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# Mental Health Matters: College Student Mental Health in the Twenty-First Century

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**Abstract:** Authors present the content, delivery, and benefits of a one-semester honors college lecture series on college student mental health.

**Keywords:** mental health of college students; lectures and lecturing; well-being; psychological stress; National Alliance on Mental Illness (organization)

Student mental health is a growing concern on college campuses. Large national samples through the Healthy Minds Study (2019) reveal that 39% of college students struggle with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-injury, or suicidality (Eisenberg, Lipson, et al, *Promoting behavioral health*, 2018). These data also demonstrate increased incidences and severity of mental health challenges. For example, 11% of students in 2016–17 reported past-year suicidal ideation compared to 6–8% in earlier surveys (2005–2013). Further, 21% reported non-suicidal self-injury compared to a previous 14–17%. Campus counseling center usage rates are also increasing, often stretching center capacity and leading to wait lists (LeViness, Bershard, et al., <<https://www.aucccd.org/director-surveys-public>>, 2018).

Although research comparing honors and non-honors students is limited, several studies indicate that honors students are at greater risk of experiencing mental health issues because they are highly aspirational and perfectionistic (e.g., Owens & Giazzoni, *JNCHC*, 5(1), 2010) notes an association between the anxiety of perfectionism and negative emotional, social, and academic

performance. Research also suggests that school administrators and mental health professionals often overlook honors students, assuming that academic excellence or higher intelligence equates to an increased ability to handle mental health challenges (e.g., Owens & Giazconi). Alternatively, other studies indicate that honors students are well-positioned to demonstrate greater levels of psychological wellbeing compared to their peers, assuming that these students engage in initiatives and services that promote positive characteristics and wellbeing (e.g., M. Kelleher, *JNCHC*, 18(2), 2017) notes the inter-disciplinary nature of honors colleges is well-suited to address mental health needs, and the role of mental health is emphasized in an article on honors students' thriving (Cuevas, Schreiner, et al., *JNCHC*, 18(2), 2017).

In an effort to raise awareness about mental health issues among college students, we developed a semester-long lecture series. Those who arranged the series included honors college personnel, an honors student, faculty with expertise in mental health, the campus counseling center director, and a community representative from a local crisis call center. We held public one-hour lectures weekly and an evening event in the community with a movie by L. Klein (2017, *The S Word*) profiling stories about young adults who survived a suicide attempt. Here are the thirteen lecture topics and the presenters' backgrounds:

1. Mental Health as a Public Health Issue: Local Initiatives and Resources. Local leaders of mental health and substance abuse organizations, and a faculty member in public health policy.
2. Depression: Symptoms and Strategies. Psychology professor.
3. 13 Reasons Why Not. Faculty member and director of the campus-wide suicide prevention program.
4. Healthy Minds Study: Current Issues and Trends on Campus Mental Health. Staff member of Healthy Minds.
5. What to Do When Someone You Know is Struggling. Case manager, Student Affairs.
6. The Pulse of Anxiety is Rising. Psychology professor.
7. The Somebodiness of African American Men (P. D. Johnson, 2016). Counseling professor.
8. How Can Good Enough Be Enough: Perfectionism in Perspective. Two graduate assistants.

9. Technology and Mental Health: Challenges and Resources. Faculty member and researcher, Center Behavioral Intervention Technologies, Northwestern University.
10. Medications 101 and Mental Health Treatment Options. Health center psychiatrist.
11. Healthy Relationships. Marriage and family therapist and family studies professor.
12. Grit, Resiliency, and Self-care. Campus counseling center director.
13. Stories of Recovery and Resilience: Panel of students who have dealt effectively with mental health challenges during college.

Many lectures had interactive components and offered practical strategies to maintain wellness, and counseling professionals were present if anyone needed support. We invited student organizations of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Active Minds to have information tables at the lectures. Attendees completed a brief survey following the lectures; satisfaction and usefulness both averaged 4.5 on a 5-point scale. The three most useful lectures were on anxiety, grit, resiliency and self-care, and perfectionism. The series helped raise awareness of college students' mental health and available resources, and it emphasized that the honors college takes these matters seriously. For more information, visit <<https://wmich.edu/honors/spring-2018-lyceum-lecture-series>>.

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