



Transcript - Increasing Help Seeking

Research consistently reminds us that many students who experience serious mental health concerns or emotional distress don't get help. Even more concerning is that over 80% of college students who died by suicide did not seek help from their counseling center.

Most campuses offer a range of student support services, including free or low cost counseling, academic, financial and disability support services and mental health support, yet many students who are struggling do not take advantage of these benefits. Why? And more importantly, what can we do to change this pattern?

An important part of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention is to increase help-seeking among those in significant distress. And because we know that anyone, given the right conditions, can develop thoughts of suicide, we need to take a broad approach that encourages help-seeking as part of the campus culture.

There is no "one size fits all" form of help; students can get help in a variety of ways. This can include informal support from coaches, advisors, and trusted staff, academic support from faculty and tutors, financial guidance from financial aid, accommodations and support from disability support services, and consultation or counseling from the campus counseling center. Many campuses also provide help through trained peers, support groups, psychoeducational classes, case management, and online resources. Urging students to seek help long before they reach the point of having suicidal thoughts can reduce the number of crises and promote academic success as well as health and safety.

In order to increase help-seeking among students, we first have to identify the barriers to help-seeking. We can break the most common ones down into six major categories:

- 1) Limited Options – If a campus does not make a range of options available to students, or faculty and staff don't know to refer students to those options, students may perceive that appropriate help isn't available. Often faculty, staff, and even peers are trained to refer a student to the counseling center for any type of emotional distress. It can be seen as the only door to getting a student needed support. While counseling is the right fit for some, there are many other types of support that can be provided. And for some students, an automatic or inappropriate referral to counseling may actually discourage help-seeking.



- 2) Knowledge – Many students are simply unaware what supports are available. They may not know that free or low-cost counseling is offered on campus, that the financial aid office can help address unexpected financial hardships, or that a case manager is available to help them find community services. Despite our attempts to advertise various resources, students don't always remember these options when they are distressed. With regard to counseling, students may be hesitant because they don't know who the counselors are or what to expect. Some students may not understand how confidentiality is protected. Some may avoid seeking off-campus services because they don't understand how to find a provider or how their health insurance works.
- 3) Personal attitudes – Although stigma around emotional distress and mental illness has declined, it still can influence students' decisions about getting help. Some students may consider it to be a sign of personal weakness and feel they should be able to handle their problems on their own. Other students may fear negative social, academic, or even professional consequences if they let others know they are struggling. And some students simply place a low priority on mental health, believing that it is something they can ignore when their time and energy are limited.
- 4) Lack of perceived need – One of the greatest barriers students identify to seeking help is their lack of recognition that they need help. Even students who have recurrent suicidal thoughts or who are at the greatest risk for suicide sometimes do not recognize this as a sign they could benefit from support. Perceiving a need is one of the biggest predictors of help-seeking. Students may not know what types of problems warrant treatment or other types of support. They may assume their problems are typical of college life and will go away on their own. And some students don't see a need for help because they don't believe that counseling or other forms of assistance will be effective.
- 5) Accessibility – Some students don't use support services because they feel they don't have time in their schedule. Or they report finances being a barrier – which may be the case if on-campus services have a cost or if they are referred to an off-campus provider. Some students may not have access to adequate health insurance, which further complicates their ability to access more formal treatment if that is the only form of help offered to them.
- 6) Cultural barriers – Finally, students may question whether their cultural needs will be adequately met by the supports offered. For example, some students who are referred to counseling may have a mistrust for traditional models of mental health care, due to negative experiences, personal or familial beliefs, campus culture, or historic injustices by the healthcare system. Likewise, particular groups such as veterans, students of color, LGBTQ+ and first generation students may not feel there is anyone on campus who understands their unique challenges unless those options are explicitly communicated.

Although these are not the only barriers to help-seeking on campus, they are some of the most widely noted by students. Now that we're aware of common barriers, let's go on to the next video to discuss some ways campuses can help students overcome those barriers and find the support that they need.