FALL 2020

BACK TO CAMPUS PLANNING GUIDE
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

KYRA H. BAKER
GRETCHEAN SNETHEN, PHD
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For College Students with Mental Health Conditions

Introduction
As a college student, you have likely faced new challenges related to your education, life on campus, and mental health in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research conducted in the spring 2020 semester found that college students with disabilities, including mental health conditions, had greater concerns regarding remote learning and faced more COVID-19 related challenges than their peers without disabilities. Before the pandemic, 1 in 5 college students were diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and researchers have expressed concerns regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of college students with and without diagnoses.

Some challenges you may have faced as a college student in 2020 include losing or having limited access to university-provided services; increased loneliness and isolation due to necessary physical distancing measures; loss of on or off-campus employment; abandoned or disrupted projects related to coursework; financial losses due to suddenly moving off-campus, and loss of cultural rites of passage such as graduation ceremonies. You may also have fears specific to COVID-19, including becoming infected and potentially being an asymptomatic carrier and unknowingly infecting high-risk individuals. These examples can have negative impacts on the mental health of all college students, including those already managing a serious mental illness. Conversely, you may have found that you've benefitted from the shift to remote learning. Some students may find that engaging in online classes and virtual campus life activities is more conducive to their well-being and educational goal attainment.

This document has been developed specifically for college students living with mental health conditions. While this is not a comprehensive guide, there are some specific areas of preparation outlined here related to planning for a safe return to campus, self-advocacy strategies, and campus engagement. The recommendations offered in each section can help you develop a plan that supports your mental and physical health as a college student. We hope that the steps outlined here will aid you in having a meaningful, successful academic year as you navigate being a college student during COVID-19.

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Return to Campus Planning
If you are living on campus you will want to have the latest information that your college has released regarding moving into campus housing. While this document was being written in August 2020, several institutions were still adjusting their move-in requirements and recommendations to best protect the health of the campus community. This section provides planning tips and examples of what you might be asked to do by university administrators before arriving on campus.

• Before arriving on campus:
  o **Quarantining.** You may be asked to quarantine for 14 days prior to moving into campus housing, and be tested for Covid-19 after arriving on campus.
  o **Make a moving day schedule.** You may be given a specific timeframe to move into campus housing. Some colleges are requiring students to register for a 20-minute moving slot on specified days. Students are being asked to be punctual and not extend their move-in time beyond the 20-minute slot. When planning your moving schedule, remember to account for traffic, travel time, and how long unloading your belongings may take.
  o **Find out who is permitted to help you move into your dorm.** Some universities are asking that no more than 1 or 2 family members assist students with moving into campus housing.
  o **Stay up-to-date.** Check your school’s website for updated information regarding moving onto campus the night before and the morning of your move-in day. It is possible that information will continue to change—knowing everything you can will support you to have a successful moving day.

• If you are taking classes on campus:
  o **Understand your schools’ policy for in-person learning.** Your school’s website likely has tip sheets, short videos, and manuals available which outline what your school’s in-person learning plan is. If you are unsure of something, contact someone! University administrators, health professionals, and faculty are all there to support you.
  o **Check your email and other communications daily.** It is likely that your school will change policies based on public health guidelines. Stay in contact with faculty and administrators to learn if in-person classes have been shifted to remote learning, and for the most recent public health safety information.
  o **Keep hand sanitizer and face masks accessible.** Having clean face masks and hand sanitizer will help keep you and those around you safe. Consider keeping face masks and sanitizer in different places—your backpack, your apartment or dorm, and in your car.
• **Be flexible:**
  o **Be prepared for changes.** You may be faced with sudden changes if you are on campus. This can definitely be overwhelming! Think of strategies that you can implement that will increase your comfort level with being flexible should sudden changes occur. It can be helpful to think of a few coping phrases that you can think of when you start feeling overwhelmed. Remind yourself that the situation is temporary, and that you have been through other tough situations in the past. Find positive ways to cope with changes. Talk with your peers and friends about how you’re feeling, and share strategies with one another!

• **Running errands on or around campus:**
  o **Know your options.** Knowing where your grocery store, pharmacy, and other places in the community you regularly visit can help you to plan ahead. Consider limiting how often you go out and run errands in order to minimize risk of infection and transmission.
  o **Understand your school’s guidelines for leaving campus.**
    Your school may ask students to limit their errands to locations that are on-campus only, in order to reduce risk to individuals in surrounding areas. Understand what options you have to get groceries, prescriptions, and other items delivered.
  o **Plan before you go.** If you are running an errand, visit the store’s website or call ahead beforehand. Some businesses have restricted hours of operation to allow older adults to shop safely, before opening their doors to other members of the community.

• **If you are feeling sick, stay home:**
  o **Contact student health services and report the symptoms you are experiencing.** The health professionals at your school will support you to take the necessary steps to help you and the people around you stay as healthy as possible.
  o **Monitor your health.** Make sure that you have a working thermometer so that you are aware if you have a fever. Take note of any other symptoms you may be experiencing, such as a cough, dizziness, or digestive issues.
  o **Communicate with close contacts:** Close contacts are understood to be individuals that you have been in the presence of for at least fifteen minutes without 6 feet of distance between you, and without masks. While public health officials are responsible for contact tracing, we all have an opportunity to be ‘citizen’ contact tracers. Close

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contacts are likely to be family members, pets, and roommates. Be open with the people in your life if you are experiencing symptoms so that they can take the necessary steps to stay healthy and safe.

**Self-Advocacy Planning**

One important way college students with mental health conditions can advocate for themselves is by developing a relationship with the office of disability services. Whether you’ve had accommodations in the past or are just looking into them now, it’s important to consider any adjustments to previous accommodations you might make for remote and/or hybrid learning. Take the following steps to gather necessary information and set yourself up for success:

- **Schedule a meeting with your disability services coordinator.** If you don’t have a coordinator, contact the office to set up a meeting.
- **Prepare for your meeting.** Collect any paperwork you may need (documentation of disability from your doctor, for example). Have a firm idea of what specific accommodations you believe will be most beneficial for virtual, in-person, and hybrid formats.
- **Know your rights.** Students with disabilities, including mental health conditions, are protected by the ADA.
- **Schedule individual meetings with your instructors.** Remember, there is no requirement for you to disclose your disability to anyone; that is your information to share with whom you choose. Maintain the focus of the meeting on your requested accommodations, and how you and your instructor can work together to support your academic success.
- **Record important dates.** Make a note of all add/drop dates, exams, and other important dates for the semester. Record the dates in your calendar or another place that is easily accessible. This information is always helpful for students to have, particularly for the fall 2020 semester, when you may be completing coursework virtually and navigating new systems of learning. If you’re unsure of a course you’ve enrolled in, make a contingency plan! Research other courses of interest that might fulfill your requirements and be a good fit for you as a student.
- **Connect with a therapist or clinician in the area.** If you are using mental health services, or would like to, it may be beneficial for you to find a therapist in the area, or one you can meet with virtually.
- **Learn about the services offered through the Student Counseling Center.** Many Student Counseling Centers started offering virtual services following the initial shut-down in March 2020. Look through your school’s counseling services website and take note of any that may be beneficial to you.

**Campus Engagement Planning**

Campus engagement—classes, work-study, clubs, and social events—contributes to feelings of belonging and a more positive college experience for students with mental health conditions. As a college student, you may be having concerns about what your campus engagement will look like while institutions navigate implementation of public health safety measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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You may be at an outdoor gathering where people aren’t wearing masks or maintaining 6 feet of distance between one another. Perhaps you have concerns about feeling isolated, and want to stay connected with your campus community. Here are a few things you can do to plan ahead:

- **Learn about your campus and social engagement preferences.** We all have different needs and preferences when it comes to socializing and engaging in activities. You may have a friend or family member who prefers a lot of solitude, while you prefer more time socializing. Whether you identify as an introvert, extrovert, or just feel different on different days, understanding your own needs can help you spend your time in ways that are most meaningful to you. Here are some questions to ask yourself; while reading through them, think about what seems most ideal to you, based on your current preferences and needs:
  - After a full day of classes, do you prefer to catch up with friends or unwind alone?
  - What kind of class schedule best suits you? Do you prefer to have all of your classes over three days, or take one or two classes every day?
  - How does your class schedule impact your motivation to spend time with friends or participate in other campus activities?
  - How important is making and maintaining friendships to you? How important is engaging in student life activities, such as being involved with the Campus Sustainability Office? You may find that you prioritize one over the other, or that you prefer to develop friendships with others who share your interests.

- **Make a campus engagement plan.** Take some time to explore your college’s website to learn about virtual events, and how you might get involved. If you are returning to college and have been involved in clubs, reach out to other members to learn what changes are being made to sustain the club. Follow your school’s social media accounts to keep up to date with virtual events. Most educational institutions have a variety of Twitter and Instagram accounts that are specific to students’ interests.

- **Know your risk tolerance.** If you are invited to a social gathering, ask all the questions you need to in order to make an informed decision that you are comfortable with. By asking about physical distancing, mask wearing, and the anticipated number of guests, you are not only advocating for your knowledge and health, but for those around you, as well. If you don’t feel comfortable attending an event due to Covid-19 concerns, simply stay home. A lot of people are likely facing the same decisions.

- **Connect with friends, faculty, and other supports.** We don’t know what a typical day in the life of a college student will look like for Fall 2020. You may run into situations that you haven’t experienced before, including the possibility of being required to self-isolate for 14 days. Whether you’re able to see your friends in a safe, physically distant way or not, make a point to connect! Try giving yourself a goal—reach out to two friends per week, for example. If you’re not able to see your friends in person, put the same level of planning into virtually connecting. The support you give is just as important as the support you get!

**Finally, remember to be kind and have compassion for yourself, your peers, and others in your campus community.** You are all facing new and challenging situations as a college student in fall 2020. Sometimes, it might seem impossible to get accurate information from members of the university administration. Things are still changing every day, and will likely continue to fluctuate. Remember what you’ve planned for yourself while going through this document—and always remember those things that are within your control to change in your own situation. You’ve got this!