

College student home? Here's how to check their mental health

College students will soon be home for summer break. They're embarking on their independent phase, so opening up about mental health to their parents might not top the summer to-do list. It can leave parents wondering: How did the school year go? Did they make friends? Are they doing OK mentally?

Rachel Brown, LCPC, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare, says there are dos and don'ts to get the most out of a conversation with a young adult.

School stress

Brown says going off to college is a huge transition. The student may miss home. They may have trouble being accountable with no 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. structure they had in high school. Making friends can also be difficult. Brown says college students may be stressed and scared to branch out and meet people.

"They might be anxious or get into a rut of depression. They might isolate. They might sleep too much or not sleep at all," Brown says.

Warning signs

Brown says parents should watch for drastic changes in their college student's appearance as a possible "red flag" of a mental health concern. Some weight gain or loss in college is expected, but significant weight changes should warrant a discussion.

"This might mean they're not taking care of themselves," Brown says. "Stress might be coming on. They might be depressed. All of those things can cause issues with appetite."

Other things to watch for:

- The young adult is spending most of their time away from others. Maybe they're in their room sleeping all day.
- They drop hints about their college experience, such as "I didn't join any new clubs this year."
- The person looks messy. Maybe they used to be a snazzy dresser with groomed hair, but they stopped keeping up that appearance. Or they stopped hygiene practices like using deodorant or brushing their teeth. Parents should ask themselves: Is my child keeping up with daily tasks?

Dos and don'ts

It's time to talk to your child about their mental health.

- Do: Ask open ended questions, and let the child fill in the blanks. For example: How did final exams go?

Don't: Ask accusatory questions like: What's wrong with you? Or: Why aren't you talking to us?

"If you get mad at them, that makes it worse. They won't want to open up," Brown says.

- Do: Find the right time. Let the child get settled back in, and have a conversation over lunch a day or two later.

Don't: Bombard your student with questions the moment they get into the house.

- Do: Curtail your reactions and judgements. Be kind and mindful.

"Instead of asking 'Why?', say 'Oh my gosh. I didn't know about this. What's been going on? Tell me more.'," Brown says.

Don't: Have knee-jerk reactions like: How could you? Or: Why did you fail that class? Or even: You know I don't like your major. Why haven't you dropped it yet?

Next steps

After that first conversation, Brown urges parents to not let the issue go.

"I encourage parents to become emotion coaches with their children," Brown says. "Continue to check in. Continue to ask, 'How are you doing?' or 'I saw the college had this event. Was it something you went to?' Just stay involved in their everyday life, but don't bombard them."

If things aren't improving, the conversation might turn to: I want to help you. Have you thought about talking to a therapist? Would that be a good option?

"Put the ball in their court," Brown says.

"When we go off to college, it can be a huge adjustment. So we try to normalize their feelings," Brown adds, outlining what she might talk to a college student about in a therapy session. "We go over ways to make friends and socialize. We go over how to manage stress, anxiety and depression. We talk about coping skills."

For example, if a student is leaving their dormitory just for class, Brown may suggest going to the library to study. The student may make a friend along the way. Brown may suggest exercise or meditation. Or, is homework procrastination causing stress? There are ways to change those habits.

Learn more

Read more about healthy thoughts and behaviors on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). If your stress has reached a crisis where you are thinking about harming yourself or others, talk to a trusted adult or mental health professional or go to the emergency department right away. The [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) is also available.