

Depression in College Students

ALISSA STEINER



WRITER'S COMMENT: This was the last of four feature articles I wrote in one quarter, and it was assigned to be the longest and most in-depth of the four. I was discouraged as I struggled to think of a topic that I felt passionate about researching. The night before the first draft was due I attended a seminar on depression in college students, and I was immediately motivated to write about the topic. It is extremely important for college students to recognize the symptoms of depression and the ways in which their campuses can provide help. The pressing nature of this issue made writing my final feature article both an educational and an emotional experience for me.

—Alissa Steiner

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Alissa's final piece for UWP 104C (Journalism) demonstrates just how compelling a feature article can be when the author identifies a significant topic, develops it with powerful specific support, and writes cleanly and directly. Her purposeful exploration of depression from a local as well as a national angle results in an especially relevant discussion, one that commands our attention, conveys the seriousness of the problem, and offers valuable insight.

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program



NIMA SHATERIAN WAS THE 2004–05 student body president at Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, California. He starred in plays, wrote volumes of poetry, and played the piano. I knew Nima—he was a year behind me in school, and a friend of my sister's. I heard him speak at his graduation, awing the audience with his wisdom and his wit. As I did, Nima went on to study at UC Davis, where he

made friends easily and was known for being charismatic, friendly, funny, and bright. Nobody guessed that on January 3, 2006—the day before he planned to return to Davis for winter quarter of his freshman year—he would shoot himself to death. Seven hundred people attended his memorial, all trying to understand why someone so popular, gifted, and warm would want to end his life.

Nima is one of the 11 UC Davis students who committed suicide between 2000 and 2006.

Depression and suicide are major issues not only here in Davis but also at college campuses nationwide. A striking number of college students are being diagnosed with depression, and that number is consistently rising. A study by the American College Health Association in 2005 showed that 15 percent of college students around the country have been professionally diagnosed with depression, up from 10 percent in 2000.

Understanding depression, its symptoms and its consequences, can help us identify and help friends and family members who may be suffering. Also, if counseling services on college campuses were able to better publicize and reach out to students, perhaps more students could get the help they need before it is too late.

Recognizing Depression

DEPRESSION IS AN ILLNESS that inhibits a person's ability and desire to function normally day to day. People who suffer from depression typically experience a loss of interest in once-pleasurable things, along with sadness, irritability, fatigue, weight changes (loss or gain), inability to sleep, and feelings of hopelessness and despair. The symptoms of depression can be easy to mistake for moodiness or stress, and students who suffer from those symptoms often fail to get help in time.

Depression is caused by chemical changes in the brain. The brain sends out neurotransmitters between cells to regulate mood. In depression, these chemical messages aren't delivered correctly between brain cells, disrupting communication. When this happens, people lose access to their positive moods, and they feel anxious, stressed, and depressed. In addition, research in genetics has shown that people can inherit a vulnerability to brain chemistry changes related to depression. When someone has a stressful or traumatic experience, that vulnerability may be triggered and can lead to the onset of a mental illness. The hormonal changes

experienced during the teen years can also cause chemical changes in the brain that inhibit neurotransmitters, meaning that depression is not merely a passing condition. College students need to recognize both the causes and the symptoms of depression so that they can get help if they need it, or seek guidance about how to help a friend who is depressed.

Triggering Factors

COLLEGE IS A TIME WHEN STUDENTS often experience a variety of pressures that can initiate depression, leaving college students at a higher risk than other age groups to develop mental illnesses. Diana Hill, a Doctoral intern at the UC Davis Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), attributes the high number of depressed students to the challenge of balancing multiple life demands. While in college, students often juggle school, work, extracurricular activities, family, relationships, and friends, among other things. “Students have to play all these roles at once and often feel a lack of support in that process,” says Hill. She also notes that students may not have fully developed the coping skills to deal with the stress of all the transitions they make during their college years.

According to Hill, the stress starts at the very beginning—the shock of leaving the support of family life at home for independence can be enough to traumatize a student. And once college students are in school, more pressures abound. Demands are increasing for students to earn advanced degrees in order to have top careers, and students must achieve high grades so that the top graduate schools will admit them. Such heavy workloads and competition can certainly play on a student’s psyche. In addition to academic stress, many students must also finance their own educations. Working to support themselves while trying to keep up academically is difficult and can fuel anxiety and hopelessness. Finally, many students take on new kinds of relationships for the first time during college as well, and the instability caused by the building and breaking of interpersonal bonds lends itself to feelings of depression and anxiety. All of these stressors can easily trigger depression, especially in students who are genetically predisposed.

Hill identifies another reason for the increase in students experiencing depression and seeking therapy—the recent advance in psychopharmacology. “Over time, we are seeing more cases of people making it to college who have been depressed earlier in life and had good treatment,” she says. In effect, students who in the past may not have been capable

of attending universities are able to further their educations. When these students are exposed to college-related stressors, they often find themselves re-experiencing depression and anxiety. Some will seek treatment once again, though others may not.

Depression at Its Darkest: Suicide

DEPRESSION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS can have devastating consequences; over the course of a single year, 1 in 12 college students in the United States will make a suicide plan, and about 15 of every 100,000 college students die each year from suicide. It is the second leading cause of death among college students, second only to accidents. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) chancellor Phillip Clay stated, “Indeed, the death of a student is one of the most painful losses a college community can suffer.” MIT, which has a reputation of being an academic pressure cooker, recorded 12 suicides between 1990 and 2000.

The most shocking of these suicides was that of Elizabeth Shin, an MIT sophomore who set herself on fire in her dorm room in 2000. On the surface, she was popular and lively, busy and self-motivated. She was an accomplished musician, athlete, and student who had many friends in her dorm. But she dreamt of death, of escaping the pressures she put on herself to feel worthy, productive, and loved. She told her suicidal thoughts to some roommates and friends, who feared for her life. And though she shared with various counselors at the MIT counseling center that she was regularly cutting her wrists, having suicidal fantasies, and not eating, they neglected to tell her parents or admit her to a hospital. On April 9, 2000, Elizabeth confessed to a friend and a counselor that she had seriously contemplated sticking a knife in her chest. Two days later, her dormmates heard Elizabeth crying and smelled smoke coming from her locked room before immediately calling for help. The fire squad found her engulfed in flames, flailing on the floor in the middle of her room. On April 14, Elizabeth died in the hospital of third-degree burns covering 65% her body.

Elizabeth’s death brought national attention to the state of students’ mental health. In an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Deborah Sontag wrote that colleges and universities were sharpening “an evolving national conversation about a more demanding, more needy and more troubled student body. Colleges are grappling to minister to what admin-

istrators describe as an undergraduate population that requires both more coddling and more actual mental health care than ever before.”

Counseling Services at UC Davis

UC DAVIS FACES THE SAME CHALLENGES as colleges around the country in providing adequate mental health care for its increasingly distressed students. Davis’ Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is designed specifically to aid students with any psychological stress they are experiencing, be it situational or long-term mental illness. CAPS works on multiple levels and aims to be a welcoming and available service to any student who should need psychological support. Students can attend group support sessions, and they can also receive individual therapy support for up to five free meetings before being referred to a psychiatrist. CAPS also offers structured skill-based programs to educate students on health and wellness, relaxation skills, sleep strategies, and other self-care strategies. As Hill sees it, CAPS is an excellent program because “we provide a continuity of care for our patients—we provide many services and work as a team so students don’t fall through the cracks.” It is their hope, says Hill, that “clients will have a place where they can reconnect with their own coping skills and strengths.” Students can walk in any time between 8 A.M. and 5 P.M. and talk to the counselor on call.

Despite the caring effort behind its programs, CAPS is not as widely utilized as it could be. A survey conducted three years ago showed that only about 70% of the student body knows about CAPS, even though the Center does have some outreach programs. According to Hill, one of the biggest challenges CAPS faces is a lack of funding, leading to fewer counselors than are really needed to serve the number of students coming in. “The counselors here are very busy,” she laments. “There are just not enough people here.” Students who have visited CAPS notice the same problem. Hagar Liebermensch, a student and former Resident Advisor at UC Davis, says, “In my experience, it has been challenging to schedule appointments there, often making sessions few and far between.” Liebermensch believes that a lot can happen between sessions, so a student who needs a great deal of help may not find it at CAPS. With more money, CAPS could also do more prevention and outreach, rather than just crisis intervention. This way, more students would know about the services CAPS provides. Perhaps students would in turn know more

about what depression looks like, and would know when and how to seek help for themselves or their friends.

Looking Out For Each Other

SO WHAT CAN WE DO FOR A FRIEND who is in crisis or appears to be mentally unhealthy? The first step is acknowledging that friend's feelings. Expressing concern for our friend's well-being, while at the same time validating that it might be hard for them to speak out about their feelings, is crucial. As Hill phrases it, "the first piece with friends is listening, offering support, and knowing that if someone doesn't want to seek help, all you can do is try to support him or her." Should a friend appear to be a threat to himself or herself, or to others, the problem should be addressed immediately. Hill recommends in such situations that concerned students either come into CAPS themselves or bring their friend in directly.



I WILL NEVER KNOW FOR CERTAIN why my classmate Nima took his life. Maybe if he and his friends had been more aware of counseling services on campus, he or they would have sought out support. Perhaps he did not realize that what he was feeling was far more common than it seemed.

If students are better educated about what depression is and how to detect it, they may be quicker to seek out someone to talk to, and possibly less likely to consider suicide as a solution. For though the college years may be commonly referred to as "the best four years" of a person's life, they are packed with turmoil. Hopefully, as universities come to realize the importance of students' mental health in academic functioning, they will make funding their counseling services a priority. Perhaps then fewer college students will suffer needlessly—or take their own lives.



Sources

Birch, Kristi. "College Level Coping." *Arts & Sciences Magazine, John Hopkins University* Fall/Winter 2005.

Depression.com. <<http://www.depression.com>>

"Elizabeth Shin." *Wikipedia: Free Online Encyclopedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Shin>

Hill, Diana. Personal Interview, 30 November 2007.

iFred—International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression. <<http://www.iFred.org>>

Kennedy, Talia. “UC Regents Hear Plan to Prevent Suicide.” *The California Aggie* 29 September 2006.

Liebermensch, Hagar. Personal Interview, 3 December 2007.

Polonik, Wolfgang & Shahar Sunsani. “Counseling and Psychological Services Unit Visit 2006–2007.” *Student Services and Fees Administrative Advisory Committee* 22 February 2007.

Ryan, Joan. “The Darkness Behind his Perfect Smile.” *The San Francisco Chronicle* 15 January 2006: B-1.

Sontag, Deborah. “Who was Responsible for Elizabeth Shin?” *The New York Times Magazine* 28 April 2002 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9F00EED7113FF93BA15757C0A9649C8B63>>.

Stone, Gigi. “Depression, Suicide Stalk College Students.” *World News Tonight*. ABC News. 2 October 2005 <<http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Health/story?id=1188772>>.

“Youth Suicide Fact Sheet.” American Association of Suicidology. <<http://www.suicidology.org>>

