

## Mental Health on College Campuses

by Cynthia A. Smith, MS, CAS, JD

### COLLEGE STUDENTS, LIKE MOST ADULTS, EXPERIENCE SOME FORM OF STRESS IN THEIR DAILY LIVES.

For college students the stressors are exacerbated by living away from home for the first time, trying to balance school and other commitments, developing new friendships and relationships, and trying out their newly discovered independence. As a result, most students, at some point during their college years, experience concerns regarding their mental and/or physical health.

During the 2006-07 school year, colleges and universities across the country enrolled their largest incoming freshman class. With larger student populations than ever before, one might expect that any form of violence on college campuses would also increase. Postsecondary schools are also experiencing an increase in the number of students seeking mental health services. A recent national survey conducted by Pennsylvania State University found sixty percent of university health centers reporting a record number of students using campus counseling services and doing so for longer periods of time than in previous academic years, according to the Anxiety Association of America.

Stigma is the predominant reason why students with mental health disabilities do not seek treatment. As reported in *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America* (2003) by the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, stigma "is a pervasive barrier to understanding the gravity of mental illnesses and the importance of mental health." Research shows that 61 percent of Americans believe that a

person with schizophrenia is likely to harm others. In actuality, however, people with schizophrenia are rarely violent toward others, and if they are, the violence is commonly related to a co-occurring substance abuse disorder.

After school shootings, the students' mental illnesses are discussed, but little is said about contributing societal and environmental factors, such as stigma about mental illness and access to mental health services.

The first recommendation in *Achieving the Promise* is to implement a national campaign to reduce the stigma of seeking treatment for mental illness and a national strategy to prevent suicide. This can be accomplished by increased understanding about mental health through the use of targeted public education campaigns.

Personal contact with someone already dealing with a mental illness is one of the most effective ways to reduce stigma. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has undertaken this endeavor by developing NAMI on Campus, whose goal is to improve "the lives of all those affected by a mental illness, ending the stigma associated with mental illness, and the ultimate goal of eradicating mental illness." Student-organized and student-run, the NAMI on Campus groups "provide

"Each day that another person decides not to perpetuate mental illness stereotypes and takes the time to understand the issue, we as a community take one step closer to becoming a healthier community. It is that simple."

*Stigma.net, 2007*



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mental health support, education, and advocacy” in postsecondary educational settings. More information and a listing of chapters can be found at [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org), NAMI’s Web site.

Seeking to improve mental and behavioral health services on college campuses, Senator Richard Durbin (IL) introduced the Mental Health on Campus Improvement Act (S.3311) on July 23, 2008. Senators Carl Levin (MI), Debbie Stabenow (MI), and Sheldon Whitehouse (RI) cosponsored the bill, which has broad support from educational and mental health organizations, and it has been referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

The proposed Act would lower the counselor-to-student ratio from the current average of one counselor for every 2,000 students to a ratio of one counselor for every 1,000 to 1,500 students. The shortage of counselors on campus, with an increasing student population, is an example of how the mental health system is failing students by not providing them with access to services. Stigma about mental illness further prevents many students from seeking assistance. The Act finds that only 22 percent of students who committed suicide on college campuses were former or current clients of college counseling services. Some advocates have raised concerns about linking the Act to the school shootings because it may perpetuate stigma and misperceptions about the relationship between mental illness and violence.

Increasing the mental health services and resources available to all students on college campuses is an important initiative to ensure that postsecondary education fulfills its goal of preparing young adults to lead independent and economically self-sufficient lives. For students with AD/HD and related disorders, it is important that college campuses are welcoming of students with all types of disabilities. All students must feel they are valuable members of the college campus and greater community.

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