COLLEGE for RURAL WISCONSIN

Mental Health Guide for College Students

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Mental health has gained public interest in the past decade, yet mental health for students is at an all-time low, with the National Education Associate (NEA) describing the current state of college students' mental health as a "crisis" (Flannery, 2023). It comes as no surprise that people living in rural areas face disparities in mental health outcomes when compared to urban counterparts (Morales et al, 2020). For these reasons, we at College for Rural Wisconsin have put together a guide for rural college students on how to care for your mental health while in college. While this resource has UW-Madison specific resources, we also feature a plethora of general tips for any college student.

1. **Build Community**
    a. Belonging to a community helps us feel like we belong. And having a sense of belonging is a huge indicator of success and continued perseverance in college.
    b. There are lots of ways to find your communities at college, but the biggest step is putting yourself out there! Joining student-led clubs and organizations can be a great way to meet people with similar interests while also doing something you like to do!
    c. Forming study groups with other students in your classes and choosing to study/spend your time at places beyond your bedroom (even if that just means moving to the living room or common space) can help you be more social and improve your relationship with others.
    d. If maintaining relationships with family members and old friends from back home is important to you, then putting in the effort to call, send a text message, or connect in-person is worth it!
2. **Practice Self-Care**
    a. Self-care is simple: it is the act of taking care of oneself. This can look very different for each person, but examples include brushing your teeth, doing your laundry, baking something sweet, going for a walk, or getting a massage. Anything that makes you feel better physically, mentally, and emotionally can be self-care!
3. **Balance**
    a. Life is all about balance! You should never put all your eggs in one basket. While you may have come to college to learn, it is important that you also have experiences beyond your textbooks! Lots of learning and growth occurs outside of the classroom. Make sure to set aside time for hanging out with friends and family,
    b. When your body is healthy, your mental health improves too! It is imperative that you eat enough to fuel your body and mind while in college. Drinking plenty of water can help improve your mood and help your focus better. Carrying around a reusable water bottle to classes is one way to easily help increase your water intake.

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The road from rural to college-ready!

4. **Prioritize Yourself & Your Health**
    a. Taking a mental health day is very normal and can help set you up for greater success than trying to push through when you're not at your peak. We all have days when we wish we could stay home because the walk to class is long, or it's raining outside, or our favorite series just released a new episode, but if you are really struggling to get out of bed and accomplish anything productive for the day, it's best to let yourself get the rest you need. When a mental health day starts to look more like a mental health week, then it might be time to reach out for some additional support in getting back on your feet.
5. **Becoming Your Own Advocate**
    a. Unlike in high school where you may have had your parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults in your life to support you and advocate for your wellbeing, at college, it is now your chance to learn how to speak up for yourself!
    b. This is not to say that you are entirely on your own, instead we want you to feel liberated in having the freedom to build your own network of support and explore the resources that work best for you!
    c. If you feel that you would benefit from accommodations in class or you're struggling with your mental health and you want to discuss with someone possible treatment options, there are resources on campus to help you!
    d. This also applies to feeling pressure to be someone you aren't. Don't feel you need to have the latest and greatest to fit in. If you aren't comfortable attending any event or participating in any 'normal' college activity, it's okay to say "no". In fact, learning to say "no" is one of the most important skills you can learn to stand up for yourself and be your own advocate!
    e. We won't sugar coat it; it is challenging to speak up for yourself, but you can do it! Others will tell you that the first step is the hardest, but you won't regret getting on a path to bettering yourself!
6. **How to Access Mental Health Resources**
    a. Disability resource centers
    b. Mental health facilities
    c. Sexual health and assault
    d. Addiction and support groups

Program supported by:

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Published: April 2024