



# DISABILITY AND CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH

Understanding the experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic

## SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on college students' well-being, including students with mental health diagnoses. To understand the experiences of students with mental health diagnoses during the pandemic, Mental Health America surveyed 471 college students who identified as having mental health disabilities about their academic experiences and needs during the pandemic. Students who took the survey reported significant gaps in knowledge about mental health disabilities and accommodations with confusion about what qualifies for accommodations and even that accommodations are available. The majority of students receiving disability accommodations reported that their needs had changed and that their colleges were not adequately supporting them in adapting their accommodations during the changing circumstances. Universities should educate students, disability staff, and professors about accommodations for mental health disabilities, in addition to working with students to discover how their learning needs have changed during the pandemic, how to improve the accessibility of disability resources, and what lessons from the pandemic can be utilized moving forward.

## COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The pandemic has caused serious life disruption for college students across the country from sudden transitions to online learning to the loss of major milestones. A [survey](#) from Active Minds conducted at the beginning of the pandemic found that 80 percent of students reported that it negatively impacted their mental health. But what is happening to students who were struggling with their mental health or receiving support for a mental health disability prior to COVID-19?

Mental Health America surveyed 471 college students with mental health disabilities to learn about their distinct experiences during the pandemic. The major findings include:

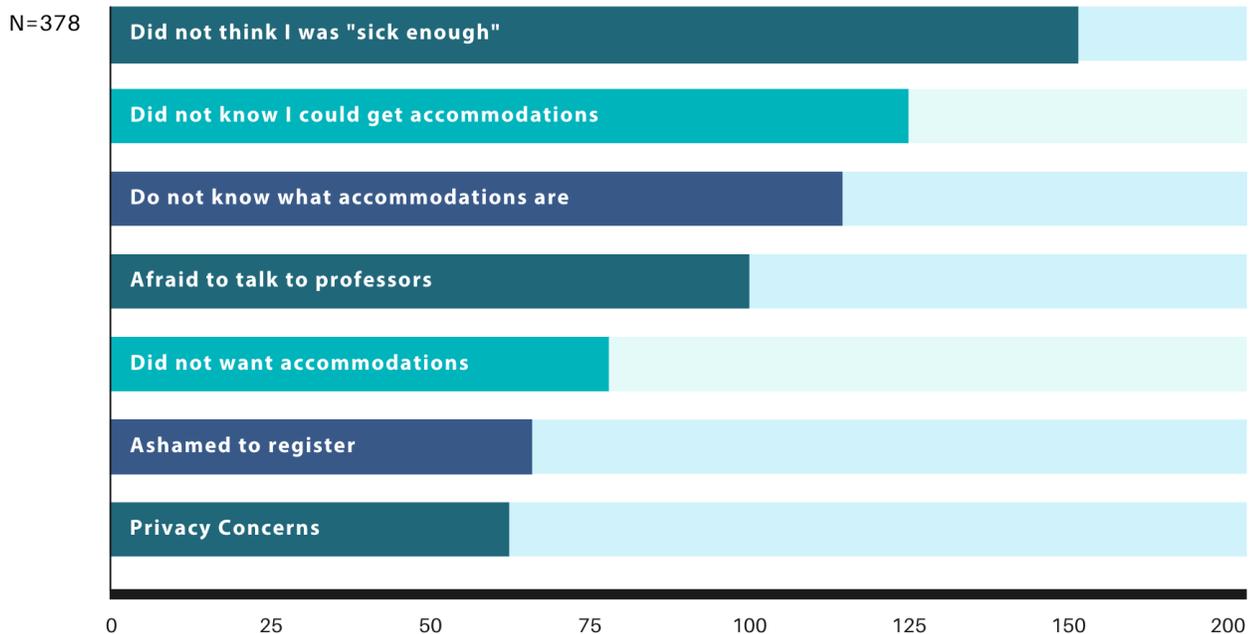
### **Students have little knowledge or understanding of accommodations for mental health disabilities.**

70% of students with mental health disabilities did not register for disability accommodations.

The top reasons they reported were:

- They did not think they were 'sick enough' to get accommodations (41%).
- They did not know that they could get accommodations (33%).
- They do not know what accommodations are (30%).
- They are afraid to talk to professors about accommodations (26%).

## TOP REASONS COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS DID NOT REGISTER FOR DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS



**The needs of students with mental health disabilities have changed during the pandemic, and many do not feel supported by their colleges.**

Among students who receive accommodations for mental health disabilities:

- 33 percent agree that disability support services staff are knowledgeable about psychiatric disabilities.
- 42 percent agree that professors are supportive in providing accommodations.
- 47 percent say professors have been flexible with requirements during the pandemic.
- 54 percent agreed that the pandemic changed their needed accommodations.
- 61 percent say their needs are different in online versus in-person learning.

**Colleges have opportunities to create more inclusive and supportive environments for students with mental health disabilities, especially through training professors and educating students about accommodations for mental health disabilities.**

The top suggestions for how colleges can improve accessibility for students with mental health disabilities were:

- Train professors to understand mental health and disability accommodations (73%).
- Provide more education and outreach about the availability of disability support services for mental health disabilities (69%).
- Dedicate staff to provide or support students in the accommodations process to remove financial barriers to registration (58%).
- Offer staff or peer navigators to support students in the registration process (42%).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES

- **Educate students on mental health disabilities and accommodations.** The overwhelming majority of students did not register for disability accommodations, but only 20 percent stated that they did not register because they did not want accommodations. It is common for students with mental health disabilities never to receive accommodations or only receive accommodations after crises or significant academic challenges. To make colleges accessible for students with mental health disabilities and prevent unnecessary academic challenges, universities must work with students, student groups, and staff to educate their communities on mental health disabilities and accommodations.
- **Invest in training on mental health disability accommodations for professors.** 1 in 4 students reports that fear of talking to professors is a barrier to registering for disability accommodations, and less than half agree that professors are supportive in providing accommodations. Colleges should educate professors on mental health, including disability accommodations, to make sure students feel comfortable using accommodations and that professors remove barriers for student participation.
- **Provide more accessible accommodations processes, including addressing financial, cultural, and logistical barriers to registration.** Many students who would like to register for disability accommodations report financial, cultural, and logistical barriers. Broader issues in mental health, including mental health professional shortages, lack of insurance coverage, lack of providers who take insurance, culturally incompetent services, and complicated paperwork, can make the process for accessibility support inaccessible. Colleges should work in partnership with students to identify barriers and develop strategies for addressing these barriers in their communities, including reconsidering the accommodations registration process and requirements.
- **Coordinate outreach and dialogue with students with registered psychiatric disabilities.** Many students with mental health disabilities report that their needs have changed during the pandemic, yet they did not feel supported by disability services staff in this transition. Outreach and conversations with students can improve accessibility and help keep students enrolled. It can also support staff and the broader community in understanding necessary changes to the available accommodations for students with mental health disabilities.
- **Provide increased education for disability services staff on mental health diagnoses and accommodations.** Among students who receive disability accommodations, only 1 in 3 reports that disability services staff are knowledgeable about mental health disabilities. Colleges should ensure that disability services staff have adequate training that includes information about mental health conditions and possible accommodations for students.

## CONCLUSION

College students with mental health disabilities have a right to participate in higher education. Colleges must improve their accessibility to support the inclusion and celebration of students with mental health disabilities in higher education. Colleges should work alongside students to educate their campus communities about mental health accommodations, create more accessible accommodations processes, and support students with needed accommodations during the pandemic and moving forward.

To learn more about mental health disabilities and accommodations in higher education, check out resources from the [National Council on Disability](#) and [Project Lets](#).

**This report was written in October 2020 by Kelly A. Davis, Mental Health America.**

## ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA



Mental Health America (MHA)—founded in 1909—is the nation’s leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all. Our work is driven by our commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; integrated care, services, and supports for those who need it; with recovery as the goal.