



Mentors Can Help Young Adults Transition to Higher Education

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Mental health concerns are a growing problem on college campuses—particularly during the transition to college—with one in three first-

year students reporting problems with their mental health, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Bruffaerts et al.,

2018). One promising, yet relatively

understudied, social support for college students during these stressful times involves natural mentoring relationships, or relationships with non-parental adults that emerge organically in a person's life (rather than being assigned by a formalized program).



Figure 1 Photo by mentatdgt from Pexels. CCO.

“Increased presence of strong mentoring ties was associated with reduced depressive symptomatology and worry, and this effect was partially explained by the association between strong ties and lower levels of emotion suppression.”

Relationships with naturally occurring mentors appear to be an especially critical support for youth during late adolescence and the transition to adulthood. In fact, youth who can identify at least one of these natural mentoring relationships show better

Highlights

Natural mentoring relationships can pair young adults with non-parental adults.

Natural mentors can provide young adults critical support as they transition to college or university.

Colleges and universities should help students develop and maintain close relationships with mentors.

mental health, fewer risk-taking behaviors, and better academic and vocational outcomes during adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2005).

Our research explores which types of mentors may be most critical to students' mental health during the transition to college, and why.

Methods

We surveyed a diverse group of 275 first-year college students to explore the role of different types of informal, naturally-occurring mentoring relationships (e.g., with professors, family friends) on students' mental health during the transition to college. We followed undergraduate students at a predominantly white, medium-sized university in the southeastern U.S. across their first semester of college. During their first four weeks of college, students completed a baseline survey about their demographic characteristics and their relationships with the mentors. We then contacted participants again during the final week of their first semester of college to tell us more about the strategies they used to cope with difficult emotions, as well as their symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Results

- College students who had more emotionally close mentors, like family members or family friends, were less likely to attempt to suppress their emotions during the first semester of college.
- The lower levels of emotion suppression seen in college students with more emotionally close mentors helped to explain why these students reported feeling less depressed and worried at the end of the first semester in college.
- Less emotionally close mentors, such as teachers or employers, did not seem to shape the kinds of strategies students used to regulate their emotions, or their feelings of anxiety and depression.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology informs the strengths-based approach that underlies our exploration of naturally-occurring sources of support in students' existing social networks as they navigate stressful new environments at college.

In addition, our work seeks to highlight avenues for supporting students who may be particularly vulnerable to mental health risks during this critical developmental stage. Consistent with the aims of Community Psychology, we hope to promote equity in rates of college success and persistence for all students.

What Does This Mean For...

Research and Evaluation: These results help uncover potential mechanisms of mentors' effects on youth development, particularly during the transition to college, although further research is needed on the different types of natural mentors identified by students, as well as the kinds of support they provide. Findings may also help to inform studies evaluating programs designed to support college students' mental health.

Practice: Our findings suggest that colleges and universities may benefit from developing and implementing programming designed to help students develop and maintain close relationships with mentors in their lives. At the same time, practitioners should be careful not to neglect the importance of helping students maintain emotionally close ties with family members and family friends from home as they move onto college. This may be particularly important for students who move away from home to attend college.

Social Action: Students from historically marginalized backgrounds in the U.S., such as BIPOC students or students from low-income families, tend to be more vulnerable to mental health problems as they transition to college. At the same time, research shows that these same students may have reduced access to various kinds of naturally-occurring mentors. Our policies and practices need to make sure that all students are empowered to have meaningful, extended interactions with non-parental adults in a variety of contexts. This type of work is critical to supporting students who may be particularly vulnerable to mental health risks during this developmental stage and promoting equity in rates of college success and persistence for all students.

References

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