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Mental Health on College Campuses

With one in four students living with mental illness, CAPS provides services to help students cope with what’s troubling them on the inside. →

BY CARNEY JUDGE
When you first look at the quad composed of Maryland, Puryear, and Richmond Halls, you might be taken aback by the beauty of the scene. With the foliage and an impressive fountain creating a landscape of serenity, you might not wonder what is going on inside those buildings. Most students sitting in the quad may look calm and cool on the outside, and you might never guess that there is anything troubling on the inside. Unbeknownst to the outside admirer, Richmond Hall holds the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office, which is designed to help students cope with a variety of mental health issues. Just as the building is more than meets the eye, one in four college students have much more happening on the inside, including diagnosable mental illnesses.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), college-aged students are most privy to mental health issues or concerns, and more than 25 percent of college-aged students have been diagnosed or treated by a professional for a mental health condition within the past year. Seventy five percent of lifetime cases of mental health issues begin by age 24, and almost 73 percent of students living with a mental health condition experienced a mental health crisis on a college campus. These mental issues also make it more difficult for students to focus academically. In an American College Health Association report released in 2011, students cited depression and anxiety as among the top impediments to academic performance. Thirty one percent of college students have felt so depressed in the past year that it was difficult to function, and more than 50 percent have felt overwhelming anxiety, making it hard to succeed academically. In fact, 64 percent of young adults who are no longer in college are not attending college because of a mental health related reason.

In the article “Mental Health Problems and Help-Seeking Behavior Among College Students,” in the Journal of Adolescent Health, Justin Hunt and Daniel Eisenberg found that many students who identify themselves as having some sort of mental health issue do not seek treatment at their college or university. Among college students, “the ACHA-NCHA found that only 24 percent of those diagnosed with depression were receiving treatment.” Multiple studies have identified barriers to help-seeking student populations, including lack of time, privacy concerns, lack of emotional openness, and financial constraints. Hunt and Eisenberg also found that service use was especially infrequent among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, international students, and Asian-American students.

The University of Richmond participated in the Healthy Minds Study, sponsored by Eisenburg at the University of Michigan, in Spring 2009, Spring 2011, and Spring 2013. The national studies assessed mental health status, mental health service utilization, and barriers to accessing needed mental health services within the student populations of more than a dozen universities and colleges. In 2013, the survey had a response rate of 33.8 percent among University of Richmond students. According to the survey, 38.1 percent of Richmond students, approximately 1,334 students, “thought they needed mental health help in the past year,” while CAPS only had 634 clients in the 2013-14 academic year. CAPS Director Peter LeViness said that there has been steady growth in terms of students seeking mental health help each year. In the 2002-03 academic year, CAPS only saw 333 clients, nearly half of the number they saw last year. “I think the rise in students indicates that we haven’t met the full need of students out there and I hope that eventually the numbers plateau,” LeViness said.

The Stats

1 in 4 college students are living with mental illness

1,334 students at UR thought they needed mental health help in the past year

75% of lifelong mental issues begin by age 24

38.1 percent of Richmond students thought they needed mental help in the past year, according to result of the Healthy Minds Survey.
The Healthy Minds Study demonstrated that anxiety, stress, and depression are the top reasons students sought CAPS services in 2013-14 among both men and women on Richmond’s campus. Fifty-eight percent of women and 44 percent of men who sought CAPS services reported that they were dealing with issues of anxiety.

NAMI also found that more campus-based mental health services and support are needed on college campuses. The demand for mental health services and support in community colleges is expected to increase in the next several years, and the increase in enrollment alone is justification for expanding and enhancing mental health services. Students have emphasized the critical need for the following services and support to be available on campus: mental health training for faculty, staff, and students; suicide prevention programs; peer-run, student mental health organizations; walk-in student health centers; and ongoing individual counseling services.

University of Richmond already offers free counseling services to all enrolled students, which includes many of the demands previously listed.

According to the CAPS website, the average wait time until a student can have an official meeting with a counselor is “usually a few days after they first come in.” Nationally, the average wait time for an on campus counseling center is 12 days, but at Richmond the average wait period is nine days. In the case of emergencies, CAPS offers after-hours care options on campus. CAPS pairs students with the first available counselor that matches their availability. “It would probably take an hour to see a doctor, so if they are willing to do the same thing to see CAPS that’s always helpful,” he said. “We really don’t want to have a wait list at all if it were up to us because it isn’t ideal.”

CAPS is currently conducting a survey from students on the wait list to see what their experiences were like to get a better sense on how to improve services. “If students all say the wait list is unreasonable then we can request funding because we can say that things are not going over well with the students,” he said. “I would like to know how students feel about it.”

Sophomore Annie Blanc said, “I think CAPS can never be fully efficient until they get more people working there.” Blanc said that she has found that everyone there has been very nice and insightful about any issues she has brought to them, but “would say that they could probably be more helpful if they brought in therapists with more specialized knowledge.”

LeViness said that CAPS has put in a request for additional funding for part-time contractors that they can bring in at peak times of the semester to try to eliminate the waiting list. “We actually did get it approved this fall so we will probably have something three days a week with contractors who can see six or seven appointments a day,” he said. CAPS puts no limit on the number of visits students can have, but LeViness has noticed that the average number of visits for clients is around five visits, which matches up with national statistics as well. CAPS already sees about 18 percent of the student body, but LeViness predicts that, ideally, CAPS would see closer to 25-33 percent because of the predicted need demonstrated in the Healthy Minds Survey.

“CAPS was well organized and felt like a space separate from the campus,” sophomore Dan Cunn said. “I really felt as though I was going to be helped by the CAPS employees; this instills a lot of hope in an anxious person. I went for what most people go for help with managing their changing life in college.”

Having struggled with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and anxiety earlier in his life, Cunn saw CAPS as an opportunity to better his college experience and build upon the skills he learned when he was 14, he said. “My friends that have gone and are open to talking about CAPS have all had similar experiences. I always left feeling refreshed and ready to take on my busy schedule.” Cunn said that CAPS should begin to spread awareness on campus of their services and the needs of their services meet. “An increase in knowledge and awareness will only further the program and reach more people,” he said.

CAPS does have interns who specialize in campus outreach and events, LeViness said. “One of the things I wish students struggling with anxiety and stress didn’t do is giving up the things that help them cope,” he said. “If there’s one thing I would encourage adults to do is incorporate some form of physical activity into their schedule, much like a scheduled class, because physiologically it is one of the best things you can do for stress in addition to a steady sleep cycle.”

LeViness said that his hope for every CAPS client is to give them the guidance they need to make effective changes in their mental health state. “We would like to work ourselves out of a job and help a person develop strategies and skills that can help them in the long run so they can go on their way.”