

Editorial

Student Mental Wellness and Optometric Education

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During my 17 years in academic optometry, much has changed. I think about one change in particular? students' increasing struggles with mental wellness? exponentially more today than I did a decade ago. Today's students are more open with discussing mental wellness, and my colleagues and I frequently discuss the anxiety and stress they manifest.

What we see in our schools and colleges matches what is being documented in the literature, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of data from the long-term national Healthy Minds Study showed that in 2020-2021, more than 60% of college students met criteria for one or more mental health problems, a nearly 50% increase from 2013.^{1,2} Results from the analysis also indicated that while mental health has been worsening among all undergraduate and graduate students, racial and ethnic minority students face the additional burden of what the study authors called a mental health "treatment gap."¹ In general, current mental health needs are outpacing the resources on most college campuses.³

It is clear that student mental wellness is an issue that needs our attention. Not so clear at this time is exactly what we should be doing.

How Do We Best Support our Students?

Often, student mental health support is focused on wellness education and programs, improving access to care and reducing the stigma of seeking help.⁴ At least one university school of medicine tested a different approach and explored altering aspects of the curriculum, such as scheduling and grading, known to be student stressors.⁴ Strategies that have been implemented in various settings (often through

student services departments), including at schools and colleges of optometry include:

- educating faculty and staff about the resources available at their institution
- training faculty and staff on how to identify a student in distress and the protocol to follow
- wellness activities such as meditation and yoga
- providing access to on- or off-campus virtual or in-person counseling (This can be achieved through campuswide resources or by contracting with a local counseling group.)
- hosting a wellness group with associated programs and activities, driven by either students or faculty
- regularly scheduled mental health check-ins

Time to Dig Deeper to Find the Best Solutions

While any of these strategies can be a step in the right direction, they leave us with multiple unanswered questions we will need to address. Although current supports are likely helpful, are they enough? What do students really need? What actions would go beyond supportive and reactive to be preventive? What should be the day-to-day role and responsibility of faculty and staff? How do our institutions adequately meet the mental wellness needs of our students with limited resources and limited mental health expertise?

References

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