

Mental Health: What Do Parents Think?

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Mental health problems are a leading impediment to academic success among college students and, left untreated, can lead to suicide. Addressing the emotional well-being of your student population is important for a healthy, safe, and successful campus community. Parents can be an important ally in these efforts because they are often in the best position to identify signs of emotional problems in their children and help them find appropriate treatment. However, they need to be educated and empowered so they are able to effectively take on this role. Understanding what parents know (or think they know), their ability to discuss these issues, and their perceptions of help-seeking are the first steps in engaging and informing parents on this important issue.

This article summarizes the results of a national survey of parents and provides useful guidance about preparing parents to be effective gatekeepers. These results can help you communicate to parents through orientation, newsletters, websites, etc., about how they can protect the mental health of their children.

Background to the Survey of Parents

The survey of parents was conducted as part of the research phase of the Transition Year Project, a collaborative effort of The Jed Foundation and the American Psychiatric Foundation (APF). The final products of the project are the *Student Resource Guide* and the *Parent Resource Guide*, which will provide high school seniors, college freshmen, and their parents with information about how to safeguard students' mental health through the college transition and beyond.

In order to ensure that the *Parent Resource Guide* delivers the most pertinent information in the most effective manner, we wanted to learn more about how parents think about mental health in general and as it relates to their children. To this end, The Jed Foundation and APF worked with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) to develop a survey instrument that focused on the following areas:

- Communication about mental health issues

- Existence of stigma around mental health problems
- Knowledge about emotional disorders
- Attitudes toward help-seeking for mental health problems
- Ideas about the role of colleges in student mental health

Methodology

In November 2007, AED carried out a 15-minute, national telephone survey of 1,007 parents and guardians in households with teenagers between 16 and 20 years of age. In order to participate in the survey, a parent/guardian had to have a child who fell into one of the following categories:

- Currently a freshman or sophomore in a post-secondary school (e.g., a 2- or 4-year college, trade/vocational school)
- Currently a high school junior or senior intending to enroll in post-secondary school within two years of graduating from high school

If a parent had more than one child meeting the above criteria, they were told which child to think about when answering the survey questions. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in *Table 1* on page 14. Note that specific sub-populations (e.g., racial/ethnic groups) were not oversampled. While there were statistically significant differences in the way that different demographic groups answered certain questions, only the most relevant differences will be presented in this article.

Results

Talking with Their Children: Parents were asked to rate their comfort level in talking to their children about a variety of topics, including nutrition, stress and obesity, before being asked the same question about different mental health issues. In general, parents are less comfortable talking with their children about mental health than about other health concerns. For all health topics, a greater proportion of mothers than fathers report feeling very comfortable discussing these issues

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics (n=1,007)	
Variable	Percent (%)
Sex of Parent/Guardian	
Male	32.5
Female	67.5
Marital Status	
Married	87.2
Not married	12.3
Race (multiple responses allowed)	
Caucasian/White	89.9
African American/Black	5.3
Asian	1.0
Native American	0.9
Other/Not sure	2.1
Refused	1.7
Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	2.4
Age of Parent/Guardian	
Younger than 40	5.4
40-49	53.8
50-59	37.0
60 or older	3.2
Highest Level of Education	
Less than high school graduate	1.3
High school graduate/GED	13.0
Some college or technical school	19.6
Technical or vocational school graduate	2.0
College graduate	42.7
Post graduate degree	19.1
Other	1.8
Refused	0.5
Household Income	
Less than \$40,000	9.6
\$40,000 to under \$75,000	24.7
\$75,000 to under \$100,000	21.0
\$100,000 or more	29.3
Don't know/Refused	15.4
Region of Residence	
Northeast	18.4
Midwest	23.0
South	36.7
West	21.9
Child's Year in School	
High school junior	24.9
High school senior	37.2
College freshman	24.2
College sophomore	13.7
Child's Gender	
Female	54.2
Male	45.8

with their children. In addition, parents of female children are more likely to feel very comfortable discussing obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts than those with male children. **Overall, parents are less comfortable discussing suicidal thoughts with their children than any other health topic.**

The majority of parents think that discussing mental health issues would be more uncomfortable for their children than for themselves. Fathers are more likely than mothers to say that children would be uncomfortable talking with them about mental health, and parents of a male child are more likely than those with a female child to report this is as an uncomfortable topic for their children. However, over three-quarters of all parents think their children would tell them if they experienced a mental health problem while in college.

Stigma: As *Tables 2 and 3* indicate, there remains a significant level of misunderstanding and stigma around having or being treated for a mental health problem. For example, half of all parents believe that a teen with a mental health problem could “pull themselves together if they wanted to.” In addition, almost one-third of parents think that other people would avoid their children if it were known that they had a mental health problem. However, only 4.8% of all parents would want their children to avoid a friend with a mental health problem, with more fathers and parents of male children supporting this statement. Overall, the results showed that mothers are more supportive of a teen with a mental health problem than are fathers.

Help-Seeking: *Table 4* on page 16 lists resources that parents would go to for help if they thought their children had a mental health problem. Respondents were asked to name sources unaided and then asked about a list of sources that they had not mentioned. It is important to note that college/school staff were presented separately from various types of mental health professionals on the list, even though there may be overlap between these categories. This allowed us to find out how many parents consider college personnel, in general, as a source of help. Over 50% of parents say they would look to college/school staff for help with their children’s mental health problem. When asked specifically whom on campus

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Table 2: Perceptions about an Unknown Teenager in the Community Being Treated for Mental Health Problems

Do you think a teenager being treated for mental health problems is...	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Able to be as successful as anyone else	83.0	7.3	9.7
Dealing with an illness	77.3	6.3	16.3
Able to pull themselves together if they wanted to	51.0	23.4	25.7
Taking care of themselves	50.2	18.0	31.9
Strong	46.9	15.3	37.8
Going to have a hard time being successful	20.7	57.2	22.1
Weak	4.2	89.7	6.1

Table 3: Beliefs Associated with Mental Health and Help-Seeking

Question	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
If your teen had a mental health problem, you would feel comfortable reaching out to a mental health professional for help.	63.0	33.5	1.9	0.6
Most teenagers with serious mental health problems can, with treatment, get well and lead productive lives.	48.5	47.7	1.6	0.3
Almost any teenager can develop a mental health problem.	37.0	54.7	4.9	1.3
You would not be comfortable if people outside of your family knew your teenager had a mental health problem.	5.6	26.2	47.6	13.2
Mental health problems are best handled privately within the family.	5.1	15.4	52.0	23.8
If your teenager had a mental health problem that other people found out about, they would avoid your teenager.	3.8	28.9	43.2	11.1
Mental health disorders are not real illnesses.	2.3	3.8	40.2	52.2
If your teenager knew a friend who had a mental health problem, you would want them to avoid that friend.	1.2	3.6	52.1	38.1

they would turn to, most say advisors, counselors or guidance counselors.

Almost 85% of parents – more mothers than fathers – feel sure or very sure that they would know when to seek professional help if they were concerned that their children were experiencing a mental health problem.

Knowledge: When asked how much they knew about different mental health issues, parents report knowing much more about certain disorders (e.g., depression) than others (e.g., schizophrenia). Eighty percent of parents are confident that they would be able to tell if their children were experiencing a mental health problem while in college. When asked specifically about depression, over 90% of parents say they would be able to tell if their children were exhibiting signs of the disorder (see *Table 5* on page 16). A larger percentage of mothers than fathers report knowing a lot about different disorders and feel very sure that they would be able to identify depression in their children.

In order to compare what parents think they know to what they actually know, they were asked to name, without help, specific signs of depression in teens other than prolonged sadness (see *Table 6* on page 17). The most common responses included in the “other” category are anti-social, withdrawn, drop in grades, and change in eating habits. **The most disturbing findings are that only 3.4% of parents identified suicidal thoughts as a sign of depression, and only 15% of parents were able to name more than one or two signs.**

Almost two-thirds of parents do not think that their children are likely to experience a mental health problem while in college (see *Figure 1* on page 17). This is in sharp contrast to the fact that the great majority of parents say that any teen can develop a mental health problem (*Table 3*). More parents of a male than a female

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Table 4: Preferred Sources of Help for Mental Health Problems

Resource	Unaided (%)	Aided (%)
Family doctor	53.9	90.5
Counselor	26.1	82.1
Clergy (e.g., minister, priest, rabbi)	21.3	58.5
Family member	16.8	72.1
Psychologist	16.8	81.5
Psychiatrist	16.5	79.8
College/school staff	11.1	56.9
Friend	9.6	61.7
Therapist	5.9	79.9
Social worker	2.7	44.1
Internet	0.7	52.5
Other	15.3	16.8
Don't Know	2.5	---

child think it is unlikely that their children will experience a mental health problem while in college.

Role of Colleges: When asked how much a school’s mental health services influenced the college selection process, over half of all parents say that it had little or no influence on their decision-making. Only 25% of parents report receiving information from their children’s current or prospective college(s) about mental health services.

Less than 30% of respondents think that their children’s college would be likely to tell them if their child was experiencing a mental health problem. More mothers than fathers think it is unlikely that their children’s college would provide this information.

Table 5: Level of Confidence about Being Able to Identify Depression

Level of Confidence	Percent (%)
Very sure	40.3
Somewhat sure	51.4
Somewhat unsure	7.5
Very unsure	0.4

Key Findings and Opportunities

Today’s parents are increasingly involved in their children’s lives, and this gives you the opportunity to help them become better gatekeepers of their children’s mental health. The results of this survey have implications for how and what you communicate in the course of your campus’ programming for parents.

Encourage the Conversation: Overall, parents are fairly comfortable talking about mental health issues with their children, though they are less comfortable talking about suicidal thoughts. However, many parents think that a conversation about emotional problems would be uncomfortable for their children. You can help parents understand the importance of having an open dialogue with their children about these issues early in the college transition process and, ideally, before problems develop.

Address Stigma: Stigma often emerges from misunderstanding, and our survey showed that a significant number of parents wrongly blame teens for their mental health problems. While most parents are comfortable reaching out to professionals for help, many would not want others to know that their child had an emotional problem for fear that they would be avoided. Interestingly though, the majority of parents would not want their children to stay away from a friend with a mental health problem. Parents need to understand the realities of emotional problems and the relationship between biology and mental illness.

Increase Knowledge: Parents think that they know a great deal about the signs of mental health problems and would be able to identify these problems in their children. However, our survey showed a significant lack of knowledge around the signs of depression, the same disorder most are sure they could identify. Almost all parents understand that any teen can develop a mental health problem and that these problems are treatable, but the majority of parents do not think that their children are at risk for developing an emotional disorder. You can help educate parents about how to recognize and address potential mental health problems, so that their level of knowledge matches their level of confidence. Specifically, they should be familiar with what these problems look like in the teenage and young adult population. It is also critical that they understand that their child could, in fact, develop a mental health problem during the college years,

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Sign	Percent (%)
Loss of interest in activities	39.1
Sleeping too much	29.4
Significant change in weight	20.0
Unable to sleep	14.1
Irritability	10.6
Feeling sluggish	9.7
Problems controlling anger	7.8
Unable to concentrate	6.9
Unexplained crying spells	5.5
Anxiety	4.8
Indecisiveness	3.5
Suicidal thoughts	3.4
Other	49.5
Don't know	5.3

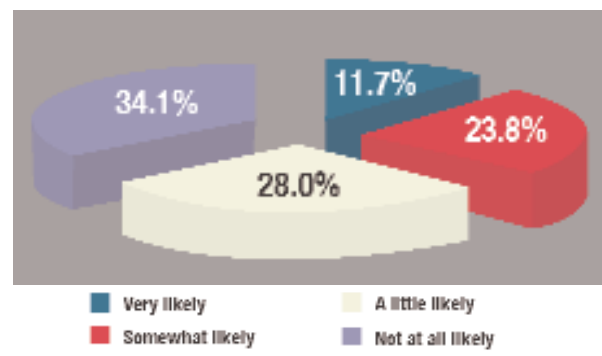
a period when many emotional disorders first appear.

Improve Help-Seeking: Most parents do not report having received information from colleges about available mental health services and do not take notice of these services during the college selection process. In general, mental health professionals are not top-of-mind when parents consider sources of help for an emotional problem. You can help parents better understand the treatment process and how students can get help on your campus or in your community. Information about your campus resources should be provided to parents in ways that make the information stand out and “stick” rather than slipped into events or materials that cover multiple topics.

Limitations

The key limitation of the survey data is that certain demographic characteristics of the sample, notably race/ethnicity, education level, and household income, are not representative of the parent population as a whole. In addition, two-thirds of the survey respondents are female, although this is a less concerning limitation since over 325 fathers/male guardians are included in the sample. There are many statistically significant differences between

Figure 1: Perceived Likelihood of Developing a Mental Health Condition in College



the way that mothers and fathers answered the survey questions, which are consistent with what is already known about men’s attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking. These limitations will be taken into consideration when developing the *Parent Resource Guide* and should be considered by colleges when using these survey results to inform their outreach to parents.

Acknowledgements

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Next Steps

The *Student Resource Guide* and *Parent Resource Guide* will be available at no cost on The Jed Foundation’s website (www.jedfoundation.org) by July 2008.



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