

Resource Guide for New Jersey Institutions of Higher Education

Maintaining Mental Health amid COVID-19 Pandemic

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of increased anxiety and change for students, staff and faculty. Social distancing, online and remote instruction, and the loss of many campus activities can lead to feelings of stress, worry and isolation. These emotions can negatively impact an individual's mental health, which is a key component of maintaining overall health and wellness. In addition, mental health can impact students' success in persisting toward earning a degree.

To help support campus mental health needs, below is a non-comprehensive list of potential strategies and services that individuals and institutions should consider that are available from the state and other sources. Also included is a sampling of best practices from a number of New Jersey colleges and universities. As a reminder, if you or someone you know are in immediate crisis and need help, call 911.

Individuals should consider:

- Asking for help from health professionals as well as family members and friends and working with a health care provider to devise a plan to address mental health needs.
 - Warning signs of stress and anxiety may include dizziness or a general feeling of "being out of it," headaches, increase in or loss of appetite, muscle tension and problems sleeping.¹
- Building a virtual support network of health professionals, peers, family, friends, mentors, etc., whether through phone, connecting online, or a virtual group. A list of potential resources is below.
- Eating healthy, exercising, and getting adequate sleep to maintain the balance between physical and mental health.
- Stepping away from social media and computer screens and taking breaks from the news. Information overload can be overwhelming.
- Utilizing resources available to you by your institution, community providers, and the state. Please check your institution's website for a list of services that may be offered.

Institutions should consider:

- Clearly communicating to students what mental health and other services are available and how they can be accessed — whether on-campus or virtually.
 - For example, Montclair State University has provided a 'COVID-19 Resource Guide' on their Dean of Students' page to connect students to state and material hardship resources and wellness support.²
- Employing social workers and mental health counselors, in addition to student counselors and student affairs staff, to assist with mental health needs and address material hardship concerns such as food insecurity and homelessness.
 - For example, Passaic County Community College (PCCC) and Monmouth University have noted success in implementing this model.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

² <https://www.montclair.edu/dean-of-students/covid-19-resource-guide/>

- PCCC’s Office of Student Advocacy, established in August 2019, employs two licensed social workers to directly respond to non-academic student issues, including mental health, homelessness, family and relationship issues, and stress management.³ For students receiving Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funding, the Office made resource guides and individual check-ins accessible to ensure all students access support and resources beyond the aid provided.
- In addition, Monmouth University’s School of Social Work launched the Community Care Telehealth Clinic, a free online counseling service.⁴
 - Monmouth also developed a case management project supported by staff and administrators throughout the campus to conduct outreach to students living alone and in isolation or quarantine to check in with them on a daily basis. This outreach served as a friendly voice to make sure students were doing well, staying positive and had their immediate needs fulfilled.
- Offering students, staff, and faculty expanded wellness center offerings.
 - For example, Atlantic Cape Community College (ACCC) has begun hosting “Talk Tuesdays” on virtual platforms facilitated by faculty and staff, which refers students to campus services.
- Working with the human services department and other entities in the institution’s home county to offer counseling to students and staff.
 - For example, Brookdale Community College partnered with RWJBarnabas Health to offer virtual counseling.
 - New Jersey City University (NJCU) contracted with local hospitals to provide more specialized services, including one-time informal consultations, ongoing counseling, and crisis information.⁵
- Connecting with students from diverse backgrounds who may not be open to counseling and/or therapy.
 - For example, in response to the pandemic, Bloomfield College utilized a virtual holistic approach to incorporate wellness, cooking, yoga, a spiritual perspective, etc. to be mindful of students from different religious backgrounds.
- Providing alternative and engaging student activities to foster a sense of community and support for students, such as virtual fitness classes and stress reliever events.
 - For example, ACCC engaged Student Government Associations to offer student activities such as virtual concerts, drive-in movies, etc.⁶
- Working with students, particularly resident assistants, to identify those most in need of assistance⁷ and further educate the campus community of mental health crisis resources and

³ <https://catalog.pccc.edu/policy/section/221/>

⁴ <https://www.monmouth.edu/news/monmouth-university-school-of-social-work-launches-free-online-community-counseling-service/>

⁵ <https://www.njcu.edu/student-life/campus-services-resources/counseling-center/counseling-center-services/counseling-services-during-covid-19-pandemic>

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/atlanticapesga/>

⁷ <https://sites.rowan.edu/wellness/hci/rualifesaver/index.html>

how to seek help.⁸ Making sure students, staff, and faculty are aware of the warning signs and symptoms of stress and utilize a wellness/care team to support those in need.

- For example, Rutgers—New Brunswick has a “Click to Share a Concern” button on their website. Anyone may submit a concern regarding themselves, friends, or students. It immediately creates a request for faculty/staff to review and initiate an appropriate response.⁹

State Services Available

There is a free helpline available through the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS), in partnership with the Mental Health Association of New Jersey (MHANJ). *NJ Mental Health Cares* offers telephone counseling, emotional support, information and assistance. The helpline is available seven days per week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Call 866-202-HELP (4357) or text NJHOPE to 51684.

DHS is also offering emotional help and support to deaf and hard of hearing individuals during COVID-19. Sign language users can communicate with ACCESS of St. Joseph’s Health in Paterson via video phone at 973-870-0677, Monday through Friday between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. The New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) also has a crisis text line: text NJ to 74174. A trained counselor will respond and help.

In addition, MHANJ, along with DHS’ Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services, have created virtual groups for emotional support that include “Navigating Life as a College Student During COVID-19,” “Parenting Through the Pandemic Group,” and “Decompress and Disconnect Drop-in.” To see the full list of available virtual groups, visit: <https://nj.gov/humanservices/coronavirus.html>.

Additional Mental Health Resources to Consider

[New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Coping with Stress](#)

[American College Health Association: COVID-19 Resources](#)

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health: Supporting Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[World Health Organization: Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

[The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice: College During COVID-19: A #RealCollege Guide for Students](#)

⁸ <http://www.pccc.edu/prospective/student-services/center-for-student-success/wellness-counseling/emergency-referrals>

⁹ <http://health.rutgers.edu/do-something-to-help/>