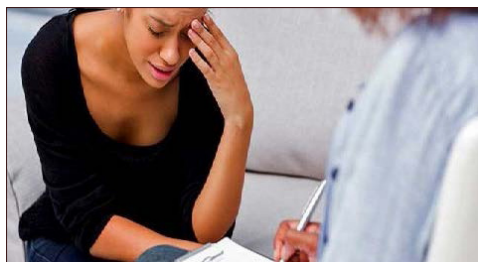


# Q and A on Mental Health as a Barrier to Academic Success at CUNY

March 2019 | A Report by Healthy CUNY and CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy



hinder one's ability to function normally. But anxiety disorders are treatable, and several effective treatments are available. Treatment helps most people lead normal productive lives.<sup>8</sup>

A more general term, psychological distress is defined as a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression or anxiety. Those experiencing psychological distress may also have physical symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, or lack of energy, symptoms that may vary across cultures.<sup>9</sup>

## 1. HOW ARE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS LIKE DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS A PROBLEM FOR CUNY STUDENTS?

Mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety, are a leading health cause of college failure and dropout, at CUNY and in colleges around the country.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at higher risk for developing such problems.<sup>4,5</sup> Depression and anxiety can impair students' engagement with school and their academic performance. These conditions can also contribute to substance abuse, further impeding academic progress.<sup>6</sup> Depressed students are also at higher risk for suicide.

Depression is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how people feel, the way they think and how they act. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at school or work and at home.<sup>7</sup> Common symptoms, when they last more than two weeks, are feeling sad or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite and weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy or increased fatigue, feeling worthless or guilty, difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions, or thoughts of death or suicide. Fortunately, depression is treatable.

Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness and involve excessive fear or anxiety. For a person to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, the fear or anxiety must be out of proportion to the situation or age inappropriate or

## 2. HOW MANY CUNY STUDENTS ARE AFFECTED BY DEPRESSION, ANXIETY OR MODERATE OR SEVERE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS?

Based on the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey of a representative sample of CUNY community college and 4 year college students, it is estimated that 40,329 undergraduates report symptoms of depression, 47,662 report symptoms of anxiety disorders and 40,818 report symptoms associated with moderate or severe psychological distress.<sup>10</sup> While rates did not differ much among different racial/ethnic groups, white students had slightly higher rates of all 3 conditions than did students of other racial/ethnic groups. Table 1 shows that symptoms of these three conditions vary by other student characteristics.

Table 1 shows that about one in six CUNY undergraduates experience depression, one in five experience anxiety disorders, and one in six report moderate or severe psychological distress. Students in four-year schools report higher levels of anxiety disorders than their community college peers. Female students report higher levels of all three conditions than male students. Students with household incomes lower than \$30,000 a year report higher levels of all three conditions than their peers living in households with incomes of \$30,000 or more per year. Finally, students born in the United States report higher levels of all three conditions than their foreign-born peers. Not shown on the table, 64 percent of those reporting depression, anxiety or moderate or severe psychological distress also reported experiencing two or more of 11 common life stressors.<sup>11</sup> Overall, 53 percent of CUNY students reported experiencing two or more of these life stressors.

Table 1. Percentage of CUNY undergraduates reporting depression, anxiety, or psychological distress, Fall 2018

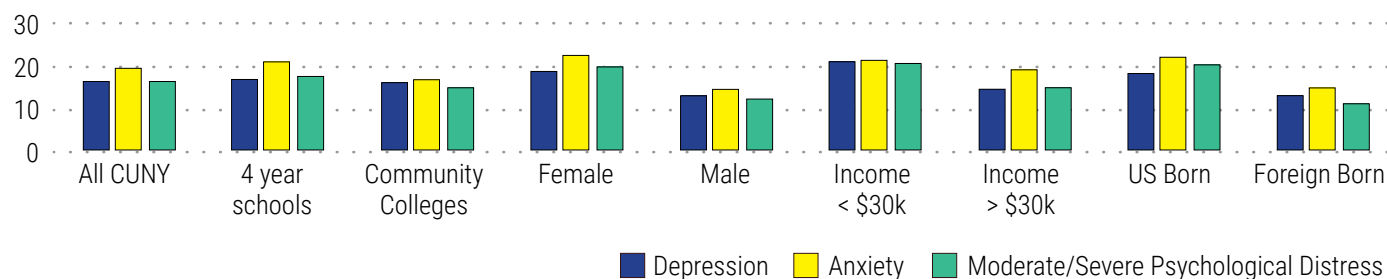
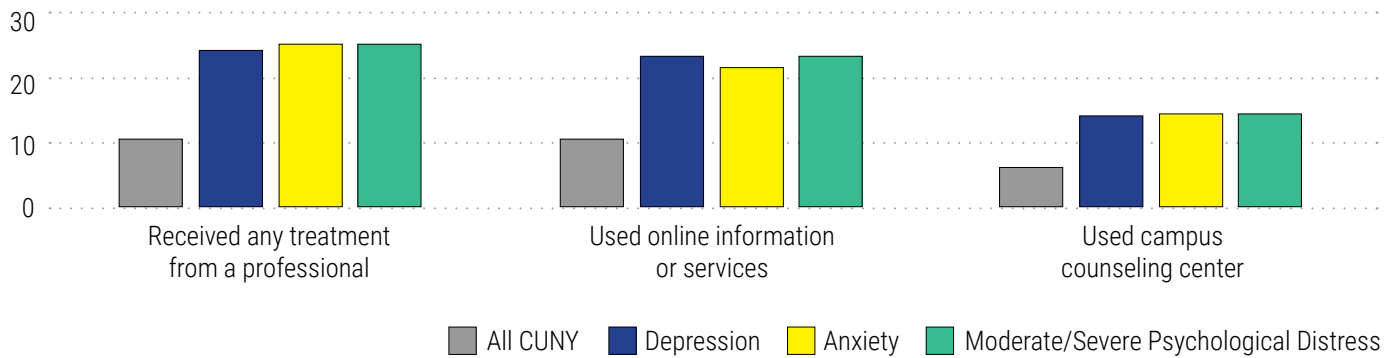


Table 3. CUNY students use of mental health services, Fall 2017



### 3. HOW DO THESE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AFFECT ACADEMIC SUCCESS?

Students who are depressed learn less, don't learn as well, and learn more slowly than their peers. Studies on depressed college students show they have lower grade point averages (GPAs) and lower levels of academic persistence and achievement compared with peers who are not depressed.<sup>12</sup> Students with unrecognized and untreated depression are hindered in courses, internships, and leadership development experiences, and are at higher risk for considering or attempting suicide, even among those with only moderate depression.

CUNY students report that mental health conditions interfere with their school work. On the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey, 55 percent of CUNY students with depression, 52 percent of those with anxiety disorders and 58 percent of those with moderate or severe psychological distress report that their mental health symptoms interfere with their school work somewhat, moderately or a lot. For the entire sample, only 20 percent report these levels of interference.

The Healthy CUNY survey also examined rates of academic problems such as dropping out of a degree program, taking a leave of absence, failing out of school, or having a GPA equal or less than 2.5. Compared to students who did not report symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders or moderate or severe psychological distress, students with any of these conditions indicated higher levels of any such academic problems with 30 percent of those with symptoms reporting any academic problem versus 26 percent of those who did not report symptoms.

### 4. WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE FOR MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS ON CUNY CAMPUSES?

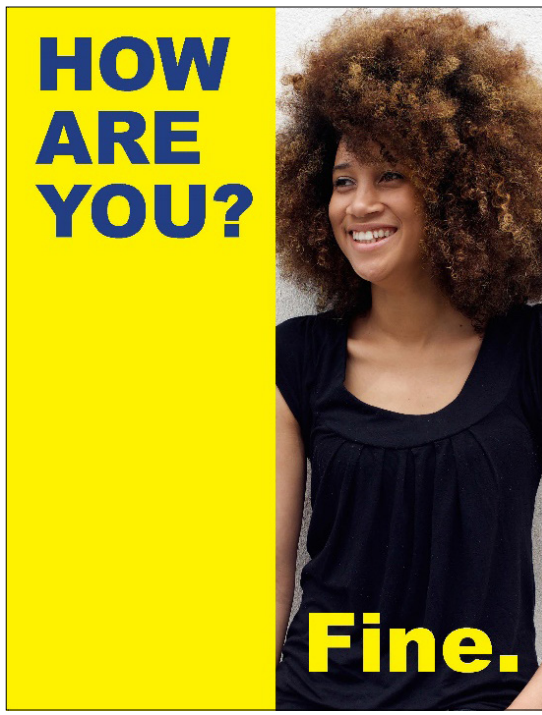
To assist its students to get help for depression, anxiety disorders, psychological distress, and other mental health conditions, CUNY offers a variety of campus services and referrals to community services. Twenty-one of CUNY's 24 campuses have a mental health

counseling center, which are staffed by 116 full-time mental health professionals. Staffing levels range from one to ten professionals per campus, with several campuses and the university as a whole falling short of the professional to student ratio recommended by college mental health professional organizations. Many campuses also prepare students to provide education, outreach or emotional support to peers with mental health concerns.

Table 3 shows survey findings on knowledge and use of mental health services by CUNY undergraduates from the 2018 survey. It shows that one in nine CUNY undergraduates has received help from a mental health professional in the last 12 months and that those reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders and moderate or severe psychological distress are more than three times as likely to get help as all students. Disturbingly, about three quarters of students with the symptoms associated with the three conditions have not seen a professional in the last year.

The table also shows that students with symptoms are also more than three times as likely to have used online mental health information or support services as students without symptoms (22 percent versus 7 percent), suggesting that expanding access to online services may connect more students with symptoms to sources of information or support. Finally, the table shows that 6 percent of CUNY undergraduates visited the campus mental health counseling center in the last 12 months while about 14 percent of those with symptoms of the three conditions report such a visit. Of note, students were almost twice as likely to have gone online for help than visited the campus counseling center. Overall, 86 percent of those with these symptoms have not used campus mental health counseling centers.

The 2018 survey showed (not on table) that about half of students know that mental health professionals are available on their campus and about 8 percent have gotten mental health information or support from another student. Rates of knowledge of campus services or getting help from another student is higher among those with symptoms compared to those without symptoms.



## 5. WHAT OBSTACLES MAKE IT HARD FOR CUNY STUDENTS TO GET HELP FOR THIS PROBLEM?

Healthy CUNY surveys and focus groups identified several obstacles that make it harder for students to get the help they need for psychological problems:

- About half of CUNY students agree with the statements that (1) most people feel that receiving mental health treatment is a sign of personal failure and (2) most people think less of a person who has received mental health treatment. “Poor mental health carries such a stigma that people are even afraid to go somewhere and find out that their condition is going to be classified as mental illness,” explained one student in a focus group.
- Students reported trouble finding the time to get help. As one student explained in a focus group, “you need to find the right time and that is the hardest part actually going in because time is valuable.” Stigma was another obstacle. Our analysis of the survey found that as depressive symptoms increased so did self-stigma regarding seeking mental health assistance, a negative cycle that interferes with getting effective help.

## 6. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS CUNY CAN REDUCE THE EXTENT OF THIS PROBLEM OR MINIMIZE ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS?

Connecting students in need of mental health support to services is crucial, as early intervention can reduce the adverse consequences of depression, thereby helping students to improve their well-being and complete their degrees.<sup>13,14</sup>

The CUNY Health for Academic Success and Engagement Steering Committee is considering several strategies to ensure that all CUNY students get the help they need to overcome mental health problems that can interfere with academic success. These include:

- Hire more mental health professionals to serve in CUNY mental health counselling centers so that more students can be reached and waiting time reduced
- Prepare students to serve as peer health advocates who can promote use of campus and community mental health services, educate students about available services and campaign to reduce stigma
- Train faculty to provide accurate, appropriate and brief information and referrals to their students who ask for assistance for mental health problems
- Develop stronger partnerships with citywide and community-based mental health providers to make it easier for CUNY students to get help and for CUNY to get appropriate feedback to assist students to overcome problems
- Develop and promote use of online mental health services designed for CUNY students

The goal of these suggestions is to create a stronger culture of caring at CUNY, a climate that will encourage all students to seek help and all students, faculty and staff to provide help to reduce the burden of mental health problems. The CHASE Steering Committee welcomes your feedback on these suggestions and welcomes your recommendations for additional ways to strengthen mental health services for CUNY students.

Send your comments to [Patricia.Lamberson@sph.cuny.edu](mailto:Patricia.Lamberson@sph.cuny.edu).



# WHAT'S UP?

Nothing.

# WHAT'S REALLY UP?

Been anxious lately.  
Might have to change majors.  
Miss my family back home.  
Bills are piling up.  
Too many papers to write.  
It's hard to socialize.  
Feels hard to breathe.  
It's a little easier knowing someone's there to listen.

Thanks for asking.  
I'm glad you were really listening to me...

# We're listening.

Healthy CUNY

sph.cuny.edu/healthycuny  
#HealthyCUNY

Lehman Counseling Center  
114 Old Gym Building  
718) 960-8761  
counseling.center@lehman.cuny.edu

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Healthy CUNY Survey Group and, Freudenberg N. Q and A on Mental Health as a Barrier to Academic Success at CUNY. CUNY School of Public Health, 2019.