



WHITE PAPER

Easing COVID-19's grip on college campuses by exploring isolation and supporting normalization

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COVID on college campuses

When first addressing a group of students—from behind a podium or virtually over the internet—most college faculty see similar things in the faces looking back at them. An eagerness to learn and discover. Uninhibited youthful spirit. The exhilaration of independence and finally being away from parents' watchful eyes. And a desire to meet new people, explore new interests and have fun.

A closer look, however, reveals additional layers.

The anxiety of being out on their own for the first time. Concern they won't fit in and dread of the inevitable peer pressure. Questioning if they made the right choice and are in the right place. Worrying about being able to handle all the practical needs mom and dad once took care of... plus their studies, recreation time, a part-time job, managing relationships and making new friends.

It's no wonder the 18-to-24-year-old age group is at high risk for anxiety and depression. College life is hard.

Students feel tremendous pressure. But at least it comes with benefits that many feel make it all worthwhile. College offers exciting opportunities driven by new interactions, independence, friends and paths to explore on the journey of finding oneself.

Despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic poses to all of this, colleges and universities are doing a stellar job of maintaining educational excellence and facilitating the many activities, interactions and opportunities—academic, athletic and social—that define the full college-life experience. But the fact remains that COVID-19 has stripped college students of a great deal. It has elevated and accelerated mental health issues for a group that is already at high risk, and it has introduced a set of potential roadblocks to students seeking and getting the support they need.

According to a joint initiative by Davidson College and the Chronicle of Higher Education, out of nearly 3,000 colleges, community colleges and universities, 21% used a hybrid of virtual and in-person learning in the fall 2020 semester. 44% operated primarily or fully online. Among a population that was already prone to loneliness, the isolation of the pandemic dug in deep and continues to significantly grip and change the landscape of college life.



What does isolation look like?

In each of these and similar situations that characterize “going” to college right now, students are likely to feel isolated from their school, their peers and the benefits of campus life that during “normal” times would have been theirs for the taking.

It's also important to turn the clock back and consider a few situations that we hope campuses will return to soon. For example, movie night during freshman orientation. Among the 30 students gathered is one who can't enjoy the experience because the movie's theme brings up bad memories. Filled with anxiety, this student withdraws and wonders why she can't relax and be like everyone else. Or consider the eight kinesiology majors collaborating in class to diagnose an unknown injury. While seven enthusiastically pursue the discovery, one questions if he's chosen the right major because he just doesn't have the “fire” for sports medicine he expected to feel by now.

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All these scenarios make a critical point: Students who may not look isolated can suffer from isolation just as much as someone who is physically alone. Furthermore, these students may ask themselves, “How can I feel alone when I'm with my schoolmates/family/friends?” If students believe this indicates something is wrong with them, it pushes them deeper into a spiral of further isolation, anxiety and depression—putting them at greater risk for mental health issues. Consider these current-day college scenarios. There's the freshman—pandemic-bound at home with her parents and sibling—taking all online classes. We have the student who's living alone in an apartment and would typically commute to campus but is now taking all classes online. There are a few students residing on campus, and each one of them is almost completely quarantined, restricted to one-person-per-dorm-room living and prohibited from congregating in the lounge. And we have two seniors sharing a loft a few blocks off campus, utilizing a hybrid class schedule during the week but remaining homebound on weekends because most of the things they looked forward to now that they've reached 21 are closed.



How is “lockdown” isolation contributing to greater concern for students’ mental health

As we approach the pandemic’s one-year mark, we see a whole new complexity of mental health issues stemming from the reality that students can be part of, and function as, one college campus community and still find themselves separated, lonely, anxious and depressed.

While the impact of this is certainly dynamic—subject to everything from governments shutting down bars and restaurants to someone’s feelings about getting a vaccine—we can look at several of the most noticeable and consistent factors coming into play for college students.

We start with some general changes the pandemic has brought for college students:	
Interruption of normal connections	Social isolation deprives an individual of the fundamentals contributing to physical and mental health.
Lack of routine	Routine equals stability, comfort, control and a sense of safety — all of which contribute to well-being.
Removal of traditional coping mechanisms	Not least among them is real human contact, a hug for example.
Diminished levels of physical activity	There is a direct relationship between physical activity and a person’s mood.
The increased cognitive demand virtual platforms place on students	The sources of this range from being constantly on-screen and analyzing one’s appearance to having to tune out the distractions of a student’s at-home virtual classroom environment.
Health anxiety	This is on the rise and includes concern for one’s own health as well as the health of loved ones.
The safety and well-being question mark	The longer the pandemic persists, the greater the anxiety about when and if life will ever feel safe again.



1 in 5 students report constant anxiety about the pandemic

Next, we drill down a bit with some findings from a recent survey—commissioned by Course Hero and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators—of college students' experiences with COVID-19, their return to campus and the support they were receiving from their college.

Most notable are the following:

55%

Nearly one in five students reported being constantly anxious about the pandemic.

1 in 5

reported spending more time on schoolwork.

44%

reported spending less time exercising.

37%

reported spending less time sleeping.



The survey also looked at students' chief concerns about staying engaged while learning remotely:

70% +

More than 70% identified engagement with their coursework.

63%

cited maintaining relationships with friends.

64%

cited their mental health.

Lastly, the survey addressed if and how students are seeking support:

75% +

More than 75% reported they have not used any support from their college to help with stress or anxiety.

77%

reported they have not used any telehealth, telecounseling, grief counseling, support groups or emergency services.

64%

are most likely to seek support from friends, and 45% seek support from parents.

All of this provides important insights on what is influencing the mental health of college students during the pandemic, where these students “are” in their lives currently and how they are—or are not—coping. Understanding all these influences—and that students need mental health support now more than ever—gives a solid foundation for providing the types of support that speak most directly, and most effectively, to their needs.



Harmful behaviors and functionality

The question remains: How much of a concern is the isolation and mental health dynamic?

To get right to the point, a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in June 2020 reported that one in four (25.5%) college-aged (18 to 24) participants seriously considered suicide during the 30 days prior to the survey. Physical and emotional abuse incidences are on the rise across the board. And in terms of physical impact, we must take into account that college students are experiencing less sleep or sleep deprivation.

Isolation and its consequential impact on mental health also have a direct correlation to an individual's ability to focus and maintain the necessary attention span for being a student. In other words, students' functionality—to study, do schoolwork, maintain relationships and more—is lower. This kicks off a downward spiral leading to more stress, anxiety and depression and an overall sense of lacking control, which in turn lowers functionality even more.

Where are we now? The three stages of COVID isolation.

Colleges and universities must be commended for the extraordinary resources they've invested to keep students educated, engaged, stimulated and well during the pandemic. Like everyone else, schools have had to pivot constantly and evolve through what Togetherall identifies as the three stages of lockdown isolation.

Togetherall provides a clinically moderated, online peer-to-peer mental health community that empowers individuals to safely, anonymously seek and provide support 24/7. At the start of 2021, thousands of students at nearly 200 colleges and universities were using the Togetherall platform. At the start of the pandemic—stage one of isolation—we noticed a type of “war mentality” in our society, which didn't escape college communities. That is, in the stage of early crisis, isolation was combated by a universal resolve, a spirit of being “all in this together.”

Then, we entered isolation's second stage, when society's “we got this” attitude succumbed to the reality that COVID-19 would remain part of our lives longer than expected. This is when the number of Togetherall users and frequency of use showed even more significant growth, with the number of college users doubling during the first lockdown. Some recurring topics being discussed in the community included:

1. **Uncertainty and fears over future of study and finances**
2. **Feeling isolated / issues related to living at family home**
3. **Missing out on major life experiences**

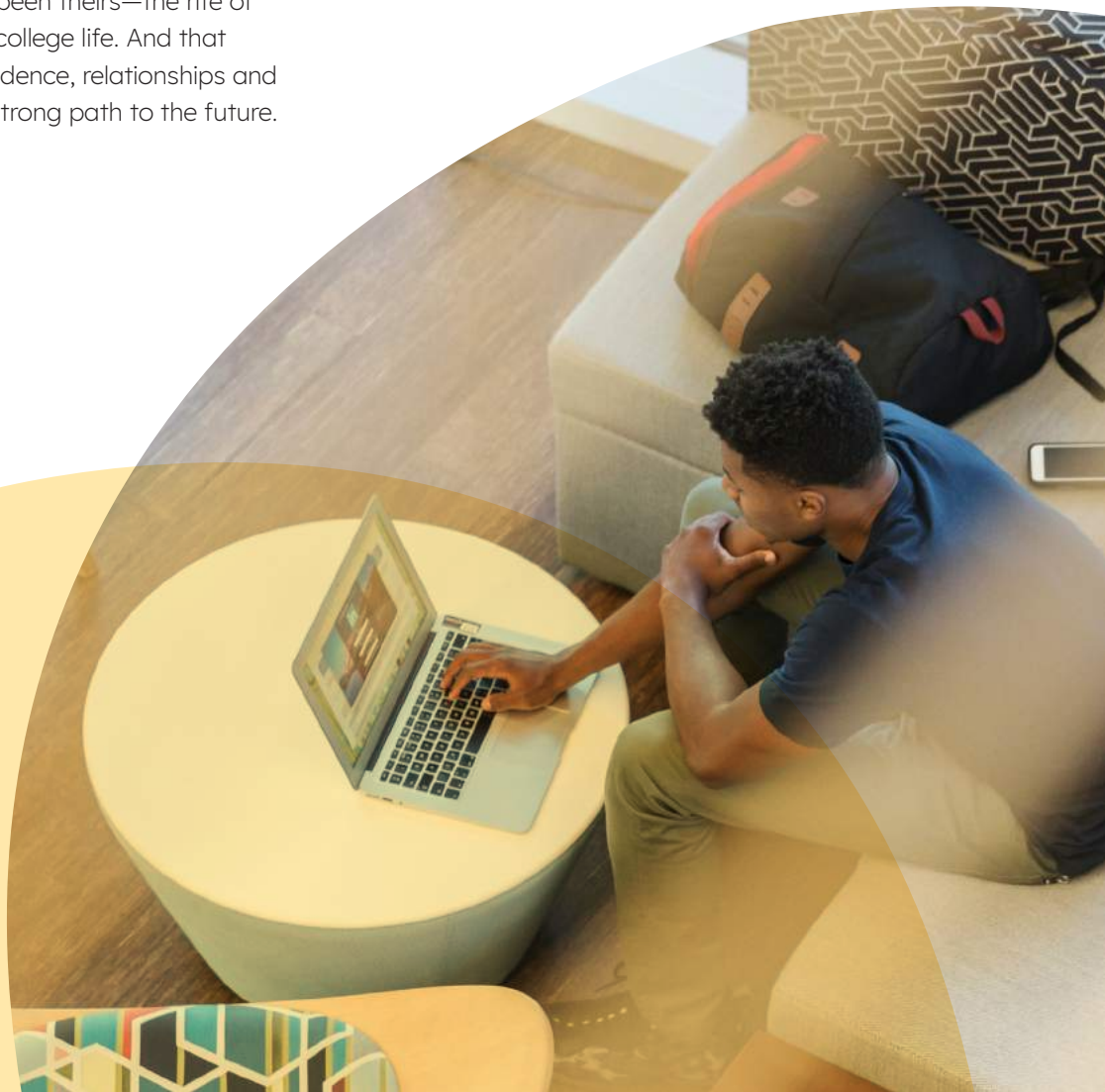


These themes continue to be strong during the third, and current, stage of isolation—acceptance. Society has accepted that COVID-19 has changed life as we knew it and a long journey still lies ahead. Consequently, there is a sense that the world is not a safe space. And the fact that no one can answer the question “When will all this end?” is driving anxiety and depression to extraordinary levels. It’s no surprise then that Togetherall use from college students is on the rise. At the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, the number of college users had increased more than 300% from the end of the previous academic year, with corresponding increase in frequency of use and session time.

Lastly, it’s important to remember that, from the start, college students have consistently experienced loss. Whether a freshman is starting his first semester, or a senior is entering year two of her pandemic-defined education, students feel loss for what should have been theirs—the rite of passage that comes with college life. And that equates to loss of independence, relationships and opportunities to create a strong path to the future.

Supporting student mental health and a “normalized” campus community

Providing students with ways to remain connected with each other, counselors and faculty will help combat isolation issues. However, when it comes to identifying students who feel isolated and intervening with support before risk levels escalate, the solution is complex and requires an integration of resources and opportunities. Defining these tactics—as well as the best ways to implement them—is the focal point of Togetherall’s peer-to-peer support platform. It starts with normalization.



Normalization is the critical first step that allows a student to move past the misconception that something is wrong with them for feeling the way they do. Normalization guides a student to find someone who has had a similar experience. Someone who can say, "You're not alone in this." Someone who shuts down the voice saying, "There's something wrong with you" by saying, "Hey, you're more normal than you think." Once a student sees they are not alone with their feelings, the doors open to discussion, further normalization and getting support from peers. Finally, a good argument for the importance of normalization comes from the fact that 60% of students using Togetherall do at least one online assessment to ascertain if they are, indeed, experiencing something commonly experienced by others.

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Normalization cannot happen without a substantial community through which a student can find people to identify with. Togetherall's user base of students has been active during the pandemic, with nearly a quarter of a million logins and more than 100,000 conversations. The more people a community has—the more connections offered—the greater its diversity. With diversity comes likelihood that a student seeking help will find peers who strongly resonate with them and provide that perfect opportunity of support that speaks directly to him or her. In other words, supporting your campus's mental health depends on connecting each student in need of support with the right peers.



Next, support must be available anytime, anywhere

Next, support must be available anytime, anywhere. The importance of this is evidenced by the fact that approximately 2/3 of our college-age users connect outside of standard office hours. A person's most fear-laden moments, most intense questioning of their wellness and strongest desire to reach out come when the world is dark and quiet. Lying in bed at 2 a.m. or waiting anxiously for sunrise to dispel the physical and emotional darkness—these are times students can feel the strongest need for support. Moreover, right now, college students can't wake up the dormmate in the top bunk or knock on the door of a close friend down the hall. The ability to turn on a device and connect with someone at any time is more critical than ever.

Creating a safe environment for getting mental health support is imperative—and, most likely, more desired than ever by students trying to function in a world that is wholly considered unsafe. While safety in providing peer-to-peer support is itself a topic for extensive discussion, here we will note the three proven pillars of safe online support that Togetherall sees every day.

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The first is offering and positioning college online mental health support that is fully separate from social media—it is professional and specific for students, unlike a discussion platform such as Reddit or Facebook. Secondly, Togetherall's online mental health support offers anonymity—a critical factor for users. Lastly, Togetherall ensures every student's experience is safe, appropriate and positive by guaranteeing that live mental health professionals are monitoring peer interactions at all times. Our Wall Guide monitors are trained to quickly identify when negative situations are brewing—from a user's anonymity being threatened to discussions becoming too intense to signs a participant may be contemplating suicide—and take steps to defuse a heated situation. If necessary, monitors will interact with a participant at risk and connect them with hotline or campus counseling support.



Conclusion

While we are all weary of hearing the phrase, “We are living in unprecedented times,” it is a reality. And the demand of higher-education institutions to maintain thriving campuses while ensuring students’ mental health is not exempt from the unparalleled challenges of the pandemic. As the dynamics of the world as well as those that define a college’s particular campus community change, successful colleges and universities will understand all the influences impacting students’ mental health. They will also be open to using all the resources at hand to create a specific model of support for their campuses and students.

Before the pandemic, a poll of our college-student users in Ontario revealed that 80% of them felt less isolated after using Togetherall, and we are encouraged that use is on the rise during the pandemic. However, we recognize that our online platform of providing a peer-to-peer environment that fosters normalization and support is not the single solution to issues of isolation and other mental health concerns. When it comes to college students’ mental health and well-being, collaboration—of people, technologies, professional capabilities and so forth—drives success. Certainly, in a world still shaped by a pandemic, digital solutions are the most viable. But whether we live in a pandemic or not, online support communities like Togetherall are most effective when leveraged as a valuable foundation of a campus counseling ecosystem that puts in place pathways to overall better mental health.



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