

Helping During a Breakdown

Goal: To teach students to recognize both in themselves and in others the signs of mental breakdowns and being emotionally overwhelmed, which can cause drastic changes in a person's personality and functionality. By acting out some scenes and discussing what the proper steps are for helping someone in need, the students will learn both to help others within their community and that they can rely on others to help them during tough times.

Introduction: College is an inherently stressful time, which can lead to the onset or aggravation of various mental health issues. According to <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/06/college-students>, back in 2013 41.6% of college students presented anxiety and 36.4% presented depression. Please note, when they say "presented" anxiety and/or depression it means they were displaying symptoms that had been or were eventually diagnosed by a doctor. This does not mean "I have butterflies in my stomach due to my upcoming date" or "I am really worried about my final exam", but rather a deeper issue that prevents people from functioning properly. Furthermore, people can experience being emotionally overwhelmed, which is when you are "completely submerged by your thoughts and emotions about all of life's current problems, to the point where you lack efficacy and feel frozen or paralyzed", as described by <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/feeling-overwhelmed/>. Due to this, "you may be unable to think or act rationally or functionally and emotional overwhelm may impact your relationships or professional life", resulting in both a drop in productivity, focus, and happiness, which can last anywhere from a few hours or days to possibly years. Due to this inability to function, the person cannot progress on other duties such as work or relationships, leaving them frozen and unable to escape the rut they are in without outside assistance.

There are many warning signs for a mental breakdown or a period of being emotionally overwhelmed, although the specifics can vary from person to person. The article <https://highlysensitiverefuge.com/overwhelmed-highly-sensitive-person/> describes 7 of the most common signs for someone experiencing an emotionally overwhelming time; these are having small problems feel like big ones, mental or physical exhaustion, the inability to concentrate, experiencing headaches or other physical discomforts for no physical reason, even little things being irritating, obsessing over small things, and the urge to just leave. However, these are not the only signs, and the degree to which they manifest differs from person to person. The universal sign is a significant and sudden change in behavior, because people do not change radically overnight.

While this all can sound terrifying to experience, both as the victim and as the people watching it happen to a friend, these are not permanent states. Even in extreme circumstances, people recover from these situations and go on to have fulfilling lives. The trick is, in the middle of a mental breakdown or emotionally overwhelming time, it can be hard to see that. The point of the following activity is to give you some ideas on how to respond to someone in a period of extreme duress.

Activity Guidelines: In this activity, students will have a chance to act out two different scenes involving a mental episode, with the overview of the sequences described below. In Scenario 1, the person having the mental breakdown is not physically present, so the actors are responding to noticing something wrong about a mutual friend. In Scenario 2, two students encounter a friend while walking down the hallway, and their friend very quickly displays concerning out of character behavior. Once each scene has been acted out, including some of the actors discussing what they think they should do to handle the situation, the entire Wing should talk about the scenario and discuss what they believe are the proper steps to take to respond to said scenario.

Scenario 1: For this scene, every actor is a part of a friend group that know the person having the mental episode; however, the person experiencing the mental episode has disappeared.

You are hanging out with your friend group when you realize that one of your friends has not been seen since 6 PM last night. You ask the rest of your friends if they had seen them at all, to which everyone responds that they have not, and when you and their roommate both call and text the missing person they do not answer or respond at all. Talking with your friends, you recall that for the most part things had been going well, and they were really looking forward to a big date night planned for in a couple of weeks. However, you also remember that they were complaining about how 4 classes had major assignments due back to back at the beginning of the week, and their part-time job and applications had been causing them a lot of stress. After checking in with some other people you know, including other people that share classes with the missing person, you learn that they did not attend any of their classes today.

At this point, the actors need to ad lib their response to their missing friend, coming up with a plan to try to figure out how to help find them.

Scenario 2: For this scene, one actor has to play the person in the middle of their mental episode, displaying symptoms that are frighteningly out of character and worrying the other two actors.

The two actors run into the third passing in the hallway, and the person in the middle of their mental episode is asked the friendly “How are you doing?” The victim responds with a several minute rambling answer that is clearly stream-of-conscious, jumping from one subject to another constantly without giving the other actors a chance to interrupt. Meanwhile, the victim is constantly moving, to the point that they start running into furniture and walls with enough force to move the furniture and potentially hurt themselves (please fake bangs and shove furniture aside to replicate this). However, said impacts do not stop them from rambling, and they keep moving despite the repeated collisions. As they get to the tail end of their answer, the victim talks about having been unable to be productive, that they are not eating, and that they have to get going, at which point they simply walk about of the Wing.

After the victim leaves, the two remaining actors have to collaborate on what to do to help their friend in need, who may or may not be a danger to themselves and others.

Scenario Specific Discussion:

After the discussion for each scenario, you can read associated blurb to fill in the students on what happened in the story this scene is based on. If you feel it is appropriate, you can also share the second associated blurb that contains the circumstances of the victim; the intention is to help the students understand what the victim was going through and why they behaved the way they did, but if you feel that would distract from the message of reaching out to people feel free to skip this part.

For Scenario 1:

Beginning to worry, the friend group reached out to their missing friend's parents and learn that they have not heard from them either. Coordinating between themselves, the parents, campus security and the police, they worked together to check the victim's usual hang-out spots to search for them. Following a suggestion from their father, the police find the victim at a casino 1.5 hours away, watching the games but not playing, 18 hours after the last time the friend group saw them.

This victim was eventually formerly diagnosed with anxiety, but had not shown any significant behavioral patterns before this event. They had become so overwhelmed and stressed out that they had no choice but to remove themselves from everything that was agitating them, including from stuff they enjoyed and loved. They found watching gambling, like poker, to be incredibly calming, so they resorted to going to a casino to attempt to self-soothe, and had been there for hours when they were found.

For Scenario 2:

The victim returned from Spring Break, in which they went on a volunteer trip similar to Habitat for Humanity. Terrified by the radical change in behavior and the very real possibility of harm occurring, whether intentional or not, the victim's friend group split up to handle several tasks. Some of them go to look for the victim, some attempt to reach out to their parents, and a couple contacted campus security to express their concern for the victim's safety, talking about the very real fear that they might not be able to stop at a crosswalk and while simply move in front of oncoming traffic. Coordinating with security and their parents to get in contact with a mental health professional as the search continues, everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they are found at the library, pacing the book stacks.

Later conversations with this person revealed that that they were trapped this entire time. When they ran into walls and bruised themselves, or answered "Hey, how are you doing?" with a seven-minute stream of consciousness answer, they were aware that what they were doing was abnormal but they were powerless to stop themselves. They tried to go to class to return to normalcy, but once they got there they *had* to keep walking, they could not physically or mentally resist the urge to keep walking. It was also discovered that there was a family history of mental illness, as a family member who was rarely talked about such an extreme mental illness that they had to be placed in an insane asylum.

Ending Discussion: For both scenarios, the people in question have not had a previous history of showing mental health issues, so these events were the first time they and the people around them witness and experience these kinds of episodes. While somewhat extreme, an important take away is that they were not fully in control of their actions. The first person was so stressed and anxious that all they could do was escape their environment and go someplace soothing, while the second person was literally trapped by an inability to stay still both mentally and physically and could not slow down by their own will. For most people on the verge or in the middle of a mental breakdown or being emotionally overwhelmed, they are “trapped” by their situation and environment, whether that is the dealing with the stressors they are facing or the mental health issues that have arisen. The change of behavior you will notice is usually their attempts to alleviate their problem, but as shown in Scenario 2 the mental issue itself has overwhelmed their behavioral patterns.

When talking to someone suspected of experiencing a period of being emotionally overwhelmed or a mental breakdown, it is important to be calm, kind, and patient. Many people are afraid of reaching out after the person snaps at them, or are afraid of ruining their friendship if they call for professional help or the person’s family. However, for people who are emotionally overwhelmed or experiencing (or about to experience) a mental breakdown, these acts of lashing out are more due to the victim’s frustration and anger at their situation rather than at the person looking to help. Having spent so long in a situation they feel they cannot control, lashing out is one of the last things that gives them a sense of agency, and lets them vent the stress, anger, sadness, frustration, etc. they are experiencing. If you want to help, you have to make it through this; no friendship worth having ended because someone who needed help got it. In both scenarios, the victims stayed fast friends with those who helped them, and in some cases became even better friends. It is incredibly meaningful to be there for someone who cannot help themselves, so do not let them push you away.

When talking to them, remember to stay focused on them. This conversation may take a long time, but do not rush them. Make sure you address them by name, and make sure you ask them about what they need and what they want to do. For many people, these experiences and periods of time make them feel powerless, so letting them know that they are heard and giving them the ability to control what the next step helps them reclaim their agency. For example, repeating back to them what they are saying is a way of confirming that you are listening to their words and their intentions. However, the best thing for them is to step away from the situation they are in, so be firm but kind as you talk to them about spending time away from work or school or whatever is stressing them. They may feel like they will fall behind and bad things will happen if they leave, so you will need to comfort them and keep reminding them that they are not in trouble and that it is okay to take a break. The best thing for them is to know that they have a support group that will be there for them and will help them through the rough times, and that includes taking a break.

Of course, you should never try to help someone alone. Most of us are not health care professionals, so you should never attempt to act as someone’s doctor or therapist. Also, in order

to help take care of someone you also have to be taking care of yourself. Stretching yourself thin to care for someone else is never helpful, so setting boundaries on how much you can help someone is also important.

Resources

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/September-2017/How-to-Help-Someone-in-Crisis>

<https://www.bridgestorecovery.com/blog/4-ways-you-can-help-someone-having-a-nervous-breakdown/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/information-and-advice-for-families-and-friends/worried-about-someone-elses-mental-health.html>

<https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/covid-19/minding-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

<https://www.mhanational.org/im-looking-mental-health-help-someone-else>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/supporting-someone-mental-health-problem>

<https://www.affordablecollegesonline.org/college-student-mental-health/>

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/06/college-students>

<https://www.westcasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Helping-someone-who-is-feeling-overwhelmed.pdf>

<https://www.talkspace.com/blog/feeling-overwhelmed/>

<http://sfhelp.org/cx/apps/overwhelmed.htm>

<https://highlysensitiverefuge.com/overwhelmed-highly-sensitive-person/>