

The Importance of Students Seeking Help For Their Mental Health.

- According to the American College Health Association, the suicide rate among young adults has tripled since the 1950s and suicide is currently the second most common cause of death among college students.
- College students are showing greater levels of stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and poor sleep patterns than any time in our nation's history, and the current trend lines suggest that it will continue to get worse. And while it has been reported that 1 in 5 adults experience some form of mental illness in a year (46.6 million), only one-fourth of these individuals reported using mental health services.
- Mental health issues also contribute to poor grades, time management struggles, even the possibility of dropping out of college.

Now I know I just told you all these statistics and some of you may think why wouldn't student seek help when they have access to free services? Except I have a confession to make. When Shantalea asked me to be the guest speaker without any hesitation I said yes! After all mental health is a topic I am deeply passionate about. However, after no sooner than I had agreed to speak, my own personal anxieties slowly began to take over. I began to question what others saw in me that they would choose me to be on this committee?

After all, I am from a culture that values sons over daughter as they would bring more significance to the family. As a young girl in Bangladesh, I remember all too well feeling how unlucky I was being born a woman. All too well I remember the struggles my mother endured. She would always tell me how she willingly sacrificed her life, so my life can be different.

Farhana Aktar

After many years of suffering, my family immigrated to America. Even though I was a young girl I didn't really understand the big deal of coming to the US, my mother knew that the US would help change our lives and give her daughters the opportunity to accomplish their goals and dreams.

After high school, I decided to continue pursuing my education; to make my mother proud. Except to achieve this task was not easy. I went against my father wishes as he insisted that I end my educational pursuits and get married. However, with unwavering support from my mother, I was able to come to university. But despite my best intentions to thrive and be a great success academically, my underlying issues with fear, depression, and anxiety consumed my life and crippled me so badly that I didn't even see the purpose of me being alive anymore.

I kept all this to myself, my anxiety kept getting worse. See, it was hard trying to balance my own internal conflicts with who my culture dictates I should be and my desire to re-story my own destiny. My grades suffered because of my bouts with depression and anxiety. Initially, I did not seek help with these issues because it was not my cultural norm. I learned to accept that this is how my life would be; it became my "normal". During my second year in college, I took an Abnormal Psychology class. It was such an eye-opening experience, as I realized that my issues were not "normal" and I should seek help. I went to the professor after one of the classes and talked with her about what I had been facing. She encouraged me to seek help but I resisted. I crippled with how I would have to tell my father that I need to see a therapist, after all, I was already going against his wishes by attending school. But I knew if I did not seek help, I could not progress in school or in life.

Farhana Aktar

In the beginning, going to therapy was not easy at all. Even though they told me it was confidential I was so worried about my family and the world finding out I needed to see therapist, I worried that they would think I'm crazy. In therapy I was not able to speak or even make eye contact because before this I never had anyone listen to me, tried to understand me without judging, I never talked to anyone about my feelings what I am going through. Looking back, this was the best decision I made in my life. Even though till this day I still struggle with anxiety, through the help of my amazing therapist I am able to stand here in front of all of you and tell my story. I have grown so much as a person and able to accomplish so much in life and without the help, I have received I would not have been able to be here.

Just last week, I was the first one in my family to graduate with Bachelor of Social Work degree from Wayne State and I will be starting my master's degree in just a couple weeks. I was elected to serve as a school of social work representative on the student senate, where I was voted as the director of governmental affairs. I am doing volunteering with other organizations; I even want to pursue a career in the political arena. I cannot believe I am the same person who would lock myself away to avoid the world.

To the mental health professionals in here today I hope you know the impact you all have. Thank you for always being there for us through the ups and down. Thank you for showing people like me that vulnerability is a sign of strength and bravery. Thank you for always being there to show comfort, hope, and courage to help us move on with life no matter the circumstance. To university staff, thank you for at times offering the support that I did not always receive at home. I was able to meet an academic advisor who saw my potential. She believed so much in me even when I refused to and could not

Farhana Aktar

believe in myself. Her faith willed me into who I am today. Please know how much your students look to you for guidance and support. You make the difference, so thank you!

Although mental illness is far more publicized now than in the past, it remains the case that mental illness is not easy to talk about and, in many circles, comes with a lot of stigma. Reaching out for support is often the hardest step on the path towards recovery.

This is not a personal problem, but a communal one for which we are all responsible to address. Wayne State is leading way with CAPS, the College of Education's Counseling and Testing Center, or even WSU Psychology Clinic. There are so many other resources available on or off campus, you only need to ask. And while I just listed these resources available to us as college students, the truth about mental health is that there is a \$150-million gap between the cost of health care and the funding provided to Michigan's public mental health system. We have a lot more work to do as a country. I hope every individual in this room see the power you have to be the change. Understand that using your privilege is often just saying hi to someone in passing and sharing a smile. We can all change the world, just by choosing to better ourselves and in bettering ourselves, we can be the candle for someone in the shadow.

Thank you!