



Marcia Morris M.D.
[College Wellness](#)



Help Your College Student Combat a Major Danger: Depression

Four ways your college student can defeat depression

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“Dad, I’m too depressed to go to class.”

This is a phone call Don never expected to receive from his son, Liam. How could Liam, who was always a happy go lucky child, be depressed?

Don responds, “I don’t understand. What happened?”

“It feels like everything has gone wrong this semester. I was seeing a girl and I wanted to get serious, but she decided to go out with my roommate instead. I was so upset I failed an exam. Now I could fail the whole class. Last week I decided to just give up and get into bed. With only a month and a half left in the semester, I don’t know what to do.”

Don makes a three-hour drive to see Liam, and the next day this father and son come to my office. Liam is as depressed as anyone I have seen. He is unshaven, speaks slowly and softly, does not make eye contact, and admits that he has considered suicide. I am so concerned about him that I recommend he enter the hospital.

Don has different ideas. “I can stay with Liam and make sure he is safe. I have the kind of job where I can work remotely. If you can start him on [medication](#) now, I’ll provide support while he finishes his classes this semester. If he feels worse, then we can consider the hospital.” Liam agrees to try medication and also see a therapist. I write a letter to the campus disability resource center so they can work with Liam’s professors to get him caught up in school.

We walk a tightrope with Liam over the next three weeks. He is able to get work done, but continues to feel depressed. His [suicidal](#) thoughts are less frequent but are still present. I increase his [antidepressant](#) medication and hope the decision to keep Liam out of the hospital was the right one.

A few weeks later, Liam turns the corner. Smiling and making eye contact, he says he will pass his classes, and looks forward to spending winter break with his family. He is grateful his father came to help. I am grateful, too

It was fortunate that Liam felt comfortable reaching out to his father, but many students will not tell their parents if they are feeling down. They want to appear strong and independent to their friends and family, wearing a mask of happiness when they are hurting inside. They suffer in silence while their depression goes untreated, with harmful results. Failing grades. Poor self-care. Self-destructive behaviors. Depression, in fact, is the leading mental health disorder identified in those who commit suicide. Timely treatment for depression can be a matter of life and death.

Knowing the signs of depression in college students can help you recognize when your child needs help.

Signs of Depression in College Students

Depression involves a two week or longer period of several symptoms that could include a down mood, inability to enjoy activities, poor concentration, irritability, fatigue, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, irregular eating habits, and irregular sleep. Some students go in and out of depression, while others are chronically depressed. College students who are depressed might isolate themselves from others or stop going to activities they used to love. Their grades might also go down.

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If you suspect your child is depressed, you can ask her if she is having problems with her mood, sleep, appetite and concentration. If she seems very depressed and you are worried about suicide, you can ask if she ever feels like hurting herself. This will allow you to take steps to help her. If there is a family history of depression, be open about it, and emphasize the benefits of treatment. Most importantly, tell her that depression is a biological and psychological condition that is nothing to be ashamed of and is highly treatable. Depression, in fact, is common among college students; 15 percent of college students were diagnosed with or treated for depression in the last year.

If your college student is depressed, you can take steps to help her cope.

Management of Depression in the College Student

(1) *Encourage your child to pursue a comprehensive evaluation and treatment plan.* A therapist can work with your child on taking steps to improve her mood. She should also see a primary care doctor to evaluate for medical causes of depressive symptoms, like anemia, mononucleosis, or thyroid disease. Consider having her see a psychiatrist if her symptoms don't improve or become more severe. Starting medication does not mean having to stay on it forever, and it can help your child cope with a tough time in her life.

(2) *Provide ongoing support through phone calls and visits.* Family support can be crucial in promoting recovery from depression. Most likely, you would not need to stay with your child as Liam's father did, but you could visit or call your child with greater frequency.

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(3) *Connect your child with the campus disability resource center if she is having academic difficulties.* The disability resource center can provide academic coaching as well as adjustments in her schedule, like taking a reduced course load.

(4) *Consider other options if the depression worsens.* Sometimes leaving school, going home, or entering a hospital will allow your child to recover, and return to school more ready to deal with academic stress. Work as a team with your child and her therapist, psychiatrist, and the dean of students office to choose the best course of action.

We think of college as the best time of our lives, but for college students facing an episode of depression, it can be the hardest time. With treatment, your child can develop the tools to fight her way out of the darkness of depression and into the light of recovery.

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Details have been altered to protect patient privacy.

If you're interested in reading about a particular topic regarding college wellness and your child's mental health, please email me at marciamorrismd@gmail.com.

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About the Author



Marcia Morris, M.D. is a psychiatrist at the University of Florida.

In Print:

The Campus Cure: A Parent's Guide to Mental Health and Wellness for College Students

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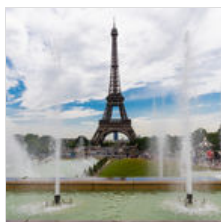


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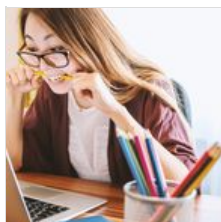
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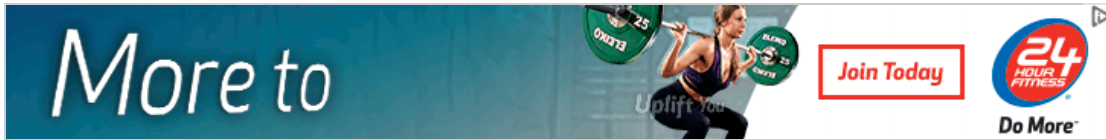
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