



**2006 mtvU College Mental Health Study:
Stress, Depression, Stigma & Students
Executive Summary**

Objectives:

- Establish the issues students are currently grappling with (emotional, financial, academic, social, etc.) and how they relate to these
- Understand how students deal/cope with these stresses, exploring the continuum from stasis to crisis
- Determine the current perceptions and understanding of mental health (from identification to treatment) among college students

Methodology:

Qualitative:

- 16 Total Qualitative Focus Groups
- National geographic spread of campuses: Boston, MA, Austin, TX, Ann Arbor, MI and Berkeley, CA
- Even mix of academic years and gender represented
- R.A.s and students
- Timing: July/August 2006

Quantitative:

- Total of 503 online interviews were conducted with full time college students, ages 18-24
- All interviews were conducted through the use of FGI Research's SmartPanel
- Panelists were sampled to reflect a cross section of the U.S. undergraduate population with attention to balancing gender, geography and ethnicity/race
- Timing: October 18 through October 30, 2006

College today continues to function as a true time of transition, a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Students have left the structure of life at home – characterized by rules, schedules, parents and relatively little responsibility – and find themselves in the more unstructured, free environment of school. Dealing with this new found independence is marked with new responsibilities, new consequences, new experiences and new relationships. For students today, college functions as both a cocoon and a springboard – a time to figure things out, make mistakes and learn from those missteps, all in preparation for the “real world”.

Brave New World:

Beyond the constant truisms that have characterized the college years, today's students face some new and unique realities:

- *More intense competition:* Students are faced with increased expectations to do more and push harder. More students are competing for the same number of seats, not only in the classroom, but in the future boardroom. Students feel a constant need to stand out and differentiate themselves.
- *Intense future focus:* Students are constantly looking forward to their next step, striving to put all the right pieces in place to ensure their futures. This means getting the right

internships, taking the right classes, having the right experiences – all in an effort to get a step ahead and stand out.

- *Increased uncertainty*: This intense, early focus on their futures can sometimes lead to doubt along the road. As they plan and strategize their way through college, students at times find themselves questioning the verity of their decisions.
- *Tech-ademics & Tech-tradeoffs*: One of the strongest forces impacting today's college experience is the omnipresence of technology. While allowing students to stay connected anytime, anywhere and providing them access to seemingly unlimited resources, technology has also served to create added demands and stresses. Academically and socially, students are expected to do and handle more and more.
- *Stress is a Badge of Honor*: Stress has become a source of competition among college students – a means to projecting your overall achievement quota. There is a great deal of one-upmanship that occurs around the discussion of stress, however, admitting that stress is getting the best of you is a sign of failure.

All of these changes lead to added challenges and consequently added stresses. In this new environment, stress is the new norm.

Key Findings:

Stigma and Denial Override the Need for Help:

Despite the fact that many students may be suffering from mental health issues for which they should seek help, many are reluctant to do so. It is clear that there is a stigma that surrounds mental health on college campuses, and this stigma acts as a major barrier in seeking counseling. Stigma is both external and internal, as many voice a fear of embarrassment if others were to find out they needed help, while there is also personal horror that comes from the idea of actually admitting you have problem (despite recognition it should be addressed).

- Fear of embarrassment is the number one reason why students say someone might not choose to seek help for emotional issues. 72% of students choose “embarrassment” as a reason that a person might not seek help.
- Only one quarter of college students (23%) surveyed said they “would be comfortable with friends or peers knowing that they were seeking help for emotional issues.” This fear is even worse among males, with only 1 out of 5 agreeing they would be comfortable with their friends’ awareness.

Believing that issues will go away by themselves and questioning the value of the help that they might seek are also major obstacles in the path to assistance.

- 69% of all students – 73% of females and 65% of males – say that a reason someone might not seek help is that they “think the issue would go away by itself.”
- Additionally, 69% of all students – again, 73% of females and 65% of males – say that the fact that people “don’t think it would help” is a reason why they might not seek help.

Juniors Are at the “Summit of Stress”:

Stress continues to build throughout a student's college career and appears to peak during the ever critical Junior Year, a time when many students are enrolling in grad school, considering the reality of the real world quickly approaching and beginning to recognize that college can't last forever.

- Only 39% of freshmen agree they “feel the pressure to handle more and more stress,” but this builds to 58% by sophomore year. Females take the lead in this stress, with 70% of sophomore women agreeing, compared to 43% of males.
- 63% of college juniors agree to “Feeling the pressure to handle more and more stress.” Again, this stress is particularly high among females, with 72% agreeing to this statement compared to 54% of males.
- 52% of junior females agree/strongly agree that they “have been stressed to a point that they have shut down and felt they couldn't function.”

The Effects of Stress Also Increase, Pushing More Seniors into Crisis Mode:

Stress can lead to depression, withdrawal from others, feeling overwhelmed, loss of function and even thoughts of suicide. Freshmen enter into their college career with considerably less recognition of these issues in their friends and themselves, but in the Sophomore Year many things seem to change. By the time they are seniors, though percentages regarding the presence of stress seem to decline, the recognition of stress' negative impacts are at a high, and thoughts of suicide are at their peak.

- Staggering differences are seen as students move from Freshman to Sophomore Year, at which point percentages remain fairly steady, with most reaching a high in the Senior Year. In the transition from the first to second year of college, the percentages of students recognizing various negative effects of stress double and triple.
 - The number of students who say they know someone who has considered suicide nearly triples from Freshman to Sophomore Year (10% of freshmen, 28% of sophomores).
 - The number of students who report having personally suffered from some kind of depression more than triples (16% of freshmen, 49% of sophomores).
 - The number of students who report that they have been stressed to a point of withdrawing from others more than doubles (23% of freshmen, 48% of sophomores).
 - The number of students who say they personally have felt so overwhelmed they were unsure how to pull out of it more than doubles (27% of freshmen, 58% of sophomores).
 - 44% of college freshmen deny knowledge of their friends having experienced emotional/mental health problems such as depression, withdrawal, feeling overwhelmed, loss of function, or thoughts of suicide, while only 18% of the sophomores in this study state that none of their friends have had these issues.

- By the time they reach their Senior Year, students are expressing major signs of crisis with almost one quarter of seniors (24%) reporting they have a friend who has considered suicide, and 1 in 5 (21%) saying they have considered suicide themselves.
 - These numbers are a dramatic increase from freshmen, only 10% of who say a friend has considered suicide and 8% who say they have considered it themselves.

Female Students Express Their Stress:

Females consistently report finding college more stressful than their male counterparts, and the effects of this stress weigh harder on them as well.

- While 46% of female respondents agreed with the statement "college is more stressful than I expected," on average, only 26% of males surveyed agreed with this.
- Additionally, 63% of all female college students agree they "feel the pressure to handle more and more stress," while only 44% of males agree with this statement.

Available Resources Are Often Avoided:

Overall, college students surveyed appear reluctant to seek counseling for their emotional issues, despite recognizing that these services might be useful for someone else in need. Again, personal denial plays a large part here. Recommending counseling to friends is not out of the question, however seeking help for themselves often is. Male students are even less apt to seek help for their issues than females, and they are also less likely to recommend it to a friend.

- While almost half of all respondents (49%) said they would encourage a friend to seek counseling for emotional issues, only 22% say they themselves are likely to seek such help if it was needed.
- Nearly twice as many female students surveyed indicate they would seek counseling for emotional issues than males (28% of females vs. 15% of males).
 - 69% of males say they are unlikely/not at all likely to go to counseling.
- When it comes to encouraging friends to get help, 57% of females say they are likely to "encourage a friend to seek out help, e.g. counseling" if he/she was feeling overwhelmed or having emotional issues. Only 40% of males say they are likely to do so.
- Only 17% of all students surveyed report having sought some form of counseling or therapy.

Students Need a Release:

When it comes to dealing with stress, males and females are predominantly opting for methods that allow them to regroup by temporarily zoning out of their stressful situation. “Listening to Music” and “Sleeping” register as the top two ways college students say they “deal when overwhelmed with stress or pressures in their life.” Other tactics common include communicating with friends and family or seeking a physical release in the form of sports or working out.

- 79% of students say “listening to music” is a way they “deal when overwhelmed with stress or pressures in their life” and 73% say “sleeping.”
- Males are more apt to use playful competition to cope, with 56% of guys saying they play sports and 50% saying they play video games.
- 44% of college students say they “make plans/get organized” – 52% of females and 36% of males.
- Alcohol is also a coping mechanism for some, with a third of all students (33%) reporting that they drink alcohol as a means of dealing with stress.

Friends Are the Main Support:

Friends are the number one resource to which college students say they would turn, once they have decided to seek help. There is a major chasm between the percentage of students that would seek less “official” help such as the advice of friends or family members and those who would consider services such as counseling, or even online resources.

- When asked “If you decided to seek help, which of the following sources would you turn to,” 69% of college students say they are likely to turn to friends.
- Next in line is family (63%), followed by online resources (31%).
- Students are least likely to turn to Resident Advisors (12% of students say they would turn to RAs) and Hotlines (only 7% of students say they would turn to hotlines for help).

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