

Guest Column: The kids are home from school: 4 tips to address youth mental health

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As high school and college students finish their spring terms and prepare for summer, it's a critical time to check their mental health and consider how to engage in conversations about it.

This is especially important for college students, as the 2nd Annual Student Behavioral Health Report reveals a significant jump in self-reported mental or behavioral health concerns among college students as compared to high schoolers.

The report found college students self-report a near-50% increase in anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation compared to high school students. For example, high school students reported that during the past year, they or a classmate or friend experienced anxiety/stress (35%), depression (20%) or suicidal thoughts (9%). Among college students, those self-reported experiences increased to 55% for anxiety, 41% for depression and 13% for suicidal thoughts.

Importantly, the report found many parents may not be aware of this change. For example, while 41% of college students self-reported they, a roommate or a friend have experienced depression in the past year, only 18% of parents reported their college student experienced this. In contrast, parents of high schoolers reported perceptions more closely aligned with high school students' self-reported experiences: 20% of students reported depression, while 15% of parents reported their high schooler experienced this issue.

In honor of May's Mental Health Awareness Month, here are four tips to help proactively address mental health concerns among young people:

Look for warning signs. As students wind down or return from school for the summer, take stock of their mood and be on the lookout for any warning signs of mental or behavioral health concerns. These can include constant feelings of sadness, hopelessness, withdrawal from friends and family, inability to concentrate, excessive worries, changes in sleep or eating habits, extreme mood fluctuations, or problems with alcohol or drug use.

Have conversations early and often. The Student Behavioral Health Report revealed the more frequently a child's mental health comes up in conversation, the more likely the child may be to interpret their parents' tone and behavior in a positive light – and to take action to access care. If you're unsure how to approach the conversation, UnitedHealthcare offers conversation starter cards to help parents talk to their kids about mental well-being and spark conversations that move past one-word answers. For instance, ask your student, "What can I do to support you better?" or "What are you most worried about right now?".

Talk to your primary care physician. It's important to raise mental or behavioral health concerns to a health care professional – just as you would if it were a physical illness. For many, primary care physicians are the first line of contact and will be able to help assess symptoms and provide guidance on next steps.

Get familiar with your resources. There may be various resources available in your community or through your health plan, including assistance with finding a quality mental health care provider, understanding what's covered and virtual care or coaching options. Also, many colleges and universities offer on-campus support services, 24/7 crisis support, virtual care, and access to self-care apps and wellness resources. Some student health plans offer students unlimited free virtual mental health visits.

By considering these tips, parents and adults can play a key role in improving mental health challenges experienced by many young people. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call or text the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline for 24-hour, confidential support.