

## **Health and Wellness of Students: A Lifestyle Issue**

A student's health is impacted by his or her lifestyle. This may be very positive as many students establish healthy lifestyles in college in which they carry throughout the rest of their lives. However, as students are exploring and experimenting in a new environment, unhealthy lifestyles can emerge. The outcomes can be minimal but may be lethal. No matter if we work on a residential campus, community college, or technical institution, student service professionals need to be informed about the impact of health issues on students.

We must realize as student services professionals that the health and wellness of our students is impacted by their overall lifestyles and the environment around them. This means, for example, that we have the opportunity to help them identify that the stress they are experiencing may not be caused solely on their course work and outside commitments. It can also be related to decisions about sleep, alcohol, exercise and/or diet. It is also necessary for us to understand that the things we do and say and the environment we create at our institutions and even in our own offices impact decisions that our students make. These decisions directly impact a student's health and wellness and in the end, their academic success.

Students with a health concern, acute or chronic, have the potential to miss class and not be able to complete class assignments. This seems obvious when discussing health problems such as the flu or appendicitis, however, what about the other health issues such as nutrition, alcohol or sexual behavior impact a student's success in class? Although sometimes less obvious, the impact of these other health issues may be more damaging.

Other chronic health issues may impact a student's academic success. As more and more students are being diagnosed with cancer, diabetes, Crone's Disease and others before attending college, students are also being diagnosed while taking classes. It is not only the number of doctor appointments that can impact a student's academics but also the financial burdens, physical ability and mental health that must be considered as well. College may become a second, third, or fourth priority for the student after diagnosis. Financially a student may not be able to afford to continue or does not know about other financial resources that his/her college has to offer for students. Doctors may insist that a student take time off to recover or to lighten an academic load. This entire process can also be mentally and physically draining. It is therefore critical for us to try to understand the scope of health issues facing our students.

### **Common Health Issues and the Impact on Academic Success**

Students have many of the same health problems as the general population. They have many chronic and acute care needs that range from sprains and minor infections to Crone's disease and diabetes. What makes many college students different is that they may delay treatment until their schedule allows them to seek medical attention (Grace, 1997). This time must fit somewhere in between study groups, class, student organizations, family commitments, studying, work and social time. It is also difficult to fit in general wellness components into a college student's life. This includes getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, maintaining healthy relationships, moderating alcohol use, and including other health benefiting activities. It is therefore important for us and our students to understand what this balanced, healthy lifestyle looks like in practice.

## Alcohol and Other Drugs

Alcohol use among college students is becoming more of a concern because of the negative outcomes that occur on all college campuses. Students are not only drinking more in college, but they are experiencing more problems. The Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2002) reported that 1 to 70% of college students are binge drinking. In addition it found that 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries, 600,000 assaults, 400,000 cases of unprotected sex, and 2.1 million cases of drinking and driving occur each year among students ages of 18 and 24.

Drugs can have the same impact as alcohol. Students are using drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, methamphetamine and others. There is also abuse of prescription drugs by students. Some are abusing drugs such as Oxycontin recreationally while others are abusing or misusing prescribed Ritalin or Aderall to study. These drugs in particular are being crushed and snorted to allow students study all night long.

Drinking and drug use have a measured impact on a students success in college. The Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2002) sites several studies where the outcomes of alcohol use and abuse include missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades among 25% of students. In addition, alcohol can impact a student's abstract thinking (the ability to solve problems, understand motivations, put ideas together, etc.) in relation to the quantity consumed (Parker et al., 1980). Several national surveys revealed the outcomes of this heavy drinking. It reported that those that had D/F grade point average drank an average of 10.0 drinks per week while students that had A

grade point average drank an average 4.0 drinks per week (Presley, Leichter & Meilman, 1999). Drugs like marijuana impact an individual's executive functioning affecting ability to learn and recall information and to pay attention to more than one thing at a time (Pope & Yurgelun-Todd, 1996). Users are therefore not in a good place to continue coursework or go to class. Overall, this use, misuse and abuse of alcohol and other drugs create negative outcomes on both a student's health and academic success.

### Diet and Nutrition

A student's diet may change once he/she begins college. Students are moving around all day and have changing schedules, making it much more difficult to sit down and eat a balanced meal (Litt, 2000). In any case, the diets of many students change when they begin college that can lead to weight gain, malnutrition and other health concerns.

Added to these issues, body image can impact a student's eating and exercising choices, which negatively impacts his/her health. It is estimated that 20-30 percent of students in college have an eating disorder of some type (Litt, 2000). Messages from the media, other students, parents, instructors, etc. can impact how a person feels about his/her body and body image.

Changes in diet, eating disorders and body image concerns may all lead academic issues and concerns. An unhealthy diet may lead to a lowered immune system resulting in more illnesses and more missed coursework. Individuals with eating disorders may be dealing with more complex issues impacting his/her mental health. Again, this will impact a student's ability to focus on academics.

## Mental Health

More and more, students are coming to college diagnosed with mental health issues. One study reported that 53% of students reported what they label as depression and 9% reported thinking about suicide since entering college. Of those that reported depression, only 17% reported seeking counseling of some kind (Furr, S. R., et al., 2001). Depression is not the only issue, however. Students are diagnosed with bipolar, obsessive/compulsive, anxiety and other disorders. Whether these issues are diagnosed before attending college or after classes begin, there can be a major impact on the student as well as other students, faculty and staff.

Mental health issues can impact a student's success in a variety of ways. A student on medication for depression may have been monitored by a parent or school personnel in the past. Once she/he starts spending less time at home, he/she may forget or refuse to take the prescribed medication. The student could then deal with a bout of depression and stop attending classes. He/she could also begin drinking while in college and not realize the impact of alcohol on the depression medications. This pharmacokinetic interaction means that that alcohol interferes with the metabolism of the medication (Weathermon & Crabb, 1999). Again, the student's depression may return with negative outcomes.

## Sexual Health

College students are also given more freedom to experiment in relationships including sexual relationships. Students do become pregnant, infected with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as herpes and HIV, and are victims of sexual and relationship violence while in college. One national study estimates that approximately

15% of college students between 18 and 24 have gotten pregnant or have gotten a partner pregnant (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 1997). A more recent national study shows that 3.5% of college students who had vaginal intercourse in the last school year experienced an unintentional pregnancy or got someone pregnant within the last school year (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2001).

Regarding STIs rates among college students, there is difficulty in obtaining accurate and consistent numbers. The National College Health Assessment data from 2000 shows that 1% have experienced genital herpes, 1.4% have experienced genital warts or HPV, 0.2% have experienced HIV infection, 0.8% have experienced chlamydia, 0.4% have experienced gonorrhea and 0.7% have experienced pelvic inflammatory disease within last year (ACHA, 2001). However, other sources indicate that two-thirds of all STIs occur in people 25 years of age or younger (American Social Health Association, 2003).

Sexual behaviors can lead to many unwanted or unintended consequences. Pregnancy may delay a student from graduating or end the degree altogether. NCHA data shows that overall 1.5% of college students reported that their pregnancy or a partner's affected their individual academic performance (i.e., received an incomplete, dropped a course, received a lower grade in a class, on an exam, or on an important project) (ACHA, 2001). A sexually transmitted infection, even if treatable such as gonorrhea, can create added stress to the student's life. This stress can come in the form of having to seek treatment, tell a partner, or evaluate the sexual decisions made under the influence of alcohol. More women and communities of color are experiencing

increasing rates of HIV, and students, who did not believe they were at risk, may be diagnosed with this disease. Although HIV is treated as a chronic disease now, the costs to the medications, treatments and medical care is extraordinary. Unfortunately there is still a stigma attached to HIV infections. All of these factors can directly impact a student's success in college.

College may also be a time where students explore and learn about their sexuality and how sexual behaviors fit into their lives, value system and future plans. Issues around abstinence, contraception and safer sex are decided; likewise, sexual orientation, gender roles and gender identity are often explored. These decisions may differ from their upbringing, which can throw students into a whirlwind of confusion and frustration as they develop as a sexual person.

### Sleep

Sleep is not a priority in our culture and this is no different for students. The day includes class time, studying, work, socializing, involvement in student organizations, volunteering and sports. Students often have to include full time employment, families and maintenance of a household. These activities leave very little time for sleep. The impact of this lack of sleep, however, can be detrimental.

The lack of sleep can create many different health issues for students. The body's metabolic activity is at its lowest, and the pituitary gland's secretions of growth hormones are peaked in deep sleep, which allows for tissue growth and repair. In addition, the body increases its immune response to infections during sleep. The important aspect of sleep for students, however, is that REM sleep plays a major role in facilitating memory storage and retention, organization and reorganization, as well as

new learning and performance. When sleep is disrupted, the brain's ability to transfer short-term memory into long-term memory is impaired (Maas, 1998). Although sleep is not valued by our culture and the lack of sleep can create problems for anyone, it can be unforgiving for students that are already under severe time constraints.

### Stress

Stress is necessary in our lives to get things done. Without it, we would not get anything done. College students, however, are under a lot of stress in which they can both control and not control. Although students do not have control over when their children get sick or when their parents pass away, they do have control over many other stressors in their lives. It is critical to help students connect their behaviors such as procrastination with the stress that occurs when they cannot get a project completed.

Individuals react to stress in different ways. For some, stress can motivate individuals to get things done but for others it may cause a mental and emotional shut down. When students are not able to frame situations or not prioritize responsibilities, the end product is a feeling of drowning in which a student does not feel he/she can escape. One small stressor begins a sequence of events that result in feelings of helplessness.

### Tobacco

Tobacco use among college students is higher than in the general population. The results of the national Core Survey revealed that that 35.8% of students were current smokers (Core Institute, 2000). This is compared to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (2000) report of 25.7% of men and 21% of women who are smokers. Although women in the general population smoke less than men, women in

college smoke more than men (Johnston et al., 2002). Reasons that students smoke include weight control, managing stress and smoking used a social tool. It is a way to meet people, especially when out at bars and clubs.

Tobacco use can also impact the health and wellness of students. Tobacco users have more colds and other illnesses, because of the suppression of the immune system (Sopori, 2002). Although many of the long term health effects will not be experienced by most college students, the acute affects can have a negative impact on a student's health and academic success.

### Violence

Violence can take many forms including physical, emotional and psychological. College campuses are not immune from any of these types of violence. There are many studies done on violence on college campuses. Ottens and Hotelling (2001) reported that one such study where 54% of college women reported some type of sexual victimization. They noted another study at North Carolina State where 27% of the women reported being physically or psychologically pressured into intercourse.

Relationship violence is another issue that can impact academic success during the college years. NCHA data shows that 15% of college students reported relationship difficulties affected their individual academic performance (i.e., received an incomplete, dropped a course, received a lower grade in a class, on an exam, or on an important project) (ACHA, 2001). In addition, approximately 16% have been involved in an emotionally, physically or sexually abusive relationship in the last year.

### **Support and Referral**

It is important to know that you can have an impact on your students' lives no matter what position you have within your institution. If you are worried about a student or if a student comes to you to talk about a problems, make sure you document your interactions and keeping the information confidential. Here are some basic steps for supporting and referring students (The University of Georgia Health Center, 2003):

- Listen. If a student comes to you with a problem, let him/her talk through it. Many times the process of talking will open the door for the student to identify pieces of the problem and solutions without help. It is critical, however, to listen carefully. Are the points logical? Are certain questions being avoided?
- Ask questions. Make sure you are clear on the situations. You may be in the situation where the student did not come for help; rather you are identifying unhealthy behaviors. Identify those behaviors that are concerning. Do not moralize or place value judgments on the situation.
- Be clear. Let the student know why the behaviors are concerning. It is important to identify factual information while speaking on a personal level. Be specific.
- Make sure the student knows that it takes strength to seek assistance. Students often times think that it is a weakness to seek help. Whether it is counseling or medical treatment for a sexually transmitted infection, it is important to emphasize that there is help available.
- Refer. Do not try to solve all of a student's problems. Refer the student to resources that can help. If possible, have the student make an appointment with a doctor, counselor, etc. in your presence with the student's permission. It is

important to know what local and campus resources are available so you do not have to spend time searching.

- If the student is not interested getting help or talking further about the concern and it is not an emergency, remind him/her that resources are always available. In addition, let the student know that you are available to continue the discussion at a later date.
- Follow-up. If the student seeks assistance, follow-up with him/her. This is especially important if the resource you suggested was not a good fit. If the student sought help from a counselor, for example, and did not like the person emphasize that all counselors are different. Without this information the student may not seek help again.

### **The Impact of the Environment on Student Health and Wellness: The Role of Student Services Staff**

The environment has an influence on student behaviors and therefore impacts their health and wellness. These environmental factors include the media, friends, instructors, societal norms and expectations, language, and more. This means that what we say to students and what they see when they come to our offices can have an affect on the decisions they make.

It is easy to inadvertently enable students to make unhealthy decisions. Enabling in this context refers to accepting and encouraging certain behaviors or choices. This can be a concern, for example, with the issue of alcohol. Students may come into your office with alcohol on their breath. Our reactions to this can support or challenge high risk alcohol use. If a we smile and make a comment about the student having too much

fun last night, this may create an environment where high risk alcohol use is not only excepted, but also that it is acceptable to meet with a professional staff member under the influence. Another response to that situation could be to acknowledge the alcohol and the inappropriateness of a person coming into the office under the influence. If comfortable enough with the student and the situation, the dialog could continue with the student about his/her choices.

Language can also impact the way that students feel accepted or included at our institutions. For example, a student may be depressed because of not fitting in to the college environment because of their race, religion or sexual orientation. The words we use may increase this alienation. We therefore do not want to wish a student “Merry Christmas” if we do not know what his/her religion is or ask about a male student’s wife or girlfriend if we do not know if the person is heterosexual.

Language is not the only thing that creates our environment. Students are very good observers when they are in our offices. It is important to examine our space to see what messages we are giving to students. From quotes on our bulletin boards and posters on our walls to photos and vacation mementoes on our desk, we could be reinforcing or encouraging a student’s unhealthy lifestyle.

The environment that we support also goes beyond our department’s walls. When individuals sit on committees to make changes on campus, they can also set the tone for a healthy or unhealthy lifestyle. When vending machines are installed, do we ask about fresh fruit or juice options? As we look for money to support student activities, does alcohol industry money show up? Are campus policies changed to be more inclusive of the entire student population? Are resources available on campus or

in the community? Does everyone know about these resources? It is critical to look at and understand the major impacts of even the most trivial decisions.

Identifying factors that impact the environment is half the battle. We must always be attuned to the environments we create for our students. Whether it is created actively through our participation or passively through our lack of action, the impact can be far reaching. It is important to always keep in mind that we all have a role in the health and wellness of our students.

### **Health and Wellness Resources on the Web**

The American Cancer Society: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The American College Health Association: [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)

The American Dietetic Association: [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

Go Ask Alice (College Health): [www.goaskalice.columbia.edu](http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu)

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention: [www.edc.org/hec](http://www.edc.org/hec)

The National Domestic Violence Hotline: [www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)

The National Eating Disorder Association: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

The National Sexual Assault Hotline: [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States: [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

Unite Georgia (Quit Smoking): [www.unitegeorgia.org](http://www.unitegeorgia.org)

### **Assignments**

1. Read the following articles:

*Health Problems of College Students.* T. W. Grace

*Is College Dangerous?* R.P. Keeling

*Freshmen Pay, Mentally and Physically, as They Adjust to Life in College.* T. Bartlett.

2. What are ways that your institution positively and negatively impacts student's health and wellness?
3. What resources are available on your campus or in your community for students dealing with the following issues:
  - Alcohol, tobacco and other drug problems?
  - Exercise and physical activity?
  - Mental health?
  - Nutrition, body image and eating disorders?
  - Relationship and sexual violence?
  - Sexual health (pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV, sexuality, etc.)?
4. In your specific area of the institution, how do you and your colleagues affect the health and wellness of students through the environment?

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