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. Finally, 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. (This is still in place!)

We are living in COVID-19 times, however. Due to the limits of our professional licenses, we have some hurdles to jump in order to provide telehealth therapy to anyone outside of the state of Connecticut. Our team is working diligently to determine the best, most effective ways to be present for our students now and – if need be – in the fall. We are helping out-of-state students find therapeutic services in their locations if we cannot serve them. 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.

In mid-March, when Wesleyan announced its transition to a remote learning model, the CAPS team quickly came together and developed a plan to connect with and support students who are now all over the world. In addition to offering phone sessions with Wesleyan students who moved out of state, we added a “CAPS at Home” tab on our web page. We quickly 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 have contributed 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 their young people are experiencing. I encourage all parents to look around our web page www.wesleyan.edu/caps!

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION WITH YOUR YOUNG PEOPLE

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 your young person, 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 your young person.
Your college-age young adults 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 your young person. 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 your young person to feel heard and understood. Strive to validate your young person’s 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 young person 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 to your young person 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, especially guarded young adults, 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 your young person 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 young adult 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 young people to feel very sad about all the losses and disruptions they have experienced in the past two months. As young adults, 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 your young person about it just as you ask about the dark. If your young person 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 young adults 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 to your young person, do not hesitate to directly reach out to a mental health professional to help you navigate your child’s needs. If you believe your young person may be at risk of harm, contact 911.

As parents, you are critical resources for your young people. 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.