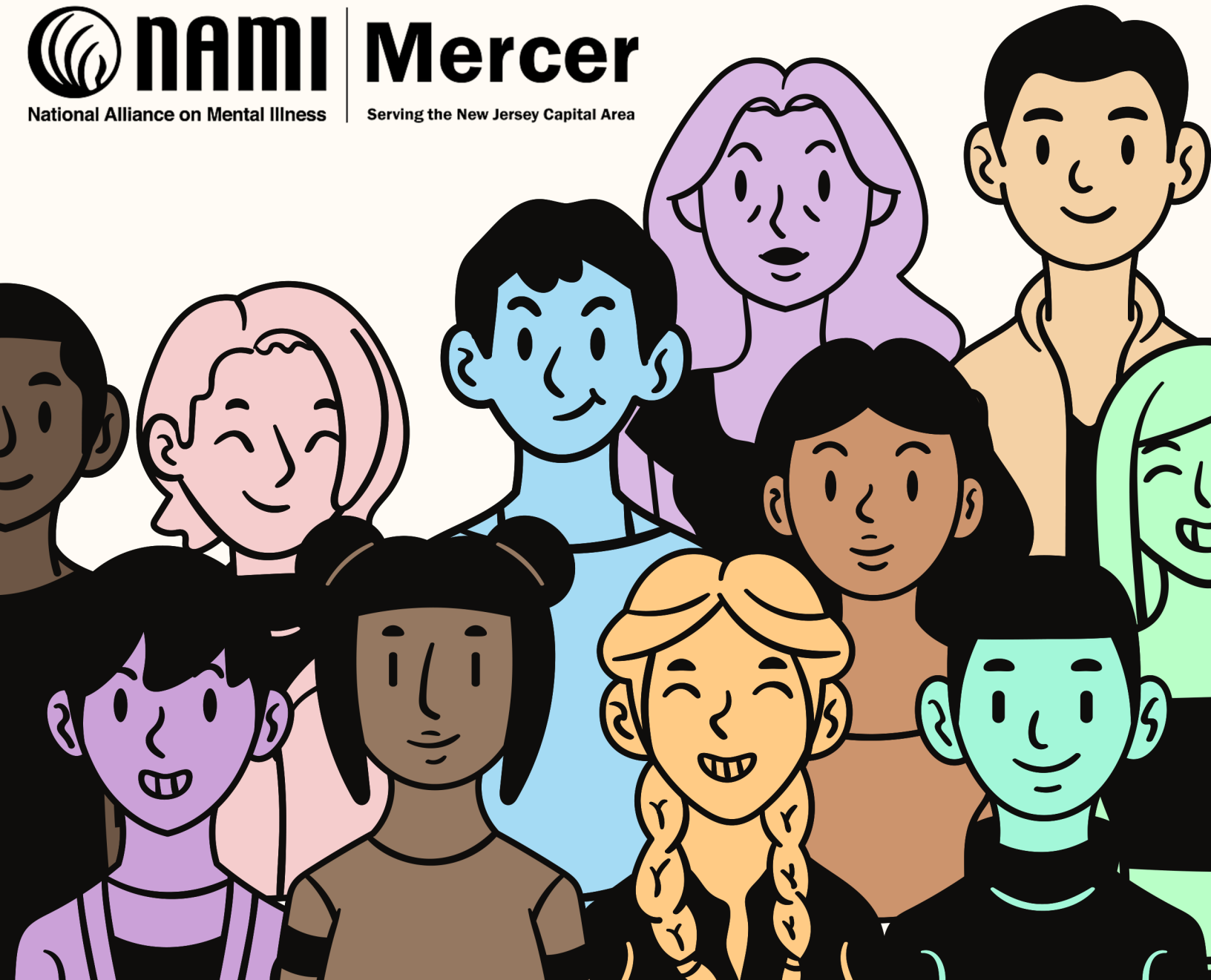


FINDING SUPPORT IN SCHOOL:

Understanding Mental Health Advocacy
for High School and College Students



Helplines and Hotlines

24/7 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Call 988

Available in English and Spanish.

24/7 Crisis Counselors

Text "NAMI" to 741741

Connection to a Crisis Counselor in minutes.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) HelpLine

Call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Mon.– Fri. live from 10am–10pm E.T.

NAMI Mercer (New Jersey) HelpLine

Call 1-609-799-8994 Ext. 17

Mon.– Fri. live from 9:30am–4:30pm E.T.

Helplines and Hotlines

The Trevor Project 24/7 Counselors (LGBTQ+)
Text "START" to 678678
Call 1-866-488-7386

Teen Line: Trained Teenage Listeners
Text "TEEN" to 839863
Call 1-800-852-8336

From 9pm–1am E.T.

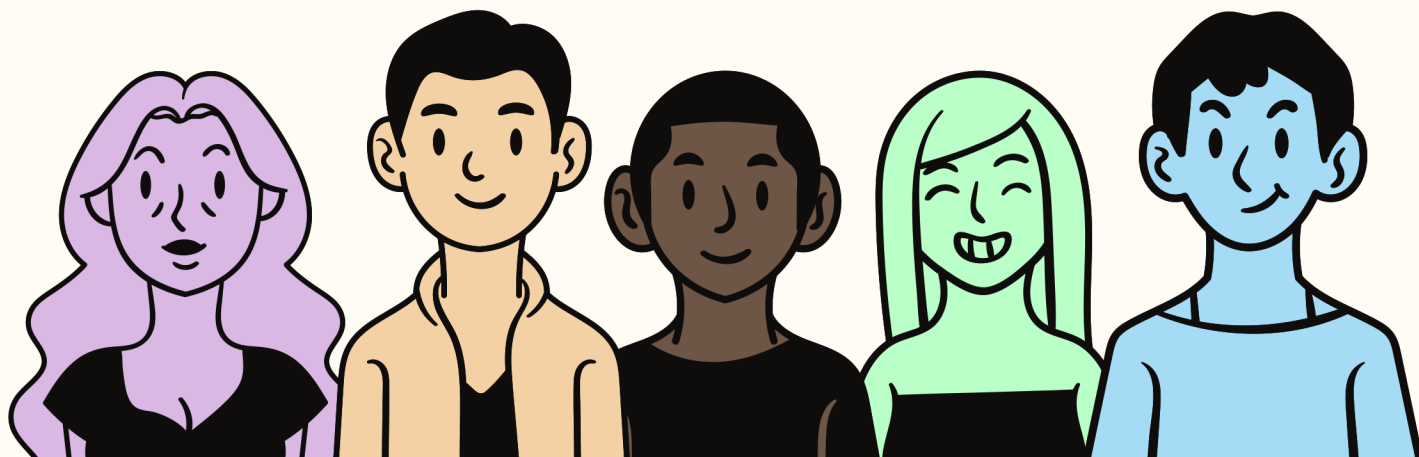
24/7 SAMHSA Substance Use National Helpline
Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
Available in English and Spanish.

24/7 National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline
Call 1-866-331-9474

THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE TO TALK TO!

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Introduction

“What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candor, more unashamed conversation.” –Glenn Close

High school and college can be an adventurous, educational, and rewarding experience for young adults; nonetheless, at times these environments can become intimidating, stressful, and exhausting, increasing the potential development of mental health conditions. This toolkit is designed to help high school and college students better understand the mental health services and support available to them while educating on the importance of self-advocacy.

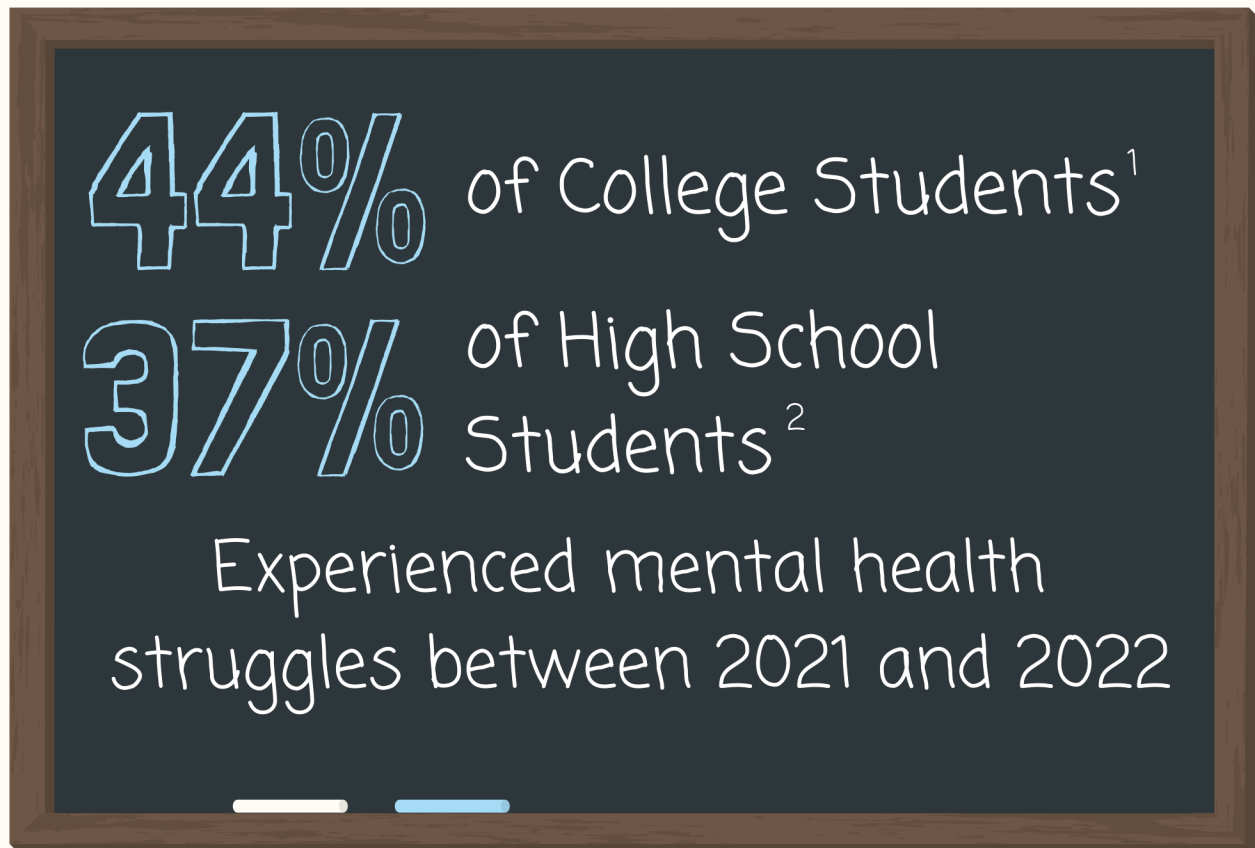
The issues concerning mental health are far too often overlooked. As the mental health crisis continues to develop, it's imperative that awareness be equally cast into the minds and hearts of our communities. It is not an instantaneous change, but a gradual spread of knowledge, understanding, and support. It requires us to criticize our prior beliefs and rebuild the constructs of our character; yet, it is not a questionable change—nor is it impossible.

Continue to pursue this change: advocate for your family, friends, and those you've yet to meet. Mental health continues to—and will always—matter!

– *Zachary Benedetti*

Author & NAMI Mercer Intern

Facts About Mental Health for High School and College Students



1. Mayo Clinic Health System (2021)

2. Pew Research Center (2022)

3. The Jed Foundation

- **Suicide** is the **third leading cause of death** for college students.
- Nearly **two-thirds** of students struggling with **substance abuse** also experienced mental health disorders.
- **Administrators, caregivers, and students** agree: **it is time to address student mental health.**³

Understanding Mental Health Across Student Populations

It's important to remember: everyone's experience with mental health is different. Oftentimes, students from minority populations are at a higher risk of developing mental health conditions.



LGBTQ+ students reported higher rates of mental health stresses compared to their heterosexual peers.¹

Female-identified students were more likely to report mental health concerns.²

Students with **lower wellbeing scores** were more likely to come from **lower-income households**.



Ethnic and racial minorities often experience **disproportionately high burden of disability** from a mental health condition.³

1. Pew Research Center (2022)
2. The Jed Foundation
3. American Psychiatric Association



Self-Advocacy: Why is it Important ⁸ in High School and College?

There will always be supportive peers by your side during your mental health journey; however, as you start to become more independent throughout high school and college, it's great to understand the importance of self-advocacy.

What is Self-Advocacy

Mental health self-advocacy consists of fully promoting and supporting your own wellbeing, health, and interests—requiring reflection and understanding of the strategies and activities that help you and those that don't. **Remember: it's always okay to ask others for help;** nevertheless, advocating for yourself can be one of the greatest ways to obtain services and support.

Self-Advocacy in High School and College

High school and college provide students the opportunity to become more independent. **This does not mean that there won't be peers, school faculty, and administration to advocate for your mental health.** However, you may be expected to take initiative: reaching out to your counseling and/or health center, showing up to scheduled therapy appointments, and practicing healthy habits to improve your overall welfare. This guide is designed to help you prepare for all these steps, and will put you in a great place to strengthen your self-advocacy.

Tips for Practicing Self-Advocacy⁹ During Therapy and Treatment

Bring a list of questions and **write down your goals**:



it's important to make the best out of your time during treatment; more so, coming prepared may help you feel more confident during your discussions.

Bring along a close family member or friend: these

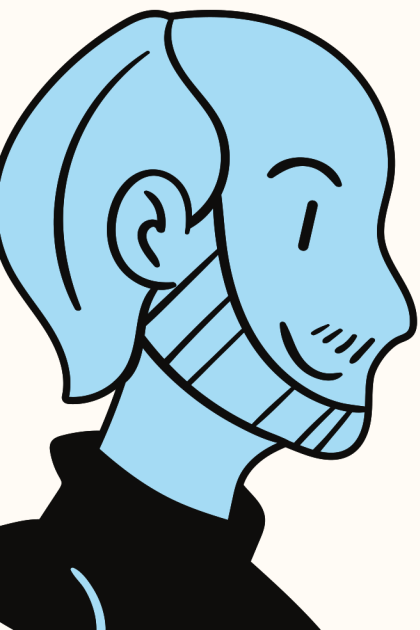


individuals can often provide a second perspective during treatment and can advocate alongside of you.

Emphasize the severity of what you're



experiencing: we often tend to minimize our mental health experiences, however it's important to be honest and truthful about your symptoms.



YOU are
your best
advocate!



More Helpful Tips for Practicing Impactful Self-Advocacy

- **Decide what you want:** be clear to yourself about exactly what you need—this helps you set goals as well as be clear to others.
- **Get the facts:** know what you are talking about and be sure your information is accurate.
- **Plan your strategy:** consider what you think will work and the necessary steps it will take to achieve your goals.
- **Gather support:** work together with your family, friends, and school staff. Talk to others who have shared similar experiences and join support groups.
- **Contact organizations:** if necessary, call an advocacy organization for additional support.
- **Be persistent:** take a firm stand and follow through!

Understanding Your Rights

Before reaching out for support, it's important to understand your rights as you begin to address your mental health:



Mental health professionals and Disability Services **can not share medical information without your permission.**

Ask about confidentiality policies before discussing your mental health.



If high school or college personnel seek to discipline you for something you believe was caused by a mental health condition, they **must provide a hearing and/or appeal process.**



You have a right to **limit the release of specific medical information**; additionally, you have a right to **review and approve medical information** made available to your school.



A student who wants to **return to school** following a leave of absence for mental health reasons **should not experience more rigorous standards and procedures** than a student returning to school after taking a leave for physical reasons.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY ARE KEY!

Disclosing Information About Your Mental Health in School

Discussing your mental health with high school or college personnel can sometimes be difficult; remember: only disclose information when you feel ready!

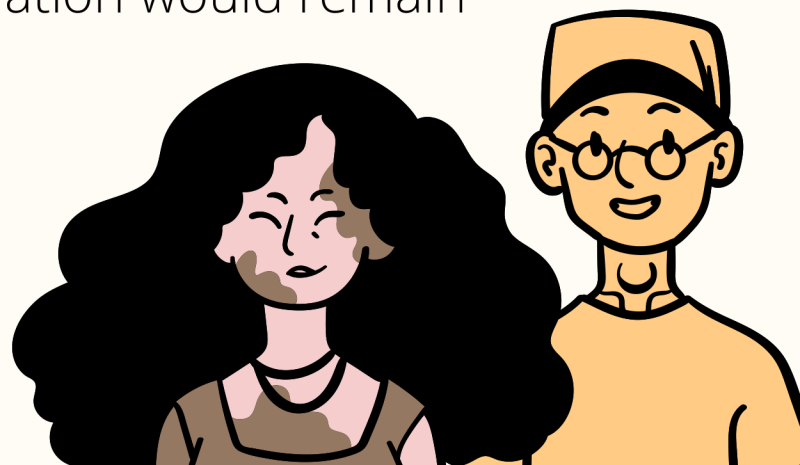
Reasons Students DID Disclose Their Mental Health Condition(s):

- 1. To receive proper accommodations
- 2. To receive clinical services and support
- 3. To be a role model and address stigma
- 4. To avoid disciplinary actions/lose financial aid

Reasons Students DID NOT Disclose Their Mental Health Condition(s):

- 1. Fear of other student and faculty perceptions
- 2. There was no opportunity to disclose
- 3. Unaware that disclosing could secure accommodations
- 4. Did not trust that their information would remain confidential

50% of students do not disclose their mental health condition.



Disclosing Information About Your Mental Health in School

WHO Should I Disclose Information To?

- **School counselors, school counseling center** and/or **health center representative**: can put you in place to receive support from school psychologists or social workers and provide referrals to off-campus services.
- **Disability Services coordinator**: assist you in gaining proper academic accommodations to promote your success (an academic advisor, counseling/health center representative, or Dean of students can also help you receive accommodations).
- Other individuals and/or places to disclose mental health information to include **resident advisors, teachers and professors, support groups, LGBTQ+ center, spiritual center**, and **mental health organizations** on- and off-campus.

WHEN Should I Disclose Information?

Only disclose information about your mental health when you are confident and comfortable to do so; however, disclosing early will better guarantee you services, support, and accommodations.

Receiving Academic Accommodations

Many schools offer specific accommodations to students who experience various disabilities—including mental health conditions.

Visiting the Disability Services/Resource Center—or discussing accommodations with other school officials and administrators—is an important step towards your academic success.

Potential Classroom Accommodations

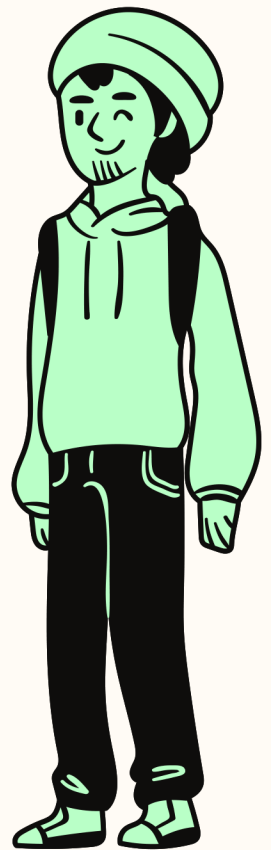
- Preferential seating
- Classmates as volunteered assistants
- Beverages in class

Potential Examination Accommodations

- Extended time
- Segmented testing
- Individually proctored exam environment

Potential Assignment Accommodations

- Advanced notice of assignments
- Substitute assignments
- Assignment assistance



Other important accommodations may include excused absences for mental health treatment, medical leave of absence, and increased availability of academic advisors.

Receiving Academic Accommodations

Before applying for accommodations, make sure you have all the proper information and materials to make the process as quick and successful as possible:



Know where the **Disability Services/Resource Center** is located (or understand how to contact a Disability Services coordinator).



Create a list of the **support you'd like to receive** to share with Disability Services and/or a teacher or professor.



Be prepared to **supply medical documentation** from your healthcare provider for any accommodation requests as necessary.



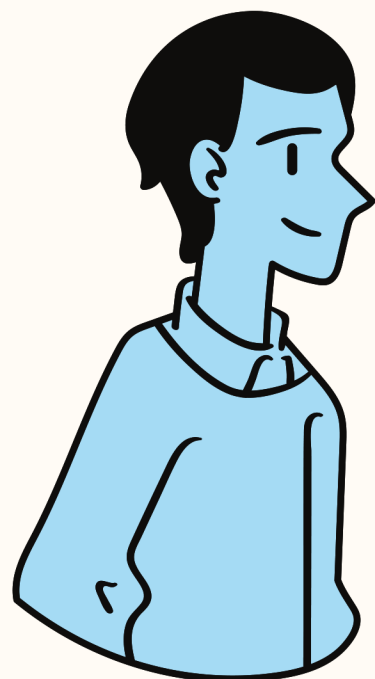
Visit the Disability Services/Resource Center's website, or **contact a school counselor** to make sure you have all the necessary documentation and understand the process for receiving accommodations.

Make sure to share your accommodations with teachers, professors, and school administration once obtained!

Finding Mental Health Support and Resources in High School

While mental health support and resources vary at different locations, many high schools offer some—if not all—of the following services:

- ✓ **School counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses:** trained mental health professionals employed by the school.
- ✓ **Teachers, administrators, coaches, and club advisors:** compassionate, trusted adults available when students need someone to talk to.
- ✓ **After-school organizations:** centered around open discussions with peers, self-care, and relaxation.
Remember: starting your own club or organization is easy!



If you're concerned about discussing your mental health with family or friends, teachers are a great resource—they get you and want to see you succeed! Teachers may share your information regarding your mental health with school administrators, school psychologists, or your parents/guardians; make sure to talk with your teacher about remaining confidential.

Finding Mental Health Support and Resources in College

Many colleges and universities offer a variety of services available to undergraduate and graduate students included in your tuition:



Campus Health and Wellbeing Center: a great place to find resources and talk with on-campus counselors and therapists.



Visit the **Disability Services/Resource Center:** learn about and apply for accommodations to support your learning and college experience.



Peer support groups and **student organizations:** centered around open discussions, self-care, and relaxation. Remember: starting your own club or organization is easy!



Professors, administrators, coaches, and **college deans:** compassionate, trusted adults available when students need someone to talk to.



Visit your college or university website to learn more about these and other resources and services available.



Who Does What?

School Counselor

Responsible for helping students succeed academically and prepare for their future. While they often focus on academic advising, counselors are also available to address students' emotional needs.



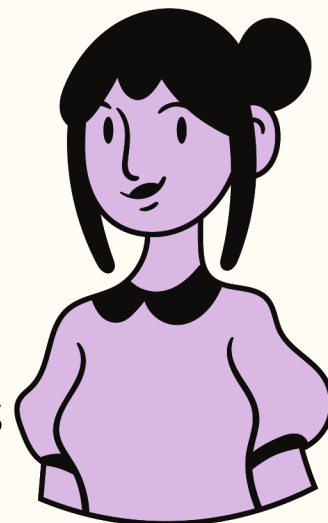
School Psychologist

Assess students for learning and behavioral concerns and work with teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians to create a support plan. Psychologists can facilitate individual and group counseling.



School Social Worker

Provide therapy for students and work with teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians to create support plans. Along with school psychologists, social workers often have masters and/or doctoral-level training.



Getting Support

It can be difficult to openly discuss your mental health experiences with others. Consider having a conversation with a trusted adult—including a parent/guardian, teacher, or friend that you feel comfortable talking to. If a face-to-face conversation might seem intimidating, try texting, calling, or emailing someone for support.

Hey, do you have a moment to talk? I haven't been feeling like myself lately.

Of course! I'm always here if you need someone to speak with. How can I help?

Finding information about your school's counselors, psychologists, and social workers is easy! Many high schools and colleges have online staff directories with contact details for individuals employed by your institution. A quick search can put you in touch with available resources and services. Additionally, consider visiting a high school or college dean and office assistants for more information about counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services and Support in School

While many high school and college students will experience a mental health concern throughout their time in school, not everyone seeks out treatment and support. Several barriers often prevent students from receiving care.

Top Five Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services in School:

1. Fear of stigmatization
2. Busy Schedule
3. Tight hours of service
4. Long wait for services
5. Unaware of how to access resources

Source: NAMI College Students Speak Survey

Other common issues that prevent individuals from acquiring support include insurance coverage, transportation, costs of treatment, and a lack of local mental health services.



Students from minority populations (i.e. multicultural, low-income, first generation) may be less likely to receive treatment and support when it is available.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services and Support in School

It's important to continuously advocate for your peers experiencing issues with their mental health—encouraging them to pursue treatment and reminding them of your support could help them feel confident and ready to seek out services.

Overcoming Stigma

Fear of stigmatization is one of the main reasons students do not access mental health resources and services at school. Both public- and self-stigma may discourage someone from receiving help. Here are some important things to remember:

You are not alone! High school and college can be stressful; other students are experiencing issues with their mental health even if they're not open about it.

Your mental health does not dictate who you are and what others think about you.

By seeking out services and support offered at your school, you are acting as a role model for other students.

Your mental health and success are more important than other's opinions.



Advocating for Mental Health Resources in School

If you find that your high school or college does not offer important mental health services and support, it's time to advocate! Consider some of the following actions to boost mental health advocacy on your campus:

For Increased Mental Health Awareness, Training, and Education:

- Distribute relevant materials (flyers, informational pamphlets)
- Encourage students, faculty, and staff to take a "stigma-free" pledge
- Promote trainings and discussions regarding mental health during freshmen orientation

For Improved Mental Health Services and Support:

- Collaborate with the student health and/or counseling center to increase mental health services and supports for students
- Promote crisis intervention services, including suicide prevention hotlines and training for students and staff

For Promoting Student Accommodations:

- Work closely with the Disability Services/Resource Center to ensure students are aware of accommodations and emphasize the importance of obtaining accommodations

Advocating for Mental Health Resources in School



Encourage on- and off-campus **speakers** to **present information** about mental health and their experiences; this may include mental health professionals, local organizations, students, and staff.



Get involved in campus and community organizations that **promote wellness and mental health advocacy**.



Hold a resource fair and **invite mental health organizations** to provide information.



Plan activities and school-wide events around **World Mental Health Day** (October 10) and **Mental Health Awareness Month** (May).



This is a non-exhaustive list of advocacy ideas—there are many more ways to advocate for mental health at your high school or college. Share your ideas with school faculty and administration, and ask your peers to help you along the way!

How to Support Peer's Mental Health in School

Oftentimes, friends and peers can offer effective support to students experiencing mental health issues. Learning proper communication techniques, identifying mental health crises, and understanding how to encourage additional help will make you a better mental health advocate for others.

How Should I Communicate with a Peer Experiencing Mental Health Issues:

DO focus on the person, not the mental health condition.
DON'T blame the person for their experiences.

DO use language that is easy to understand.
DON'T use condescending or stigmatizing vocabulary.

DO focus on strengths and abilities, not just problems.
DON'T be judgmental or argumentative.

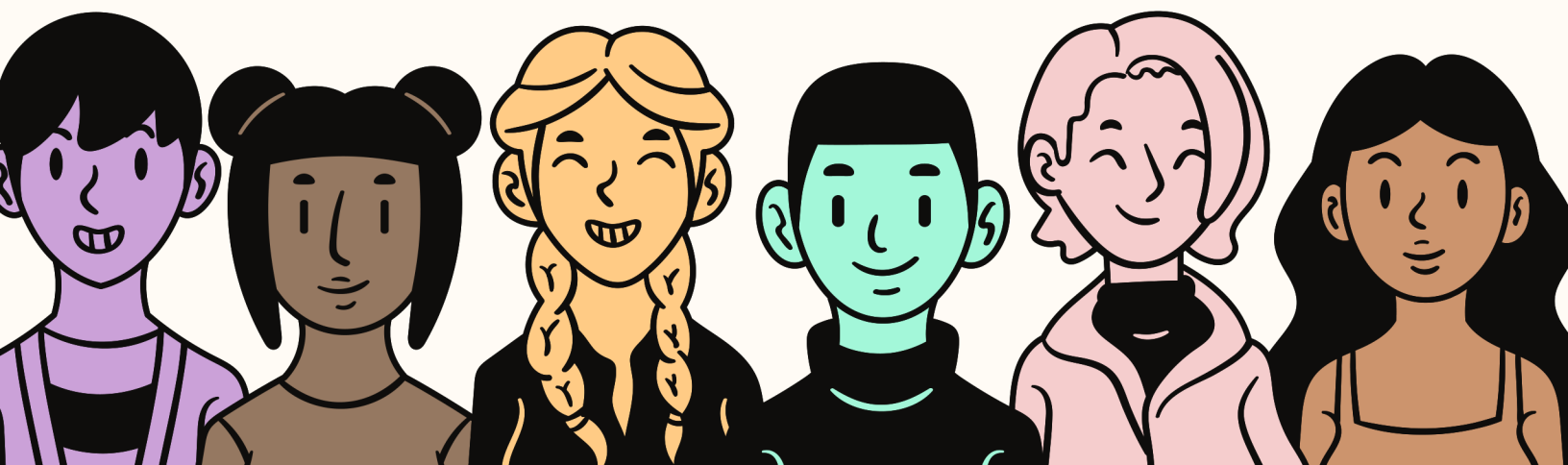
DO ask, never assume.
DON'T pretend you know how someone else feels.

How to Support Peer's Mental Health in School

Signs and Identifiers of a Mental Health Crisis

- Difficulty functioning or unable to perform daily tasks
- Intense or sudden mood changes
- Psychosis (i.e. hallucinations or delusions) and paranoia
- Feeling increasingly agitated, angry, or violent
- Increased suicidal ideation
- Harming oneself
- Isolating or withdrawing from others

If someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, encourage them to visit a student health/wellbeing center, or refer them to a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker. Continue to offer your support, and remind them you are always available to talk. Furthermore, it's important to emphasize the benefits of therapy, and volunteer to attend treatment alongside your peer if they need additional support.



Conclusion

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." -Martin Luther King

I hope this toolkit provided you the opportunity to educate yourself, and feel confident to educate others about mental health in school. There's an extensive collection of mental health resources beyond this particular toolkit—take the time to continue informing yourself and expanding the library of information you possess regarding mental health awareness.

You always have the ability to make a positive change in your community. Whether you're advocating for mental health or another critical issue, there's ample opportunities to make a long-lasting impact. I encourage you to use the information in this guide to engage in mental health advocacy on and off your high school or college campus; speak up for your peers, argue for resources and services, and allow your voice to be heard by your institution. Share elements of this toolkit as posters, flyers, and social media posts. Never stop advocating!

Remember: you are never alone. There will always be someone to talk about your mental health experiences with. Fight for your treatment, advocate for your wellbeing, and be kind to yourself—you deserve it!



Visit namimercer.org for more Mental Health Resources

(609) 799-8994 | home@namimercer.org