

The New York Times

When There Is a Mental Health Crisis in Your Dorm

As colleges face criticism for asking mentally ill students to take leaves of absence, former students discuss their struggles, and their roommates and dorm mates recount what it's like living with them.

By Lela Moore

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In the shadows of dormitories and dining halls on college campuses across America, students often murmur about their classmates' reported suicide attempts and eating disorders. And sometimes those rumors are true.

Forty percent of college students in 2018 reported feeling "overwhelmingly anxious," while 20 percent said they felt "so depressed it was difficult to function," according to the National College Health Assessment. Thirteen percent said they had considered suicide in the last year.

With many colleges and universities accused of mishandling these mental health crises, readers took to our comments section last week to defend or criticize their universities and share their own struggles. Many spoke about what it's like to live in a dorm or room with someone going through a crisis.

An article The Times reported last week about a lawsuit against Stanford University elicited the comments. The lawsuit accuses Stanford of discriminating against mentally ill students by forcing them to take a leave of absence, instead of offering them services on campus.

Here is a selection of condensed and lightly edited comments from college students, former college students and parents describing the impact of mental health crises on themselves and on other students.

Former students

'Being at home, away from my friends, was making things much worse'

I suffered from crippling depression, anxiety and insomnia as a college freshman and sophomore. In my sophomore year, I struggled to adjust to my new medications and decided to take a leave of absence.

I spent a week at home with my parents before realizing that being at home, away from my friends and without a structured routine was making things much worse and decided to return to college. My doctors agreed, but my friends and the college wanted me to take time off and I had to fight tooth and nail to return.

Ultimately they allowed it, but I was ostracized by my friends and the college administration treated me like a child. I buried myself in my schoolwork and got good grades, but it was an awful, isolating, lonely time, although I was able to take pride in having been able to succeed against the odds.

A leave of absence is probably the right move for some, but the student should have a say in that — everyone's illness and circumstances are different.

— D, New York

'Having them around me helped'

In the early '70s, I was in school and needed counseling. I was able to go to our counseling center and get the help I needed. Nearly 20 years later, I was diagnosed with mild to moderate chronic depression. Though my friends at school knew nothing about this, having them around me helped.

— Chuck, Rio Rancho, N.M.

Roommates and dorm mates

'How much should roommates or suite mates have to put up with?'

Colleges have an obligation to educate individual students and an obligation to provide a community that is suitable for learning. Obviously when students are an immediate threat to themselves, they should not be enrolled. It's trickier when an individual student's health issues affect the community at large.

How much should roommates or suite mates have to put up with? I recall having a roommate who rarely left our room, cried relentlessly, and wouldn't eat.

The same roommate got a little better and then stopped sleeping and engaged in risky behaviors with strangers. Her grades never suffered for it. What about R.A.'s? How much extraordinary work and care should they have to provide?

— Abby, Pleasant Hill, Calif.

'Her struggles were a source of stress, drama, and distraction'

Twenty years ago, when I was a freshman at Stanford, one of my dorm mates was required to leave campus for one quarter after telling a residential staff member (an undergraduate student) about her suicidal thoughts.

I felt terribly for my classmate, who did not want to leave campus and was shocked that what she believed to be a confidential conversation with a peer adviser had such profound consequences.

However, I was also relieved. Her struggles were a source of stress, drama, and distraction for everyone else in the dorm, and were more than a bunch of 18-year-olds could reasonably help her face.

I can't speak to whether the leave of absence was good for my classmate, but I know it gave those of us who had lived with her a chance to breathe, avoid walking on eggshells, and focus on our classes. When she returned spring semester, we welcomed her back with open arms, stronger footing of our own, and gratitude for her improved health.

— JG, Michigan

'My studies were much more affected by inconsiderate neighbors who blasted music than by my roommate'

The argument that depressed people are intrinsically a "disruption" to be managed different from any other social disruption is tenuous. Is the disruption the concern and moral anxiety about appropriate interventions? That is life.

My roommate at Harvard was severely anorexic and mercurial. I talked to her, her friends, and the dean about it. My studies were much more affected by inconsiderate neighbors who blasted music than by my roommate.

I can't help but wonder what kind of psychologically scrubbed culture we are envisioning colleges should maintain — sounds scary and quite corporate to me.

— Scientist, Chicago

Parents and relatives

'The psychiatrist did not find a mental illness — it was Lyme disease'

A couple of weeks before finals, my daughter called me from her dorm saying she was hearing things that were not there. She wondered if her room was haunted. She sounded fine, but concerned.

I suggested a visit to her campus mental health facility. She did. She was told to leave college and her dorm immediately.

We threw everything in the car as she had no time to pack.

After a real mental health examination, the psychiatrist did not find a mental illness — it was Lyme disease. She was placed on doxycycline and recovered. However, how the college handled this damaged her self-esteem. She was embarrassed by the college's response, leaving without saying goodbye to anyone and graduating late.

As her mother, I have mixed feelings. I would have preferred her to have a full mental health and physical exam instead of some college mental health counselor without a medical degree voicing her opinion. I never thought the college wouldn't have a psychiatrist on staff. Nor did I expect them to throw her out in less than 24 hours.

On the other hand, I am glad she was home and had excellent health care. She continued her education at a local college, graduated and has a career which she (and I) can be proud of.

Things that seem so big at 20 matter far less as time goes by, but this didn't need to happen.

— Annie, Westchester, N.Y.

'My daughter's freshman year roommate committed suicide'

My daughter's freshman year roommate committed suicide after returning from being sent home due to mental illness, so I have lived this.

As the roommate began to struggle,, her friends were caught in a terrible place — they didn't want to betray their friend, or see her expelled, and they were trying so very hard to support her, but they were in over their heads trying to help as well. The distrust of staff extended to the survivors.

When the administration sent out a form letter (yep, my daughter got an email which was not personalized with either her own name or her roommate's name) urging students to visit the counseling center or talk to wellness if they were struggling with grief after this girl's suicide, the students mostly chose to support each other instead. They didn't know if their grief and stress would get them expelled, too.

— Jan, Washington State

'Very young adults end up monitoring a depressed or suicidal student'

College students are part of a community of young adults. They have legal standing but limited life experience and varying degrees of maturity.

The reality is that other very young adults — from a 19-year-old roommate to a 20-year-old resident assistant — end up monitoring a depressed or suicidal student and sometimes take responsibility for them. That is extremely unfair to the rest of the students.

I know a 20-year-old dorm leader who cut down a student who had hanged herself, administered CPR, and yelled for someone to call 911. The student's parent later repeatedly harassed this volunteer for not closing the dorm room door to ensure their daughter's privacy while receiving CPR.

— M.R. Sullivan, Boston

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