Step by well-meaning step, colleges are being transformed into something more akin to mental health wards than citadels of learning.

by Hara Estroff Marano
photographs by Adam Levey
for mental health concerns, says Locke, who as head of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) compiles an annual report summarizing counseling-center intake data from more than 100,000 students at 140 schools. Eisenberg’s Healthy Minds Study indicates that 19 percent of all college students regularly take psychotropic meds—antidepressants, anxiolytics, and stimulants such as Adderall.

Distress on campus takes a variety of forms, but far and away the leading concern in 2015 is anxiety—54 percent of all college students report feeling overwhelming anxiety, up from 46.4 percent in 2010, according to the latest semianual survey conducted by the American College Health Association. That wasn’t always the case.

Until recently, anxiety vied with disabling depression and relationship problems. But about five years ago, campus psychologists agree, anxiety began outstripping other concerns. And each year the divide increases, says Micky Sharma, director of student counseling at Ohio State University and president of the Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors. “For 47 percent of clients seeking counseling—which is available in seven languages—anxiety is the primary complaint. Students feel overwhelmed. They can’t manage.”

Anxiety is actually more prevalent in institutions that are less selective with respect to admissions.

T WAS 3:18 IN THE MORNING. THE DORM was quiet. Alyssa had sunk to the floor, not far from her bed. First to hit was a tsunami of nausea. Then her heart began galloping; she thought it might explode. Her breath came in staccato gasps. And her arms shook so implacably it took her minutes to type: “My boyfriend is breaking up with me...life sucks...suck...i...feel...like...killing myself.”

Whether troubled Facebook posts or middle-of-the-night cries to independent support services like Crisis Text Line, such messages, along with class absences, disturbing writing in course assignments, or direct threats to faculty, are a new common core of college life, where students in a fragile state of mind, like Alyssa, may be spotted by Students of Concern committees and funneled off for help. For increasing numbers of students all across the United States, disappointment now balloons into distress and thoughts of suicide. Lacking any means of emotion regulation and generationally bred on the immediacy of having needs met, they know no middle psychic ground: Mere frustration catapults them into crisis.

“Problems are more urgent than ever,” says Philip Meilman, professor of psychology at Georgetown University and director of its campus counseling center. When he took his first post after earning his doctorate four decades ago, he says, counseling centers mostly saw collegians struggling with developmental issues— homesickness, relationship breakups, lack of life direction. “That’s not what we see today,” he reports. “Students have more overwhelming concerns: I’m cutting. I’m anorexic. I’m suicidal. I’m alcoholic. I’m bipolar. Or combinations thereof.” Developmental problems have not gone away, they are just masked by more pressing turmoil.

Nationally, 22 percent of collegians now seek therapy or counseling each year, reports Daniel Eisenberg, an economist at the University of Michigan whose Healthy Minds Study annually samples 160,000 students around the country. The number of those in counseling varies from campus to campus depending on its culture—10 percent at some large schools, nearly 50 percent at some small, private ones. The figure has been steadily growing for two decades and shows no signs of slowing.

Educators contend that students arrive at college psychically burned out from building portfolios of excellence, primed to crumble at the first significant disappointment they encounter. According to Benjamin Locke, associate director for clinical services at Penn State, one in three students now starts college with a prior diagnosis of mental disorder. Academic or social stress, late-night cram sessions, any disruption of routine in the looser-than-home campus environment can shatter their stability.

Ten percent of those seeking services in 2014 had previously been hospitalized for mental health concerns, says Locke, who as head of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) compiles an annual report summarizing counseling-center intake data from more than 100,000 students at 140 schools. Eisenberg’s Healthy Minds Study indicates that 19 percent of all college students regularly take psychotropic meds—antidepressants, anxiolytics, and stimulants such as Adderall.

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that they had been unable to func-

tion academically for more than a week. Anxiety is a byproduct of thinking, but it is incapacitat-

ing without the ability to apply critical thinking skills to emo-

tional reactions.

Angst has long afflicted those of college age; but once it had an in-
tellectual, existential cast. Now it is primarily emotional. By some psychol-

gical slight, common life circum-

stances have become mental disorders. Everyone agrees: Much of the anxi-

ety is socially driven. “Students feel inept about romantic relationships,” ob-

servers David Wallace, head of counseling at the University of Missouri. Students have diffi-
culties establishing relationships, handling conflict within them, and endur-

ing breakups. The anguish is always hyper-

acute, and it spreads to almost all areas of life.

Self-harm is a staple of dorm life, and Eisenhower finds that nearly one in five students engages in cutting, burning, or other form of self-mutilation. Accord-

ing to the 2000-2002 National Survey of College Students, 4 percent of students purposely injure themselves without the intent to kill themselves. The number is slowly increasing, up from 21 percent in 2000.

Experts find it difficult to pinpoint why. It may be that lacking the ability to emotionally regulate themselves, students feel things especially intensely—beyond control, beyond the ability to articulate their feelings. In addition, stress is now presented publicly, stripped of the anxiety that burns beneath. “It’s generational,” says a Brown University student. “We are obsessed with social media. It magnifies the music of the soul factor.” At a school with so many tal-

tented students, they say, almost everyone is stuck in negative self-evaluation—trapped in a hall of mirrors. Social connection is necessary as air for health. But “we have to acknowledge it now has a dark side,” says Gregory Eells, director of the campus counseling center at Cornell University. The dark side came glaringly into focus with the 2014 suicide of Madison Holzeran. A star athlete in high school, Holzeran had accepted an offer from the University of Pennsylvania to run track. But like many freshmen at competitive col-

leges, she had trouble adjusting to a school full of standouts, although she pulled off a 3.5 GPA her first semester. She was, by all accounts, a perfectionist, unused to stumbles or even failure. She had yet to get the knack of balancing schoolwork and training; it made her deeply unhappy, afraid of failing. There were the expectations of adoring parents, not to mention herself. Her high-school friends, scattered at colleges, all seemed so happy on Facebook. And the Penn upperclass-

men she followed on Instagram—their lives were so picture-perfect. She couldn’t get past the sharp contrast between their images and her inner reality.

A week after the start of her second semester—the return from breaks is now the cruellest time for student mental health—Holzeran took a running leap over a barrier and off the roof of a parking garage in Philadelphia. “I don’t know who I am anymore, trying, trying, try-
ing,” said the note she left in her dorm room. “I’m sorry. I love you… sorry again… sorry again… sorry again… How did this hap-
pen?” One day she seemed happy, the next day she seemed sad, and the day after that she was dead, said one of her sisters.

Disturbing as it always is, and espe-

cially tragic on the threshold of adulthood, suicide is still rare among collegians—roughly one in 10,000 students. Suic-

cide is rare still among college athletes. But the Penn death—one of a cluster of four that year—is emblematic of the new constellation of forces playing havoc with the already frail psyches of today’s students and reflects growing concern as to just how vigilant college communities should be. Mandated student-leave policies and how vigilant college communities should be. Mandated student-leave policies and how vigilant college communities should be. Mandated student-leave policies and how vigilant college communities should be.

“Holzeran’s suicide is a cautionary tale,” says Brian Tompkins, associate athletic director at Yale. “Our campus is full of people who have her struggles. Everyone so profoundly misread her. Instagram is a live account of what’s going on. But it under-

mines students by highlighting how normal and even happy everyone else seems in contrast to oneself; it reinforces isolation.” At the Ivies and other elite schools, populated primarily by those from a nar-

row band of the achievement spectrum, “weakness has to be invisible,” says a Princeton student. “You have to come off as infallible in all domains and to appear effortlessly excellent.” Students at Penn openly speak of the phenomenon as put-
ting on a “Penn face,” although their glib-

ness makes it no easier to crack.

Most students coming to college today are highly achievement-oriented and have grown up with competition. Competitiveness matters to mental health, says Julie Posselt, an assistant professor of education at the University of Michigan—but in distinctly surprising ways. It’s not the selectivity of the school that matters. In fact, in analyzing data from over 40,000 undergraduates in the Healthy Minds Study, she discovered that anxiety is actu-

ally more prevalent in institutions that are less selective with respect to admissions. What is linked to distress is how much competition competition students face in their classes. Of course, some competitiveness is good, a spur to excellence, but there is a threshold at which it begins to have negative psycho-

logical effects and shifts motivation from learning to performance. “It depends on how the professor runs the class,” Posselt says. “How much test-to-test performance anxiety is there?” Such practices as grad-

ing on a curve, for example, exaggerate small differences in high performance and pit students against each other. “Per-
ceived competitiveness increases by 40 percent the odds of positively screening for depression,” Posselt finds. “Students who reported that their classes were ‘very competitive’ had 70 percent higher odds of screening positive for anxiety.”

Here’s the catch: If students felt their classmates were more teammates than rivals, more collaborative than cutthroat, they were spared the negative mental health effects of competition. “Peer sup-
port mitigates the effect of competitive-

ness.” Unfortunately, Posselt notes, the more colleges are attuned to their stu-

tus rankings, “the less likely they are to address the effects of competition.”

SEX, DRUGS, AND ROCK’N ROLL

MAKE NO MISTAKE: Drinking has long been a part of campus life. But drink-
ing has moved beyond beer to hard liquor, which is such a staple of campus life that more than a dozen universities, from Ala-

bama to Wisconsin, license their logo to Kraft, Jell-O’s manufacturer, to market insignia-embossed molds for making tasty shots.

And drinking is now particularly...
Howard University student. “And getting out is the goal. It’s an inverted world in month. For 24 percent of students, black-out drunk at least once or twice a 71 percent of Penn students get blackout drunk during the week. I want to distance myself from the shock of having women surpass men on campus residence halls do just that.

The Ward

STEP BY WELL-MEANING step, campuses are being transformed into something more akin to mental health wards.

HOW STUDENTS (AND THE REST OF US) MISUNDERSTAND STRESS

On whatever faultlines: collegiate psyches fracture, the precipitant is always stress—actually, the perception of stress. In the college setting, the dagger skills, everything is a stressor. Even so, stress is not always what it’s cracked up to be. It’s not that academics have become more stressful, as indexed by time spent studying or grade inflation. The typical grade at Harvard is now an A, up from C+ 50 years ago; the average GPA at the University of Virginia has risen from 3.06 to 3.29 over the past 21 years. But students talk about stress more. It’s the new badge of college attendance.

College students mostly regard stress as a plague. Americans generally are encouraged to view stress as one of our top health problems, a source not only of headaches and high blood pressure but diabetes and depression. Stanford psychologist Alaine Ornstein notes that all the alarm creates a mind-set that stress is negative—which paradoxically gives rise to its harmful effects on the mind and body.

There is a laudable research thrust that stress enhances cognitive performance. It focuses attention, speeds up cognitive processing, and allows the mind to take in gobs of new information. It makes experience more salient, adding to a sense of meaning and source of learning, growth, and progress. After all, the psychophysiological activation known as the stress response has been conserved through evolution to help us meet the unpredictable demand life throws our way. Crum’s work finds that people who stress as an enhancing challenge recruit a set of positive emotions. Those positi-ve emotions allow them to engage in demanding activities without experiencing the debilitating effects of stress on body systems; they blunt cortisol reactivity. What’s more, stress actually emboldens them, motivating them to face and engage in challenges, not run from them.

Crum and colleagues developed a three-minute video explaining the value of stress and tested it on employees of a major financial firm. In the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, they report that it’s possible to change beliefs about stress quite readily, and doing so brings about improvements in psychological functioning and work performance. But in a world of many distractions and few coping skills, a video can help you focus,” says a Princeton student. “It’s almost like

Much of the stress that students bemoan is a mirage that can be dismantled with the flip of a mind-set.

There is a huge amount of research showing that stress

The War

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From stress, it is a short, disturbing leap to rape. Stress begets the desire to blow off steam on weekends, and that sets off a chain of events that sometimes ends in unhappy sex.

And so “resilience” has become the word du jour on campuses nationwide. Some students can’t do it, while others, like Steven Brown, head of campus counseling at East Tennessee State University, have created their own home-grown courses to teach students the emotional skills they think will save them some sorrow they can’t afford textbooks. They have endured homelessness, hunger, and other hardships unknown to their 16 million peers—and still managed to get themselves to college, typically without much parental input and often without any adult guidance at all.

Hung Pham is one of them. The son of Vietnamese immigrants, he grew up in Vallejo, California, a city so economically marginal it declared bankruptcy in 2008. For Pham, that meant no computers, textbooks rotated with friends for what little use and sexual decision making in the largest higher-ed system (190,000 students) in the country. But now, personnel pare students gluten-free nibbles at campus life are conscripted into the business, and administrators from all walks of campus are called for such warnings, and more. At Cornell, a school known for its academic rigor, it declared bankruptcy in 2008. Pham, who arrived on campus. Incoming students take an online mental health course before they’re having to focus on them developmentally delayed. And now students turned up at one such event at UC Davis, the second largest gathering there for students and cater to them as consumers, students and cater to them as consumers, “Most of the conversations about first-generation students are deficit-based. They focuses on what’s lacking, what are the holes, what are the missing things. And that’s not there. And that is never empowering,” especially on a campus dominated by tradition and privilege. For sure, he was not prepared for the disembowelment of Marx and Kant. “But my work ethic helped me bring it up speed.” Pham’s view of himself was transformed. “I realize now that I have valuable skills that other people don’t.”

It’s not that first-generation students glide through college. But they have their strengths, generally hidden even from them in an atmosphere that foregrounds their weaknesses. Pham is not the only one to shift his thinking about just what skills first-generation students are. Here’s the way a senior executive at one of America’s foremost investment banking houses puts it: “I hire lots of kids, and I won’t hire any more of the ‘same old’ kids.” And yet, by focusing so intently on their deficiencies, and seeing only the best for America’s young can wind up bringing out the worst in them.

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