



Wesleyan is so much more than an esteemed educational institution. Wesleyan is a community made up of many people, including the parents and care-givers of students. As a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, my work focuses heavily on family systems and functioning. The impact of the pandemic has created struggle and uncertainty, and it is now more important than ever that we are here for each other as members of the Wesleyan community. In a three-part series, this is what we've learned and want to pass on to you as the semester comes to an end.

## PART I: FAMILY, COVID-19 & MENTAL HEALTH

### ABOUT WESLEYAN CAPS

First, I will share a little about CAPS. Prior to Wesleyan's transition to distance learning, students were able to contact our office to begin ongoing therapy, to request same-day crisis appointments, and/or to arrange consultations about mental health needs. Students would come to us to find resources in the Middletown community if they preferred more privacy, weekly therapy or a higher/more specialized level of care. CAPS also offers a number of different workshops, therapeutic groups and events throughout the academic year.

We offer a 24-hour on-call service that students can access 365 days a year. Any student in acute distress who needs to speak with a clinician immediately can call our office and get connected. As the semester has come to a close, we can help students find therapeutic services in their locations. With the help and support of CAPS, students and families can contact their insurance and/or use the Psychology Today website to find local therapists for support (see Websites, Contacts & Resources).

In response to COVID-19, the CAPS team quickly came together and developed a plan to connect with and support students who are now all over the world for the majority of the semester which is on-going in the duration of the summer months. We added a "CAPS at Home" tab on our web page and developed content that includes online mental health resources, hotlines, and mental health apps for students (and anyone!) to utilize. Under "Vlogs & Clips" and "Wellness Wednesday", clinicians at CAPS contribute personal videos and blog posts directly focused on helping our students during this chaotic time. Topics include stress management, staying well, healthy eating, "Thriving at Home", and grieving. The "APRN Corner" offers important information about medication management policies as well as a series of literary newsletters penned by our all-star APRN Tamanna Rahman. All of these resources can provide important insights and perspectives for parents who may be struggling to understand what students are experiencing. I encourage all parents to look around our web page [www.wesleyan.edu/caps](http://www.wesleyan.edu/caps) !

### PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

In response to the pandemic, we experienced a shift back to basic human needs. At Wes, we first focused on student, staff and faculty health and safety, focusing primarily on shelter and learning environments. This experience was undoubtedly paralleled in your homes, as you too were faced with the necessity of identifying your families' needs. Now that you have made the necessary and abrupt adjustments to the new reality, you may be wondering, "But is my kid ok?"

Before you approach the conversation with your student, it is important to do a self-check on how you, as the adult, are feeling. You are carrying the stress of the pandemic too, and it is important for you to be aware how it is currently affecting you. Acknowledge where you are emotionally in the moment and think about what you need to do to manage your own worry and stress. Moments of feeling particularly emotionally burdened are not the right moments to initiate what may be a challenging conversation. Take some time to consider the energy that you and all family members are bringing to your now more-crowded space, and think about how you might best prepare yourself to listen to others.



### SARAH POWERS, LICENSED MARRIAGE & FAMILY THERAPIST (LMFT)

I am a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, born and raised in Connecticut. I joined CAPS in the Spring of 2019, and I bring knowledge and passion for helping students gain a deeper understanding of their family systems and relationships. I can talk about this topic all day. Watching students reflect and start to realize that they can really start defining themselves as individuals is such an exciting time to work with them. I work with students on the internal conflict that can happen as a result of this process, in a supportive way, encouraging students to develop healthy boundaries and communication skills that can be utilized in all areas of life. If you have questions or want to hear more, please reach out to me for future blog articles: [spowers@wesleyan.edu](mailto:spowers@wesleyan.edu) .

## TYPICAL VERSUS CONCERNING: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Social disconnection: at home and with peers, even online.

Academic struggles and attendance, even online.

Lack of interest in previously enjoyed pleasures.

Disinterest in returning to Wes or college in general.

Social media: monitor social media posts for posts on not coping well, things being too painful, or remarks about harming self or others.

Irritability, anger, sadness, nervousness that is out of proportion to the current situation.

Increased substance use, particularly in isolation.

Presence of dangerous tools/objects that could be used for suicide or self-harm.



## WEBSITES, CONTACTS, & RESOURCES

Wesleyan CAPS:  
860.685.2910  
<https://www.wesleyan.edu/caps/>

Psychology Today: Search Engine to Find a Therapist or Provider  
[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)

Brene Brown on Empathy versus Sympathy:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEwgu369Jw>

Your college-age students are in a developmental phase in which they are supposed to be exploring life outside their family home, developing social skills and individuating from their families of origin. Right now, they are hyper-aware of what they are missing. Although online classes and cancelled campus events may not seem catastrophic when considered in the larger context of global events, it may feel catastrophic to them. It's very hard to see your child in pain, and your quick response may be to minimize their experiences, suggest distracting activities, or encourage them to focus on a future time when the pandemic is over. Empathy can be challenging for a parent, because it requires you to see your child's pain and sit with them while they experience it, rather than try to solve it or distract from it or make it smaller. Empathy, though, will allow students to feel heard and understood. Strive to validate their feelings without trying to fix or change them. I encourage you to click on the YouTube link below to watch Brene Brown talk about empathy – she's really amazing.

## SAFE CONVERSATIONS AND DETECTION

A safe conversation with your student will help you detect the presence of bigger issues. If you are able to initiate and carry out a real conversation with your college student, you will have a strong sense of whether you can weather this storm together or if a therapist may be needed. Therapy is useful during times of difficult adjustment, and during times of acute pain and distress it can be medically necessary. This can be a scary conversation to have, so your approach is important. The first step is to gently identify what you have noticed that is troubling you: "I've noticed you've seemed more down lately and I'm concerned. Can we talk about it?" may be effective. Gentle observations combined with expressions of care and concern can create the emotional safety that is necessary for an open, honest answer. No one will respond to a question truthfully if they do not feel it is safe to do so, or if there is a negative consequence for it. Suggesting a mental health professional may be helpful if a student is in severe distress that does not diminish over time. It may also be helpful to offer to assist with the process of connecting to a therapist, as this can be a difficult task for a person struggling with symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Differentiating between typical and concerning symptoms can be extremely confusing, as the new reality brought on by the pandemic can cause irritability, frustration, sadness, and social isolation. It is actually appropriate for students to feel very sad about all the losses and disruptions they have experienced in the past two months. However, they should have some skills that allow them to actively and productively cope with the losses, stresses, and uncertainties of their current realities. It's completely normal and okay for them to have bad days when they don't communicate with anyone, or change out of their pajamas, or raise their eyes from their phones. That should not happen every day, though – the bad days should be offset by good ones marked by communication, laughter, and hope. You should see some light through the darkness, and when you do, I encourage you to ask about it just as you ask about the dark. If your student seems to be struggling to cope most of the time, and the "good days" are few and far between, a therapist might be a good idea.

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## IN CONCLUSION

Talking to students can be very challenging. It is critical to acknowledge what they are going through without minimizing it. They are resilient, bright individuals who may just need to be reminded of the supports they have around them. They are no longer high school teens in your home, so you may need to make adjustments to treat them accordingly. You may want to consider telling them this, as they may feel you have overlooked their growth and development.

If you are very concerned and in spite of your best efforts you are not getting through, do not hesitate to directly reach out to a mental health professional to help you navigate your child's needs. If you believe they may be at risk of harm, contact 911.

As parents, you are critical resources for your student. They feel and absorb your energy as you react to and cope with stress. As the parent, you are struggling to adjust to the current situation while maintaining financial and emotional responsibility for your family. It is not possible to overstate the importance of doing whatever you can to take care of yourself. Think of a flight attendant reminding you to put on your own oxygen mask before trying to assist others. Your home is your airplane – you need your oxygen mask. If you need help for yourself, it's okay to ask for it. A therapist may be able to provide support and guidance as you lead your family through this difficult time.

And finally, thank you for all you do.

## NEXT UP: TALKING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING & COPING WITH SOCIAL ISOLATION

Having young adults in the home can be a challenge as they are just that: adults. They have returned to you from an environment in which they can come and go as they please, and now they are suddenly severely limited because of house rules as well as concerns for the family's health and safety. We will explore this topic next, as well as coping with social isolation.