



## Parent and Family Newsletter | JANUARY 2021

Dear parents and families,

Happy New Year! January is a time for new beginnings, and many students find their “groove” in the spring semester. Gone are the many emotional twists and turns of being a new student, and now is the time to celebrate the first semester and to look towards registering for sophomore year. How many credits did your student complete? How does the number of credits completed translate over eight semesters? Can they graduate in four years or do they need to think about picking up a class this summer?

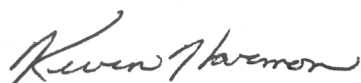
Speaking of summer, does your student have a job or an internship planned? If summer plans need to be made, please visit the Career Center in the Student Academic Success Center located in the lower level of the Gordon B. Olson Library. We are ready to help find employment or an internship that will enhance your student’s resume. Summer is also a great time to test drive careers if your student is undecided about their major.

Full-day classes are scheduled to begin in-person on Jan. 12. COVID-19 testing will be available on Jan. 11 and 12 in the MSU Dome from 8 – 11 A.M., and we plan to continue mass testing events as needed throughout the spring semester. As soon as a COVID-19 vaccine is made available to our University community, we plan to provide on-campus vaccination events.

In conclusion, I’d like to thank my administrative assistant, Darla Weigel, who is retiring at the end of December after 30 years of employment at Minot State University. Darla has been a remarkable source of knowledge and assistance to many generations of students and employees. She will be sorely missed; also, this will be my excuse when the February newsletter shows up in your mailbox in April! Best wishes to her in retirement.

As always, I’m available to answer any questions or concerns you may have as we begin a new semester at Minot State. I can be reached at [kevin.harmon@MinotStateU.edu](mailto:kevin.harmon@MinotStateU.edu).

Respectfully,



Kevin Harmon, Vice President for Student Affairs



### IMPORTANT DATES

#### January

- 11 – Classes begin after 4 P.M.
- 12 – Classes begin
- 18 – Martin Luther King Day, University closed
- 21 – Last day to add a 16-wk. class
- 21 – Last day to drop a 16-wk. class or withdraw from all classes and receive a 100% refund

#### February

- 15 – President’s Day, University closed
- 22 – Last day to withdraw from all 16-wk. classes and receive a 75% refund

View more dates, deadlines, and events at [MinotStateU.edu/calendar](https://MinotStateU.edu/calendar).

BE SEEN. BE HEARD. BE INSPIRED.

# College students and mental health in 2020–21

By Rob Danzman, [CollegiateParent.com](http://CollegiateParent.com)

In my practice before COVID-19, I mostly saw college students struggling with anxiety, depression, and motivation. Those things haven't changed. But now, I'm seeing some added stressors.

I see social isolation, struggle with online learning, and a different kind of relationship with parents. Because I also work with parents, I hear how they're struggling as well. Parents expected their kids to graduate from high school, hang out for the summer, and then head off to college. The pandemic messed this plan up for millions, and now parents are stressed, too.

This is a series of three posts in which I share my insights into college students' behavioral health and what parents can do to help. In Part One, I talk about what stressors students face. In Part Two, I examine coping skills students can use to get through, and in Part Three, I share what parents can do to help.

## ▲ PART ONE – Student Stressors

Over the years of working with college students, I've seen a steady increase in anxiety and depression. I've also seen more students struggle with motivation issues. Drug use has surprisingly stabilized, if not decreased. Overall, many students seem to not have that drive to push through the challenges of tests, homework, projects, and other typical stressors associated with college. There seems to be a lack of grit. This is not a moral judgment or the musings of an old man in a rocking chair, fist held high in the air. It's all based on observations within my practice and a review of college student mental health research.



Additionally, students are on social media 24/7. Comparing to others and the fear of missing out eats their brains and messes with their sense of belonging and self-worth. Snapchat and Instagram, among other apps, only amplify their struggle. I'll talk more about all of this and the clinical perspective below.

One quick note before we move on. Throughout Part One, we examine mental health diagnoses, all of which are listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). This is the official, evidence-based listing of all mental health diagnoses, which I'll reference several times. For more details on the DSM-5, check out my painfully long blog post on the manual and its history [here](#).

## Anxiety

It will not come as a surprise that nearly every student I work with has anxiety. Some don't use words like anxiety but describe symptoms that add up to anxiety (e.g., persistent racing thoughts, elevated heart rate, trouble sleeping).

I won't go too deeply into diagnostic details here, but I will give you a sense of the basic types of anxiety and what it means for college students. It's essential for parents to have a general understanding of whether their college student is experiencing something typical (such as stress over a group project) or something that requires professional support.

Within the DSM-5, there are five types of anxiety disorders:

1. Generalized anxiety disorder – chronic and excessive fear/concern, often with physical tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it
2. Obsessive-compulsive disorder – recurrent, intrusive thoughts or repetitive behaviors
3. Panic disorder – unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear and physical symptoms that include chest pain, racing heart, shortness of breath, and dizziness
4. Post-traumatic stress disorder – the brain's response to a terrifying event in which significant physical harm was possible or occurred
5. Social anxiety disorder – overwhelming fear and excessive self-consciousness in typical social situations

Generally speaking, a normal stress response is the perception that a situation is stressful — as if there is a gap between what the person can control and the desired

outcome. Feeling nervous for a test is typical but doesn't necessarily feel good. There may be a fear of failing. It's not anxiety but a very appropriate response to a situation that doesn't have a predictable outcome.

On the other hand, anxiety is the brain perceiving that the problem is not only something closer to a mortal risk but also that they have almost no control. There is also the belief that the situation is not finite but may last indefinitely.

So basically, stress is normal and actually helps activate us for a task. Anxiety is an unhealthy perception that a stressor is more severe and more permanent than reality would indicate. Anxiety is persistent, although at times it may be quietly pulsing in the background.

This may all seem harmless but can cause significant problems when our fear starts driving our behavior. Anxiety can make students avoid hanging out with friends, checking their grades, or attending class. Anxiety convinces us not to take any chances, to lay low, and to retreat from normal life so we don't get hurt (or see something scary like a bad grade).

Another way to think of anxiety is that it's the brain's alarm system working overtime, not having an off switch, and misinterpreting regular stressors as significant threats. I think of it like walking into a dark room with the lights off. The person with a healthy perception might feel a bit nervous as they search for the light switch. The person with anxiety believes there is something dangerous in the dark despite intellectually knowing there are no monsters. Their focus narrows, their heart rate increases, and their fear takes over. Their brain gets more and more freaked out as they look for the light switch. The person with anxiety gets sucked in while the other person can recognize their fear but doesn't have it take over their thoughts and choices.

The final difference between the two is that, once the person without anxiety leaves our metaphoric room, their fears subside, and they go back to baseline functioning. In contrast, the person with anxiety feels that they never really left the dark room (or more accurately, the room never left them). No matter where they go or what they do, anxiety is always there.

## Depression

Next up in our list of student struggles is depression. Each year, around 30% of college students are diagnosed with depression, according to researchers. Those are the students

who contact a professional and get diagnosed. It's probably an underestimate. Way more have depression than are diagnosed. Nearly every student I work with has some form of depression. Almost all of them have thought about suicide. Nearly all of them feel hopeless.



College students also rarely share with their parents just how depressed they feel. Parents may notice behavioral changes well before hearing that their son or daughter is hurting so much.

Depression is not the same as feeling sad or a response to a bad event. It's the experience of feeling despondent for weeks/months/years at a time.

Eight specific depression disorders are listed in the DSM-5, including:

- Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder
- Major depressive disorder (including major depressive episode)
- Persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia)
- Premenstrual dysphoric disorder
- Substance/medication-induced depressive disorder
- Depressive disorder due to another medical condition

## Motivation

For over a decade, I've said that of all the challenges I work with college students on, motivation issues are the hardest to overcome.

There's usually a history of being accused of laziness as if the student was morally deficient or just a slacker. However, research in the last few years has found there is a definitive neurological basis for why so many people struggle with motivation. Without going into too much depth, the essential brain chemical associated with motivation seems to be dopamine. Dopamine, once thought to be the

“pleasure” chemical, turns out to be more of a “motivator” chemical. It’s the chemical the brain starts pumping when we need to be activated — for example, if we are stepping into the street and a bus nearly hits us, prompting us to jump back.

What’s the difference between laziness and motivation issues? Laziness is an avoidance of responsibility with intention. Laziness can be overcome with a little nudge and has more to do with choice and privileging other more exciting options.

Real motivation issues are a deep trench within which we feel stuck. I work with so many students who sincerely want to get stuff done but can’t get started or complete a task.

### Drug use

Most of what’s being used by college-aged young adults are prescription drugs (though students may not be the one with the prescription) like Xanax, Klonopin, Valium, and Ativan. These all are benzodiazepines and super addictive.

College students are also using weed (marijuana) and vaping, which, among other issues, can lead to breathing problems and increased anxiety. Yes, weed increases anxiety over the long term.

Though alcohol is still abused, it’s been on the decline. College students figured out years ago that professors aren’t big fans of students reeking of alcohol in class. Instead, weed (especially combined with vape pens) and pills were more convenient ways to get high without anyone knowing.

## ▲ PART TWO – Coping Skills

You’ve heard the term, but what are coping skills? Coping skills are thoughts and behaviors that can help college students (and anyone for that matter) get more comfortable with, minimize, and deal with stressors. Coping skills can provide temporary reprieve or long-term solace.

As you’ll see below, many coping skills are kind of no-brainers (e.g., talk to a friend!) while others may not be as obvious (e.g., healthier eating). I’ve split up some of the most common coping skills I teach students into five categories.

The best way parents can encourage their college-aged kids to use these skills is by having subtle conversations about what’s not working in their life. Starting out by giving unsolicited advice doesn’t work so well (as I’m sure you already know).

### Diversions

A diversion is a distraction, a coping skill that helps college students avoid destructive or unhealthy thoughts. This provides a temporary interruption until they can think clearly again.

Not all diversions are fun, but they can still provide good distraction. Some typical examples include:

- Exercise (something requiring focus like weightlifting)
- Reading a book — preferably fiction
- Listening to (chill) music
- Listening to a podcast
- Writing/journaling about something other than current thoughts and feelings
- Spending time with a pet
- Playing a game or solving a puzzle (Solitaire, Sudoku, crosswords, etc.)
- Doing chores like cleaning your bedroom or the kitchen
- Hiking a nearby trail
- Playing an instrument like a guitar
- Working on a hobby or craft, such as knitting or painting
- Helping someone else with something they’re struggling with



### Thinking differently

“Think different” was an advertising slogan used from 1997 to 2002 by Apple. They used grainy, black and white photos of famous people who changed the world by thinking (and acting) differently. The slogan was a clever response to IBM’s “Think” and became iconic in the marketing world.

So, what does this have to do with coping skills? One of the fundamental things I work on with college students is to get them to essentially think differently. Students often have their emotions dictate their behavior and they benefit from thinking differently about how to improve their lives.

Thinking differently — or developing what clinicians call cognitive skills — helps students identify unhealthy thinking landmines and possibly reverse the negative downward spiral.

Here are a few cognitive skills that work well:

- Find a mantra or phrase associated with something positive
- Consider cost/benefit analysis of a decision
- Consider other perspectives in new situations
- Practice observing (without judgment) thoughts and feelings
- Reward oneself when accomplishing something hard
- List and express gratitude

### Physical coping skills

Physical coping skills are focused on changing behaviors in order to improve a situation, decrease negative feelings, and promote mental space to get through tough things. These are bodily coping strategies that we can practice to minimize undue stress.

Some behaviors I encourage my clients to adopt are:

- Focus on their heartbeat for 30 seconds
- Deep or mindful breathing
- Reduce caffeine and stimulants
- Exercise for at least 30 minutes
- Take a nap
- Eat healthy foods: fruit, vegetables, nuts, salmon
- Reduce sugar intake



### Social coping skills

This set of coping skills is pretty instinctive for most. It's the use of our social network. Sharing their struggles and talking through the pain helps students more accurately identify problems and process uncomfortable feelings. It's also an opportunity to accept support and advice.

Here are examples of ways college students can cultivate social skills:

- Share thoughts/feelings with a friend...and practice being vulnerable
- Practice saying “no” to unhealthy situations
- Organize online games
- Ignore yourself (for a bit) and support a friend
- Practice asking for what you need

### Unhealthy coping behaviors to avoid

Not all coping skills are healthy. While they may bring a temporary sense of relief and comfort, these coping strategies can negatively hurt you in the long run.

Here are several unhealthy coping behaviors I see many college students use:

- Alcohol and drugs
- Reliance on prescription medications
- Expressing disproportionate anger at others
- External locus of control (blaming others for bad things that happen)
- Cutting/self-harm
- Catastrophizing

That's it for Part Two. Coping skills are not meant to fix anything. Coping skills buy us time to develop practices that become healthy routines. I certainly don't teach them with the expectation that my clients will miraculously be depression and anxiety-free. It's a way to get through to the other side of emotional struggle until clinical intervention can fully take hold.

Parents often feel helpless and sometimes even a bit hopeless when their kids are struggling in college. Next time, in [Part Three](#), we'll examine what parents can do to most effectively help during such a chaotic and unpredictable time.

## 2021–22 Minot State Scholarship Application is OPEN!

The Minot State General Scholarship Application for the 2021-22 school year is now open. The application deadline is Feb. 15, and all students planning to enroll for the 2021-22 school year are encouraged to submit their application online at [MinotStateU.academicworks.com](https://www.minotstateu.edu/academicworks.com). Encourage your student to apply today.

## Financial Aid Satisfactory Academic Progress

Schools that participate in the Federal Student Aid programs are required to monitor all enrolled students for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). SAP standards apply to eligibility for all forms of Federal Student Aid and some non-federal private education loans and some scholarship programs. At Minot State, SAP is evaluated at the end of each semester after grades are posted. It's important for students to be aware of the SAP standards and to always meet the minimum standards in order to continue being eligible for those forms of financial aid for future semesters.

For students at Minot State to maintain eligibility for programs that fall under the SAP standards, they must meet these or exceed these criteria:

### 1. Minimum grade point average

Undergraduate students are required to maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0 at the conclusion of each semester based on all Minot State and transfer undergraduate credits.

### 2. Completion of attempted credits

Students must successfully complete a minimum of 66.667% of the cumulative attempted credits. Attempted credits include any credits students are enrolled in as of each semester's census date (the last day to drop a full semester course and receive a 100% refund; approximately the 10th calendar day of fall or spring term, or fifth calendar day of summer term) and any credits added after the census date. Credits dropped or withdrawn from after the census date and failed credits are considered attempted but not completed.

### 3. Maximum time frame

Students must successfully complete their degree within 150% of the published number of credits needed to complete their program of study. The maximum number of credits includes all prior credits attempted

while attending Minot State University and any credits attempted at other colleges or universities whether or not federal financial aid was received while completing those credits.

The complete Minot State SAP policy is available at [MinotStateU.edu/finaid/policies.shtml](https://www.minotstateu.edu/finaid/policies.shtml). Students are encouraged to visit the financial aid office located on the second floor of the Administration Building or contact them at 701-858-3375 if they have any questions about SAP.

## Student employment at Minot State

Minot State on-campus student employment opportunities are a great way to help fund an education or to allow students to earn spending money. Student employment is flexible and convenient by fitting with a student's class schedule and study schedule. Students do not work any more than 20 hours per week to encourage them to keep college the top priority. Student employees are paid a minimum of \$9.25 per hour twice a month. Student employment gives our students employment experience to be used on a resume in the future as well as customer service skills. Most student jobs do not require any previous employment skills.

Federal work-study employment is a part-time employment opportunity for students with financial need, allowing students to earn money while enrolled on campus. On the FAFSA, Free Application for Federal Student Aid, the applicant is asked if they are interested in work-study. Students that are eligible for federal work-study and marked they are interested, may be offered work-study when awarded for the academic year. Eligible students that marked they were not interested in work-study or unsure, could still be awarded federal work-study funds. Students not eligible for federal work-study can still be employed by Minot State in departments that have the funding to hire students.

All student employment begins with an employment application picked up at the Minot State financial aid office. Students interested in working on campus are encouraged to stop by the financial aid office, located on the second floor of the Administration Building, to find out if they are eligible for federal work-study or to pick up an application for any type of on-campus student jobs.