

Below are three sample letters that schools can send to students and families regarding life after high school. The second two are specifically designed for those planning to go to college.

The Transition to Life Beyond High School

1. Choosing Among Possibilities [*sample letter 1 to be sent before Spring Break of Jr. year*]

You have worked hard and are now considering the next phase of your life. The possibilities for this new phase bring new challenges for both you and your parent. As you embark on your search for a college or other adventures in life it is important to consider how to support your emotional and mental wellness in the options you are looking at. The following is meant to aid you in your search for the best fit for you.

If you are looking at colleges, there are a great many things to consider. Not all of them are academic. The college you choose will be your home and your community for a number of years. Your mental and emotional wellness will be greatly affected by your new environment and these, in turn, will greatly affect your ability to thrive in your new setting. Therefore it is important that you check into many aspects of the campuses you are considering that may not seem the usual thing to look for in a college setting.

The JED Foundation, <http://jedfoundation.org/about>, is an excellent resource to help you find out how campuses you are considering support their students mental wellness. The following draws heavily on suggestions offered on their website. As you tour campuses you will find that both administrators and students are knowledgeable about and willing to discuss the mental and emotional support services their campus provides.

When applying to college:

1. Think about the “fit” between a college and your personality. Academics are important, but other aspects of a college (e.g., size, location, diversity, extracurricular activities) can impact how well you thrive in all areas of college life.
2. Understand what mental health services, policies, and programs exist at prospective college(s), especially if s/he has an existing emotional disorder: 1,2
3. What services are provided by the counseling center? Are there associated fees? Are there a maximum number of sessions allowed per year? Are there specialists (e.g., in treating eating disorders)? Is there a psychiatrist on staff? Does the counseling center provide off-campus referrals?
4. Is there a counselor on call 24 hours a day? If not, what after-hours emergency services are available?
5. Is there a wait time to see a counselor? If so, how long?
6. Under what circumstances will the college notify a parent regarding their child’s mental health? What happens if a parent calls the college with a concern about their child?
7. Does the college train faculty, staff, resident advisors (RAs), etc. to identify and refer students in emotional distress?
8. What kinds of educational programming (e.g., workshops, talks) are provided to students around mental health and wellness?
9. What accommodations are available through disability services for students with emotional disorders?
10. What is the policy around taking leaves of absence?

ATTACHMENT 1.2

11. Is there an office to intercede for students who feel overwhelmed? Will using such resources imperil scholarships?
12. Learn about other available support structures. Ask about tutoring, academic and peer advising education coaching, student activities, and career services. Understand how much support is available in the residence halls, such as the number of resident advisors. Find out how the college helps students to connect with one another.

Ask the Dean of Students about what support systems are in place. Is there peer counseling on campus? Is there a peer support organization such as "Active Minds on Campus"? Does the college use the Interactive Screening Program (ISP) from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

1 Based on the National Mental Health Association/The Jed Foundation. (2002). Safeguarding your students against suicide. Alexandria, VA: National Mental Health Association.

2 Adapted from the Anxiety Disorders Association of America. (2007). Information for parents: helping a college student with an anxiety disorder.

2. After Being Accepted to a College [*Sample letter 2 to be sent in January of senior year*]

With high school graduation, students will enter a new phase in life, full of new possibilities, experiences, and responsibilities, for both parents and their young adult children. This document is meant to provide information and guidance about how a young adult's mental and emotional wellness can be affected during this exciting time, as well as how both parents and their children can work together to support and enhance that wellness. In the same way that physical health concerns and care is discussed, it's vital that families have an open discussion about mental health before beginning this new part of life.

Discussing mental health proactively, before a student leaves high school, can help ensure that parents are able to play a supportive role, should there ever be a period of crisis or need for care. Once a student reaches the age of 18, the rights accorded to the student's parents, including authority to permit access to records, are transferred to the students themselves. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) and the Family Educational Rights Act (FERPA) govern all students' privacy rules related to sharing information about mental health. These will be discussed in depth separately but given these laws, it is even more important that families consider how they want to manage a mental health crisis before one arises. Such a situation may never occur but knowing how to respond or what is available on your campus or in your community should such a stressful event arise may even save a life.

Before starting college:

1. Be honest on the college's medical history form about your child's current or past emotional issues. These forms provide important information to the health/mental health practitioners (no less important than the rest of your child's medical history), and they are confidential! Knowledge of a pre-existing condition will help in an emergency.
2. If a student is being treated for a mental health problem before going to college, transfer his/her care and records to the college's counseling center or a local community provider. Your child may never need to visit a mental health professional, but the stresses of college can cause existing (or previous) mental health problems to worsen (or re-emerge). In other words, the start of college may not be the right time to stop treatment.
3. Find out what mental health services are covered when making decisions about your child's health insurance. You may decide to keep your child's existing health insurance or you may choose to purchase a health insurance plan offered by the college. When making this decision, consider the questions below:

Will your child's existing insurance cover an out-of-state provider?

Will s/he be able to fill out-of-state prescriptions?

What outpatient and inpatient mental health services, emergency care, and prescriptions are covered under each insurance plan?

What mental health services are covered by student health fees (e.g., number of sessions, psychiatric care, medication)?

ATTACHMENT 1.2

4. Identify whether your child is eligible to register with disability services. If your child has a diagnosed mental illness or learning disability, s/he may be eligible to register with the disability services office (may be called the "Office of Accessible Education") to receive reasonable accommodations. This may include education coaching, academic accommodations, or other services.

5. Be familiar with the resources for parents provided by the college and know whom to contact if you are concerned about your child. Many colleges have web pages specifically designed for parents that may link to parent guides or information from a parent advisory council.

6. Read the college's student handbook. This will often include a code of conduct that addresses issues such as alcohol or other drug use and plagiarism. It may also include information regarding confidentiality of records and leaves of absence.

3. Going to College [*Sample letter 3 to be send at time of graduation from High School*]

As students leave high school they take on not just a new adventure but new responsibility for their own health. With the services available in most college communities students learn to manage their health. This is still challenging given the stresses, poor sleep patterns and rising rates of anxiety and depression emerging or recurring amongst transition aged youth (TAY ages 19-24). It is important to discuss mental health issues even if there is no history of a mental or emotional difficulty before beginning life outside a home setting.

These issues are far from uncommon in college settings or even in the community at large. Mental and emotional health issues are a very serious health concern faced by the TAY age group today. In Spring of 2014 the American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) found that within the last 12 months 33.1% of college students "felt so depressed that it was difficult to function". And within the same 12 month period 8.6% of college students had "seriously considered suicide" (American College Health Association, 2014). We provide these health statistics not to scare you but to prepare you. Being aware of possible health concerns in advance of their development brings the possibility of being prepared should a health issue or crisis arise. Mental health conditions can be life threatening. However these conditions are also among the most treatable. Recovery is to be expected with the proper treatment. But if treatment is not sought it cannot be effective.

Sadly, less than 20% of college students who die by suicide have sought help from college counseling centers ("College and Confidentiality," 2009). Though often stigmatized and rarely discussed, mental illnesses are just that: illnesses that can and should be diagnosed and treated. Mental illnesses, like most illnesses, do not get better on their own - without treatment. Many treatment options exist, including talk therapy, medication and/or stress reduction and management. But treatment needs to be accessed before it can be effective. Because it can be difficult for students to realize when they are struggling information on how to recognize mental health issues and what to do when one is suspected is included.

For Parents when Your Child is at College

- Keep the lines of communication open. Don't be afraid to talk to him/her if you think that something is wrong. You may be in the best position to notice and address any difficulties that your child is having. If they say that nothing is wrong, it can be helpful to explain what it is you've noticed that concerns you (be specific) and reassure them of why you're mentioning it (e.g., because you love them, don't want them to struggle on their own, know how difficult it can be to reach out for help, etc.). It's ok to be persistent!
- Know the signs and symptoms of emotional disorders as well as the warning signs for suicide. It is common for mental health problems to appear for the first time during the college years, so you may want to familiarize yourself with their signs and symptoms. These signs will take the form of changes or behaviors that are out of character and that are pervasive in their life and persistent for about 2 weeks or more. There may be marked changes such as eating or sleeping more or less, isolation or withdrawal from others, feeling overwhelmed, not going to classes, difficulty concentrating, seeming confused or disoriented, feeling worthless or behaving as if they were worthless, a sudden drop in grades, poor memory or recall, highs or lows in mood, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. Sleep deprivation on its own increases the risk of suicidal thoughts threefold. If your child is having suicidal thoughts ask about these, listen, and then get professional help immediately ("Half of Us Mental Health Study," 2013).

ATTACHMENT 1.2

- Encourage your child to go to the counseling center if one or both of you think it is necessary. Sometimes students can be reluctant to seek help because they are afraid that someone will find out. Reassure your child that counseling services are provided confidentially and that you support them as they reach out for assistance.
- Students who are experiencing emotional distress will tend to turn to friends first for support. Next in line is family followed by online resources. They are least likely to turn to Resident Advisors and Hotlines (“Half of Us Mental Health Study,” 2013).
- Find out whom to call at the college if you’re concerned about your child’s emotional well-being.
- Provide your child with their health information including details of their primary physician and emergency numbers to contact at home. Include a list of current medications and diagnoses if applicable. Keep this up to date. Your young adult should advise a friend where this information is in case an emergency arises.
- Get local contact information including that of a friend of your child. Assure the friend that you will contact them only in an emergency
- Create an emergency plan with your child before a crisis arises.
- Understand the circumstances under which the college will notify you regarding your child’s mental health. Review the FERPA and HIPPA resources referenced here (U.S. Department of Education, 2008 & “Family Educational Rights,” 2009).
- What Can You Do If You Are Concerned That Your Child May Be Thinking About Suicide
- Remember: Asking someone about suicide does not put the idea into his/her head.
- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow for the expression of feelings. Accept what they have to say as being reflective of their current experience; don’t argue about or dismiss these feelings
- Be non-judgmental. Don’t debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Don’t lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don’t dare him/her to do it.
- Don’t act shocked. This will put distance between you and make them feel less comfortable being entirely honest about how they are.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available, but do not offer glib reassurance; it only shows that you don’t understand just how distressed they are feeling.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Get help from individuals or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

CONSIDERATIONS AFTER GRADUATION & WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE

- *Should you witness, hear, or see your child exhibiting any one or more of the following, get help IMMEDIATELY by contacting a mental health professional, calling the college's emergency number, or calling 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, for a referral.*
- Threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Expressing hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking • Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- Expressing no reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

Individuals who are contemplating suicide often give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member. All suicide threats, gestures, and attempts must be taken seriously.

Adapted from: <https://www.jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/jed-nami-guide-starting-conversation-college-mental-health.pdf>

Additional Resources

National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 800-273-TALK (273-8255)

The Jed Foundation, 212-647-7544: <http://www.transitionyear.org>

The Jed Foundation: "Set To Go" <https://www.settogo.org>

Reach Out: <http://us.reachout.com>

Half of Us: <http://www.halfofus.com>

MY3 app: <http://www.my3app.org>

NAMI: <http://www.nami.org>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <http://www.afsp.org>