Depression on a College Campus

*Introduction*

One in ten college students reported being diagnosed or treated for depression. As a friend of such a person, do you know how to help? Do you know resources to refer them to? Do you know how to react, what to say, how to feel? One in fourteen, or 7%, have seriously considered suicide in the past year. How do you talk someone down? Can you? How do you react when a friend tells you he or she has felt suicidal? With suicide being the 3rd leading cause of death on college campuses, one question stands out as pivotal for the friends of those individuals suffering from depression or suicidal thoughts: How can you truly be the friend?

*Be the Friend*

Considering the prevalence of depression on most college campuses (one in ten students report having been diagnosed or treated for depression), there is a good chance that one of your friends may have or have experienced depression. Unfortunately, campus resources tend to be lacking in this area, with most colleges being unable to fully meet the needs of its mentally ill individuals. Thus, colleges must turn down students in need of appointments, forcing them to go off campus, and, in some instances, to take medical leave, which only exacerbates an already difficult situation.

Therefore, this paper will make an argument for the *Be The Friend* program, one that encourages the friends of depressed individuals to take it upon themselves to be a resource to aid depressed individuals. Of course, that is a burden on those friends, who will need to know the signs and symptoms of depression, which will help in spotting out a friend who may need help. Friends will also need to learn how most people react to finding out that a friend is depressed, how a friend may want to react, things a friend should do, and things a friend should not do and say to a depressed friend. Finally, a true friend will need to be connected with national and more campus-specific resources before being given a plan to intervene if necessary.

Nevertheless, despite the amount of effort it will require for a friend to truly *Be the Friend*, it is necessary, as colleges mental health support is lacking enough resources to be an adequate solution, and peer networks are frequently underutilized because they are either unaware of friends having depression or they do not know how to be productive in aiding a friend’s suffering.

*A Typical Reaction* *from the College*

All colleges have different systems in place to treat mental illnesses, particularly the most prevalent, such as depression and anxiety. However, colleges differ in their willingness and ability to help in such circumstances. Most colleges do not have adequate resources, and recommend that extremely depressed individuals resort to off-campus treatment, which can be off-putting to an individual seeking help. While some students do find excellent counseling resources, some are unable to even make appointments. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of depression and its relation to suicide, several colleges have reportedly forced students to withdraw or take a mental health leave. All of these factors can make it difficult for an individual with depression to be willing to make use of campus resources, though they are available and can sometimes turn out wonderfully.

*A Typical Reaction from Friends, Classmates, and Peers*

Some peers have the ability to be extremely empathetic, especially considering the sheer number of college students who experience depression. In such cases, admitting to depression can be cathartic and helpful, and peers and friends may become a valuable support system for a depressed friend. However, that friend may also be concerned about the stigma and judgment that so often accompany and admittance of suffering from depression. Even a friend who has not had depression can be sympathetic and helpful, but a depressed friend may worry of the response. Some friends may initially be supportive, but later become distant, even telling the depressed individual that they no longer want to hear about the issues. Some depressed college students report friends not wanting to discuss any mental health aspect because they could not help and did not want to deal with it. Some even ended friendships because they could not handle an unwell friend and because the friendship was no longer the same. This can cause a depressed individual to feel even more worthless and troublesome, furthering their depression. Thus, friends can have a variety of reactions, and fear of a negative one can make it harder for a depressed individual to open up.

*The Real Problem with College Mental Health Resources*

There are a number of problems with college mental health resources. Studies suggest that universities have at least one counselor for every one thousand students, but large universities cannot keep up with this standard[[1]](#footnote-1). Demand for counselors is rising, but the resources are not rising to match. In fact, the typical experience is that a student must wait for an appointment at a counseling center offered by his or her campus, and once they have been seen, are typically unable to complete as many session as is truly necessary or they are referred to an off-campus psychiatrist. This is largely due to an insufficient number of counselors.

A prime example of this comes in the form of Tulane University, which had three suicides in only a number of months. With a full-on mental health crisis imminent, University President Fitts attempted to understand the issue, finding again that students were not receiving enough help[[2]](#footnote-2). One major issue was the hard cap on how many times a student was eligible to see a therapist, a policy many other universities, including Emory University, embraces. Once a student has reached the cap, they are expected to coordinate mental health care off-campus with little guidance more than some numbers of therapists to call. Even when the college is willing to keep in contact with the student, it is often in a pressuring manner, forcing students to get health or withdraw.

Thus, the real problem with college mental health resources can be split into two ideas: first, there simply are not enough therapists and counselors available on campus for students. The second is that there is so much stigma associated with mental health issues that colleges as a whole become bullies, forcing students to either face the illness alone or find themselves risking being forced to withdraw or be put into the hospital[[3]](#footnote-3).

*How Friends Can Help*

Though most colleges are unable to provide sufficient resources for students suffering from depression, there is an untapped resource on college campuses that could ease a depressed student’s suffering: his or her friends. If one in ten college students suffer from depression, then nine in ten do not; those nine friends can do something to help the one depressed friend.

Currently, most colleges educate individuals on alcohol and drug abuse, safe sex habits, and a number of other useful advice on being safe and protecting others while in college. What colleges do not give useful advice on in a widespread manner is mental illness, how to recognize it, and how to combat it or help an individual with an illness. Though colleges are more than willing to educate individuals on how to recognize the signs of drunkenness and alcohol poisoning, they are much less willing to educate individuals on how to recognize the signs of depression or suicide.

Thus, the friends of depressed individuals may not be able to rely on a college to provide adequate resources for their depressed friend. Furthermore, the friends cannot rely on the college to provide resources for them to aid their friend. This is where the *Be the Friend* program steps in, attempting to educate the friends of depressed individuals and give them the tools to be a useful peer network of social support for a depressed individual.

*The Why and How*

There is no reason why an underutilized support system should not be activated. Though it would be ideal for colleges to fix their mental health resource problems, this will take time, money, and effort, and depressed individuals should not have to suffer in silence until these changes are made. Thus, regardless of the blame or responsibility a college should take in its failing to provide adequate resources, this is not a reason for friends of depressed individual not to take a more active approach in their friend’s mental health recovery. If a friend can truly help someone with depression, there is no reason that should not occur, even if it is not that friend’s ultimate responsibility.

Helping a friend with depression is not easy, but it is possible. Studies have shown time and time again that a strong social network aids in the recovery from depression. Thus, if a friend is willing to take the time to become educated and understand what does and does not help, a friend can truly *Be the Friend* that helps. The *Be the Friend* program hones in on this underutilized resource by encouraging friends to help their depressed friend. By providing the most pertinent information in one condensed website linking to a number of resources for further reading and exploration, *Be the Friend* seeks to provide easy access to the most relevant information so that friends do not have to cross extra burdens of research which may prevent them from being a friend. *Be the Friend* also seeks to promote awareness of depression so that friends can be more aware and perceptive of their friend’s problems. Furthermore, *Be the Friend* seeks to provide friends with a number of resources for the depressed individual as well as a guide to holding a successful intervention, should that be necessary.

*Ultimate Goal*

Ultimately, the goal of the *Be the Friend* program is not for colleges to change but for friends to become aware of the issue of depression, to be prepared to aid a friend with depression, and to actively reach out to friends who may suffer from depression but not yet have admitted to it or have gotten help. The goal is to show friends of depressed individuals that they can help and they can make a difference, as well as to make that action step – being a friend and helping – easier to take by providing the information in one location. Additionally, the *Be the Friend* program is designed to be something that can spread; if one person finds it helpful, linking it via social media or some other platform allows it to be seen by more and more individuals; and if someone takes the time to click on and view the site, he or she will undoubtedly be intrigued; one intrigued, it is not likely to take long before an individual realizes that he or she may have a depressed friend, which creates a personal connection between that individual and the cause. One a person is convinced he or she can help and is given the resources, it is the *Be the Friend* program’s sincere hope that friends will take action in being a true friend.

1. http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2015/02/07/Study-Increased-demand-inadequate-resources-for-college-mental-health-services/stories/201502070034 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://news.yahoo.com/tulane-s-mental-health-meltdown-144028239.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.newsweek.com/2014/02/14/how-colleges-flunk-mental-health-245492.html?hc\_location=ufi [↑](#footnote-ref-3)