

LET'S HELP OUR STUDENTS



**A Faculty and Staff Guide for Supporting Student
Well-Being and Mental Health at Mason**

Introduction



At Mason, we're focused on our students' success and cultivating a culture of well-being. The challenges of 2020 (and 2021), including the COVID-19 pandemic, have been extremely trying for our students. Whether these difficulties involved health concerns, personal losses, isolation, race-based violence, or uncertainty about their future, it is more important than ever that we support our students in need. The purpose of this document is to help faculty and staff recognize students' concerns and guide them in managing challenges.

LET'S GET STARTED.

LET'S UNDERSTAND.

Current State of College Students' Mental Health

Findings from a 2021 Duke University study¹ focusing on student, faculty, and staff well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic reported these statistics for respondents at-risk for depression:

- ~40% of respondents reported symptoms classifying them as 'at-risk for moderate depression'
- ~25% of respondents reported symptoms classifying them as 'at-risk for severe depression'

In another recent mental health survey of over 2,000 college students², **75% of students reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic**, indicating widespread feelings of:

- Disappointment
- Isolation
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Stress
- Anxiety

The aforementioned feelings, coupled with the loss of connection and the on-campus community, can make it difficult for students to get and stay focused and/or motivated.

Students are not alone. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, **nearly 40% of faculty members, staff, and student employees surveyed screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**³.

The Short Version?

Many students are struggling with numerous mental health challenges and we don't yet know the long-term effects of the pandemic. Therefore, we need to be more attuned to students' well-being needs and show that we care.

"IT'S OK TO NOT BE OK"
-Michael Phelps

¹ [Depression Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic among Well-educated, Employed Adults with Low Infection Risks](#); Duncan Thomas, Tyson Brown, Donald H. Taylor Jr., Ralph Lawton, Victoria K. Lee, Menna Mburi, Michelle Wong, Rachel Kranton (January 2021).

² Active Minds Student Mental Health Survey (September 2020).

³ The Chronicle of Higher Education, *How one university is creating space for people to process the pandemic's damage*; Sarah Brown (July 2021).

At Mason, we're facing similar – if not the exact same – challenges as any other college campus. But at the same time, our student community is unique in its makeup, stresses, and struggles.



- **38,542:** Number of Mason students who missed out on a “normal” 2020 school year
- **+5,000:** The expected increase in Mason student enrollment from 2021 to 2024
- **55%:** Mason undergraduate students from historically under-represented populations⁴
- **32%:** Mason graduate students from historically under-represented populations
- **26%:** First-generation students
- **60%:** Mason students carrying student loan debt⁵
- **\$32,000:** Average amount borrowed by Mason students

⁴ Historically under-represented populations include American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and two or more races. Source: Fall 2020 Census Enrollment Data, OIEP.

⁵ Data includes students in the 2020 undergraduate class who started at Mason as first-time students and received a Bachelor's Degree between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. Transfer Students were not included.

LET'S BE AWARE.

Recognizing the signs

We all want to help. **70% of students aren't comfortable** telling their instructor if their mental health stops them from completing their work⁶.

We're working together to develop a culture of warmth, patience, and well-being, where students will feel comfortable opening up. In many cases, struggling students won't approach you first, so check in with them frequently and [look for any signs that a student may be in distress](#).

ACADEMIC SIGNALS

- Ongoing absences, calling in sick, or repeated tardiness
- Decline in classroom engagement or quality of work
- Assignments or other classwork that include disturbing content and/or themes of despair, hopelessness, suicide, violence, death, or aggression
- Missing work, multiple requests for extensions, or grades of "Incomplete"

PHYSICAL SIGNALS

- Appearing ill or fatigued
- Drastic change in appearance, from clothing and makeup to weight gain/loss
- Marked change in mental state and/or apparent intoxication
- Unusual/out-of-context behavior

INTER / INTRAPERSONAL SIGNALS

- Short-tempered or on-edge
- Speaking out about feeling distressed, overwhelmed, worthless, anxious, etc.
- Open expressions or subtle signs of hopelessness
- Acting out of character
- Peers expressing concern about a student
- Implied or direct threats of harm to self or others
- Self-injurious, destructive, or reckless behavior

⁶ "College Student Mental Health and Well-Being: A Survey of Presidents", Higher Education Today, 2019; "COVID-19 and Mental Health", Chegg, 2020; "College Students Mental Health Continues To Suffer From", Timely MD, 2020; "Faculty Pandemic Stress Is Now Chronic", Inside Higher Ed, 2020; "Mental Health on The Syllabus", Inside Higher Ed, 2021 Student Affairs Forum interviews and analyses.



DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOURSELF.

With all the focus on students, it's easy to lose sight of self-care and your own trauma and distress. Many of the recommendations we make for students apply to you as well. Talk to your peers or supervisor about any feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, or distress you may have.

For staff and faculty well-being resources, reach out to Mason employee relations at hr.gmu.edu/support-resources/.

LET'S START *THE CONVERSATION.*

What Can I Do To Support Our Students?

It has been a difficult year for most of us and acknowledging a shared experience is a comfortable starting point for open, honest communication and for creating a psychologically safe space. So, talk to students, set a tone of openness and acceptance, and be real. Address uncertainty and stress. Let students know that you are open and available to talk about well-being.

SHARE your EXPERIENCES.

Part of students feeling alone and “less than” is the sense that “everyone else has it all together” so be vulnerable and let students know that you struggle too.

OFFER TIME and SPACE.

Be supportive and approachable, understanding that some students will be more comfortable connecting one-on-one. Whether it's office hours, Zoom meetings, or even a text chain, set aside time to talk to students privately if you can.

PROVIDE SAFETY.

Students may have a history of trauma or struggle that's been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Keeping that in mind will help you create a safe, supportive space for your students.

LET the STUDENT STEER the CONVERSATION.

Meet your students where they are and follow their lead as they open up.

BE POSITIVE.

Students look to you for comfort, guidance, and leadership. Sharing positivity, hope, and even humor can help to ease a stressful burden.

Taking Care of Underserved and Marginalized Student Populations

Well-being and mental health are important to everyone. There are underserved and marginalized student populations that have historically been left without access to resources that fully understand their experiences. This can feel lonely and alienating. Work towards building a sense of connection and belonging where each story is welcome and valued. This can be done by being open to listening to their stories, validating their experiences, and showing empathy. Do what you can to guide the student to resources that align with their identities.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at Mason provides culturally inclusive care. If students would like to seek resources outside of Mason, here are some options to share.

BIPOC Student Resources

- **B.E.A.M. (Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective)** – Black virtual wellness directory to find Black therapists, doulas, yoga teachers, and mediators throughout all 50 states. beam.community
- **AYANA Therapy** – Online mental health therapy for marginalized and intersectional communities. ayanatherapy.com
- **Inclusive Therapists** – These therapists center their services around the needs of marginalized populations, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the LGBTQ+ community, neurodivergent folx, and people with disabilities. inclusivetherapists.com

LET'S TAKE THE NEXT STEP.

HELP STUDENTS FIND SUPPORT.

Consider yourself a front-line worker when it comes to student well-being. Get familiar with, and take advantage of, the many mental health and well-being resources Mason has to offer.

CONNECT STUDENTS with ONE ANOTHER.

Peer support is critical, so be sure to take advantage of opportunities to facilitate connections between students outside of any specific crisis or issue. Encourage interactions outside of the classroom where you can.

SHARE TOOLS and RESEARCH.

Part of not feeling alone is knowing that other people are experiencing – and managing – the same challenges. Share the research and tools from this resource at your discretion.

LET'S EMPATHIZE.

What to do next.

When having a conversation with a student you suspect to be in distress, take your time so you can connect them to the right resources for their needs. Jack.org's "Be There" initiative offers a simple five-step process (with examples) to help guide the conversation:

Say what You See

"Hi ____, I just wanted to check in. I've noticed ____, and wanted to see if you wanted to talk about it."

"I've noticed ____ and wanted you to know that I am here to support you."

"You seem distracted today. What's going on?"

"Hey, it seems like you're having a hard time. I am here to support you if you want to talk about it."

Show You Care

"I care about your well-being, so I just wanted to check in to see how you're doing. I want to know how I can be the most helpful for you"

"Thanks for taking some time to talk with me. I wanted to have this conversation because I care about how you're doing and want you to know that I'm here to support you in the ways you need."

"How can I be helpful?"

Hear Them Out

Focus on listening. If questions are helpful:

"Wow, I'd like to hear more about that."

"I'm sorry, that seems like a difficult situation to be in, what is that like for you?"

"That sounds really hard, how is that affecting your life?"

Connect to Help

"Thank you for being so open with me. I want to continue this conversation, and I also want to make sure that you're getting the help you need. I really think you may find ____ to be a very helpful and comforting resource."

"Reaching out to ____ for the first time can be a little confusing. Would you like help connecting to ____?"

"I really think ____ can address some of your needs, but sometimes it takes several tries to find a place that is the best fit. For any reason if it doesn't feel like a match, then ask what other resources may be a better fit for your needs."

Tip: Offering the name of someone from the resources can help the student feel more comfortable when they reach out.



LET'S USE EVERY AVAILABLE TOOL.

LEAD STUDENTS to the RIGHT RESOURCES.

We're fortunate that Mason has a wide variety of resources to help us support our students. Depending on the type of support you're trying to offer, know that you're empowered and equipped with what you need to help our students.

You're not expected to have all the answers. Once you've determined that the student may require help beyond your capabilities, here are the next steps you can take.

PINPOINT their NEED.

Does the student need resources for social connection, specialized professional help, or is this an emergency?

CONTINUE the JOURNEY.

Let the student know that you're not "passing them off" as a problem or burden. Reiterate that you're here to help them and you're not going anywhere.

LEAD the WAY.

A student in distress may not be comfortable connecting with a resource on their own. Guiding them through the process of accessing a resource increases the likelihood that they will follow through while also making them feel more confident about getting help.

CHECK IN.

Follow up to ensure that the student has successfully connected with the resource(s) you recommended. This reaffirms the connection you've made as part of their support system and lets the student know that they aren't being "passed off." This may also be an opportunity to re-direct the student to a different resource if the original resource wasn't a good fit.



Privacy and Information Sharing

Professionals affiliated with confidential resources will gladly receive information from you about a student's well-being. However, due to privacy laws such as FERPA and HIPAA or professional ethics, some resources are often unable to provide reciprocal information to you regarding the student. This can be frustrating, but these privacy laws are an essential ethical and legal safeguard for student privacy and confidentiality.

When talking with students, please remember that University employees (except confidential resources in most instances) are required to make reports of certain types of behavior, such as sexual misconduct, crime, acts of discrimination, and concerning behaviors that are potential precursors to future violence. For more information, see stopviolence.gmu.edu/concern/.

Conclusion

LET'S KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

Consider this guide as your starting point. There are countless ways to support our students, and we are all responsible for contributing our best efforts and ideas to create a culture of well-being and mental health. Just remember:

- Your influence is important.
- Be open, approachable, and empathetic.
- Make well-being part of the learning environment.
- All feelings are valid.
- Connection and community make a difference.
- Share your experiences AND resources.
- We're all creating a culture of well-being and mental health together.

Emotional Support Help

For emotional support, students (as well as faculty and staff) can always **call the Emotional Support Line** through the GMU Center for Psychological Services at 703-215-1898.

LET'S COME TOGETHER.

“ Now more than ever in Mason's history and in all of higher education, it's important for us to be attuned to students' mental health and well-being. With this effort, faculty and staff have an opportunity to be champions of student well-being simply by knowing about these resources and guiding students to them ”

- Rose Pascarell, Vice President for University Life

STUDENT SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

CRISIS SUPPORT

Mason Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

- caps.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2380

Mason Police

- 911 (Emergencies)
- 703-993-2810 (Non-Emergencies)

Violence Crisis Line

- 703-380-1434

National Crisis Support

CrisisLink

- 703-527-4077

Crisis Text Line

- Text HOME to 741741

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24/7)

- 800-273-8255

Trans Lifeline (for the trans community)

- 877-565-8860

The Trevor Project's TrevorLifeline (for LGBTQ+ students)

- 866-488-7386

The Steve Fund (for students of color)

- Text HOME to 741741

Veterans Crisis Line (for Veterans)

- 800-273-8255, Press 1

HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SUPPORT

BurnAlong

- fit.burnalong.com/gmu/

Center for the Advancement of Well-Being

- wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

- caps.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2380

Emotional Support Help Line

- 703-215-1898

MasonCARES

- caps.gmu.edu/masoncares-suicide-prevention-program

GMU Center for Psychological Services

- psyclinic.gmu.edu

Mason Chooses Kindness Toolkit

- kindness.gmu.edu/mck-toolkit

Mason Recreation

- recreation.gmu.edu

Mental Health First Aid

- wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mental-health-first-aid

Mindful Mason Moments

- wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/mindful-mason-moments

Resilience Badge

- wellbeing.gmu.edu/students/student-resilience-badge/

Student Health Services

- shs.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2831

Student Support and Advocacy Center

- ssac.gmu.edu/support-request-and-referrals/

Thriving Together Series

- wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources/thriving-together-series

ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND STUDENT SUCCESS RESOURCES

Academic Advising

- provost.gmu.edu/academics-and-research/undergraduate-education/student-academic-affairs

Academic Integrity

- oai.gmu.edu

Disability Services

- ds.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2474

Learning Services

- learningservices.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2380

Math Tutoring

- science.gmu.edu/academics/departments-units/mathematical-sciences/math-tutoring

Student Success Coaching

- coaching.gmu.edu
- mycoach@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2470

University Career Services

- careers.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2370

University Registrar

- registrar.gmu.edu

Writing Center

- writingcenter.gmu.edu

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Campus Ministry Association

- mason.gmu.edu/~ministry
- 703-425-0022

Leadership Education and Development (LEAD)

- lead.gmu.edu
- lead@gmu.edu

Office of Housing and Residence Life

- housing.gmu.edu/about/housing-staff
- housing@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2720

Patriot Experience

- patriotexperience.gmu.edu
- masonpe@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2470

Student Involvement

- si.gmu.edu
- sa@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2909

POPULATION-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Center for Culture, Equity, and Empowerment

- ccee.gmu.edu
- 703-993-2700

Graduate Student Life

- gradlife.gmu.edu
- gradlife@gmu.edu

Contemporary Student Services

- contemporary.gmu.edu
- offcamp1@gmu.edu
- 703-993-6563

Patriot Experience

- patriotexperience.gmu.edu
- masonpe@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2470

International Programs and Services

- oips.gmu.edu
- oips@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2970

LGBTQ+ Office

- lgbtq.gmu.edu
- masonpe@gmu.edu
- 703-993-2470

Veterans

- military.gmu.edu
- 703-993-1316

Women and Gender Studies

- wgstcenter.gmu.edu
- wmst@gmu.edu



