

# Supporting young adults with serious mental health conditions in their post-secondary education

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
Hospital & Health Sciences System  
— Changing medicine. For good. —

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# Acknowledgements



The mission of the **Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research** is to promote the full participation in socially valued roles of transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14-30) with serious mental health conditions. We use the tools of research and knowledge translation in partnership with this at risk population to achieve this mission.

Visit us at [umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR](http://umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR)

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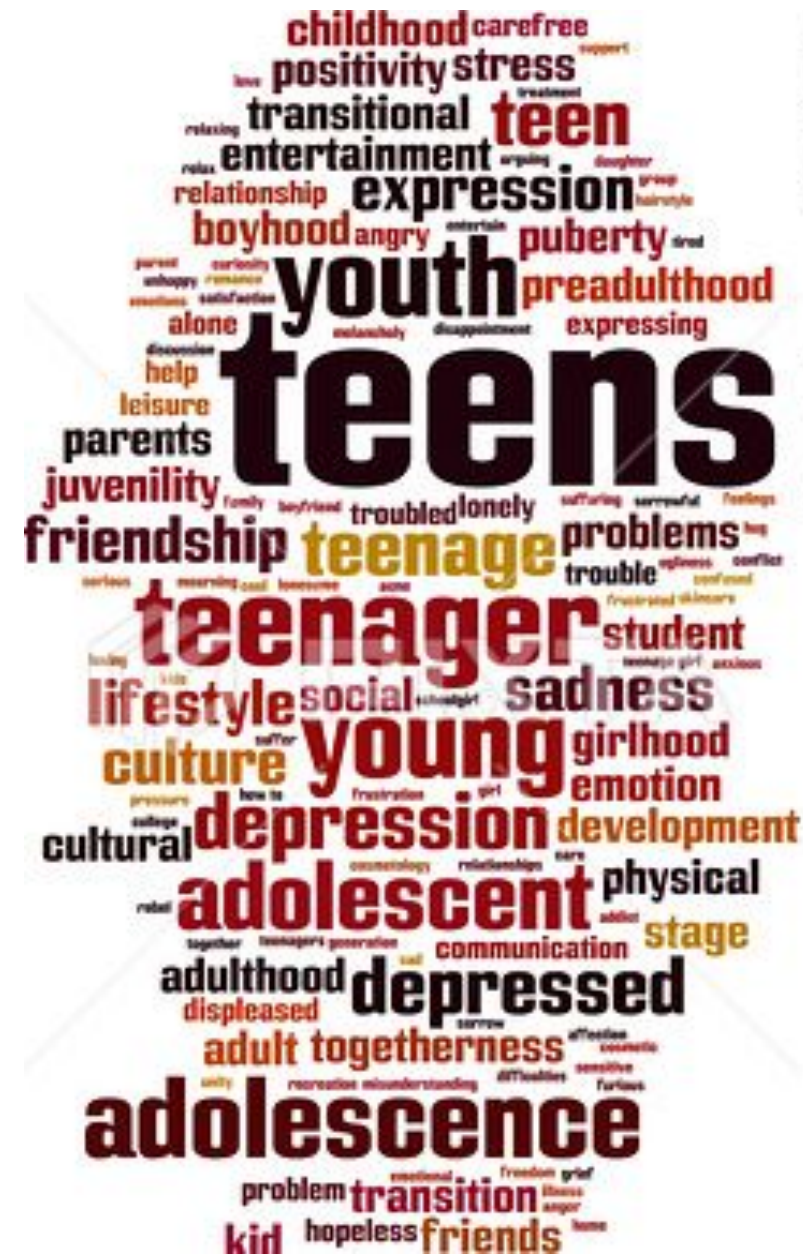
# Overview of Presentation

- I. The developmental, social, and cultural context of young adulthood
- II. Mental health conditions in young adulthood and higher education
- III. Experiences of young adults college students with mental health challenges in post-secondary settings
- IV. Implications for supporting young adult college students with mental health conditions
- V. Resources



Broadly ages 14-30, most often 16-25

# Young Adulthood

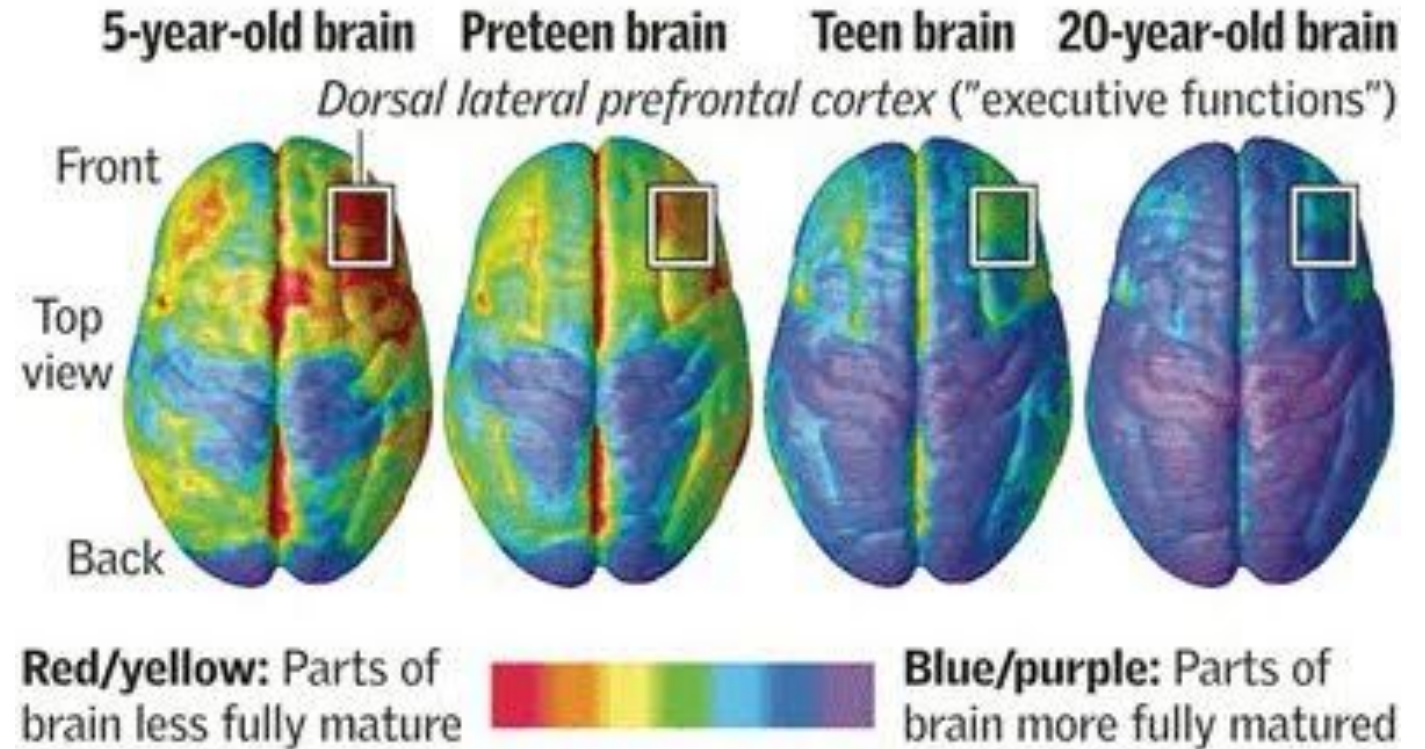


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# Part I: Developmental and Social-Cultural Context of Young Adulthood

# The amazing brain “remodel”

- Extensive brain development maturation.
- Pre-frontal cortex handles logic, empathy, creativity, self-regulation, self-awareness, predicting, planning, problem-solving, attention
- *Most* have cognitively matured by age 26



*Sources: National Institute of Mental Health;  
Paul Thompson, Ph.D., UCLA Laboratory of  
Neuro Imaging*

**Thomas McKay** | The Denver Post

# Cognitive Development

## □ Executive Functioning

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- Increasing ability to think abstractly
- Hypothetical thinking (if, then)
- Increasing ability for insight and foresight

The differences between adolescents and adults are stark, and the years between 18 and 26 are when young people develop psychologically in ways that bridge these differences.





# Development on every front

- Moral and ethical
- Social and social-sexual
- Identity
- Family

Taken together, development underlies one's ability to function *as an adult*



# Age is nothing but a number

- Age is an *objective* demographic that is used *subjectively* (i.e., differently) across different cultures and societies, and the expectations of people at a certain age can evolve over time within those cultures and society. **Humans and societies are evolutionary!**
- Generational labels foster stereotyping as though everyone born between year X and year Y shares the same set of characteristics, when class, gender, race and geography have far more of an effect on shaping our trajectories through life.
- Young adults' biological development has probably not changed in many generations, but the world has changed in many ways

# “Extended Young Adulthood”: Trends over last 70 yrs



Marriage rates  
Independent living



Age of marriage  
Age of childbirth  
Cohabitation



Increased rates of  
college enrollment

A close-up photograph of a young person's face, focusing on the right side. They have dark, thick braids visible on the left side of the frame. They have two silver nose piercings on the right side of their nose. The background is a solid light color.

# Youth sub-culture

- Communication:
  - Technology use
  - Social media
  - Texting
  - Instant gratification
- Peer influence
  - Acceptable forms of expression, status symbols
  - Drugs and alcohol
  - Bullying
  - Increased competition re: school performance



Evolving and diverse  
youth perceptions  
and experiences of  
mental health and  
mental illness



**'IT'S O.K.  
TO NOT  
BE O.K.'**

**NAOMI OSAKA**

ON HER FIRST OLYMPICS  
PERFORMANCE • MENTAL  
HEALTH AND WHY SPORTS  
NEED TO CHANGE • NEW

THE 2020 SUMMER  
Olympians



# Unique impact on young adult transitions

# Context: Education and the Economy

- Traditional manufacturing & blue-collar sectors of the economy have shrunk while information technology sectors have grown
- High school diploma no longer a ticket to the middle class, and a high-school equivalency has decreasing societal and economic value
- “Rate of return” on additional education is at highest levels; each additional year of education returned, on average, a 9% increase in earnings (Borjas, 2005).
- But post-secondary education costs are rising and student debt is crippling.



## Part II: Mental Health Conditions in Young Adulthood and Higher Education



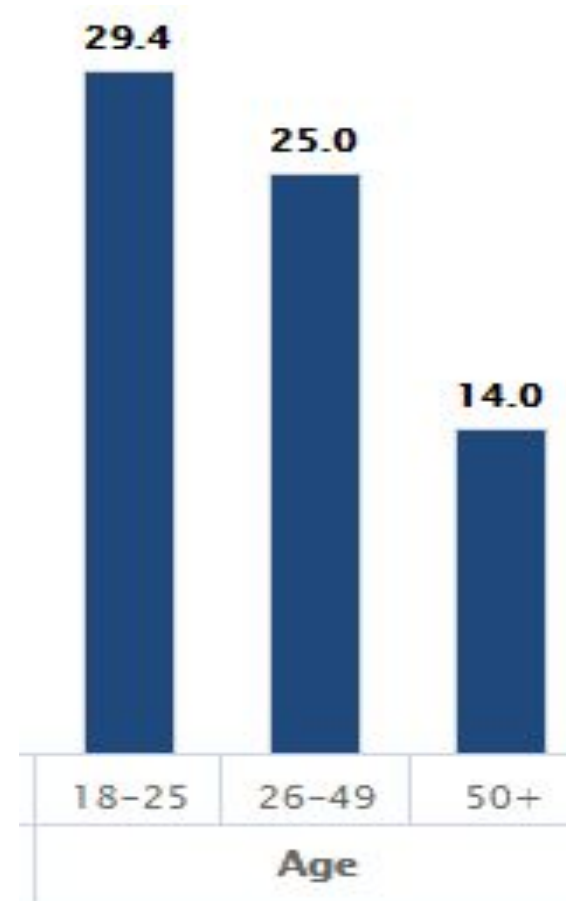
# Young adults with mental illness

NSDUH 2019 data (SAMHSA)

## Onset of mental illness (globally)\*

- The majority (two thirds) of mental illness/disorders occur prior to age 25
- Peak age of mental illness/disorder onset is 14.5
- First episode of psychosis commonly occurs between ages 15-30

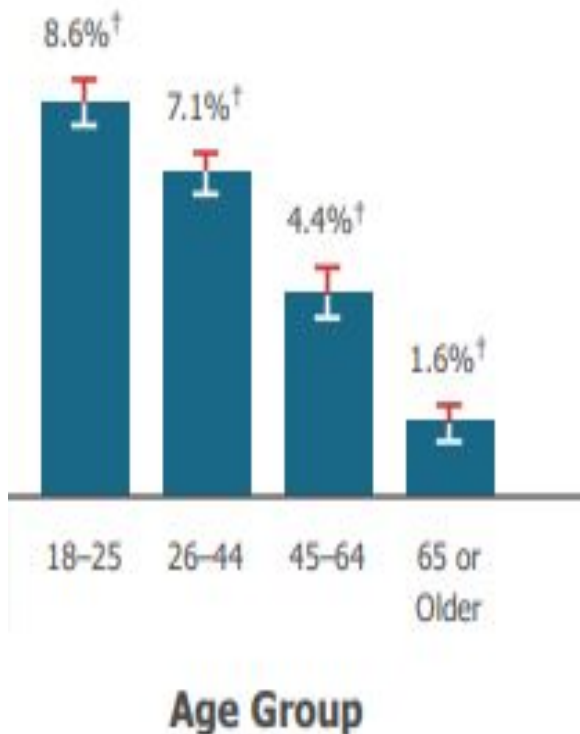
## 2019: Any mental illness by age group (in the U.S.)\*



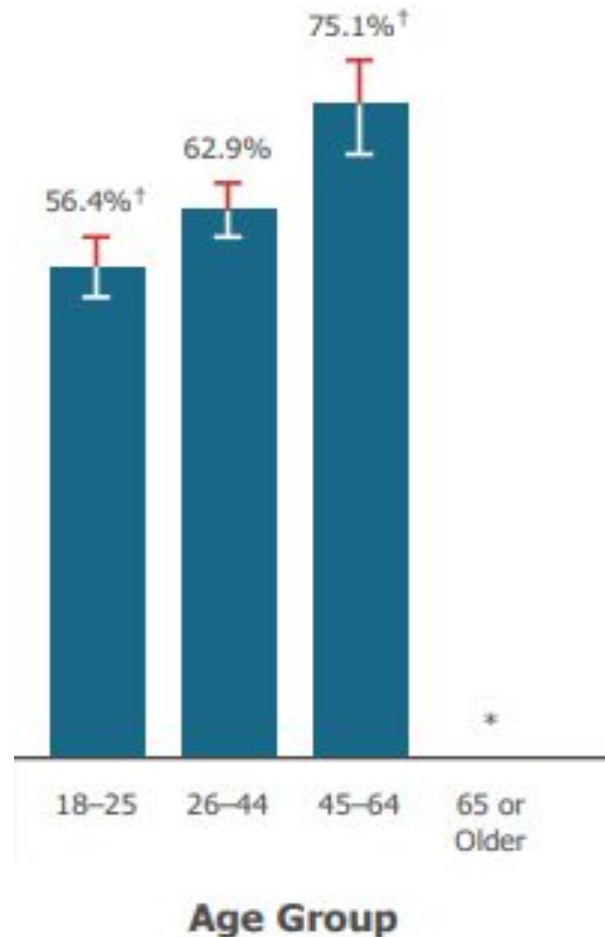
# Young adults with mental illness

NSDUH 2019 data (SAMHSA)

**Highest rates of *serious* mental illness compared to other ages...**



**Lowest rates of mental health service use**



**A crisis brewing...**

Rates of **serious** mental illness among 18-25-year-olds almost doubled between 2008 and 2019

Similar pattern for serious thoughts of suicide



# Mental Health in Higher Education

- $\approx 27\%$  of U.S. college students have a diagnosable mental health disorder <sup>1</sup>

Healthy Minds Study Findings Academic Year '18-'19<sup>2</sup> vs. Winter/Spring '21<sup>3</sup>

Variable	AY2018	Winter/Spring '21
Current Severe Depression	18%	22%
Current Moderate-Severe Anxiety	31%	34%
Psychotropic medications in past 12 months	24%	35%
Endorse current need for help for MH	49%	53%
$\geq 3$ Days in past 4 weeks MH hurt academic performance	44%	53%

# Mental Health in Higher Education

- 43% of 1<sup>st</sup> year college students with mental health conditions report severe role impairment<sup>2</sup>
- College students with mental health conditions have high rates of college disruption<sup>3</sup>
- Positive mental health is strongly correlated to academic success, retention, and ultimately vocational success, adult resiliency & Return on Investment<sup>4</sup>



# Part III: Experiences of Young Adults with Mental Health Challenges in Post-Secondary Settings



# Experiences of mental illness in Young Adulthood

- Many are unsure if they have a formal diagnosis
- Many report receiving multiple diagnoses from different providers, and resulting ambivalence about psychiatry
- Medication changes are frequent and disruptive to daily lives
- Inpatient hospitalization is very common

**TikTok brings positive and negative impacts to mental health**



*Some people self-diagnose instead of going to professionals*

By Jasmine Ramirez

Published: Feb. 23, 2022 at 8:14 PM EST



TikTok's Rise: Both Good News, 123 - Social media can be a blessing or a curse depending on how it's used

# Post-secondary patterns

- Many start with unclear educational aspirations
- Many weave in and out of college and work
- Many pursue classes at two or more universities
- Multiple 'academic disruptions' and starts and stops
  - Student debt can hinder movement towards next education goals
  - Short add/drop periods create debt for credits that weren't earned
- Low rates of help-seeking on campus (e.g., "disability services") and counseling services are overloaded
- GPA among college students ~2.8-3.2 (Eisenburg, 2009; Mullen, 2022; unpublished)

# Barrier to Success: Stress-induced anxiety and panic

- Situational or environmental causes
- Inability to cope with stressors
- Increased anxiety in social situations or problem solving

*I have a 4.0 GPA, and content is not the issue. It's being on campus, just being around people, walking into a classroom that tends to be the biggest issue. Going to class, attendance, you know. And I think that will always probably be my biggest struggle... I work very hard to get the grades I get, but it's definitely managing the anxiety day-to-day.*



# Barrier to Success: Increased SMHC symptomatology

- Managing a SMHC can be a full-time job
- Symptoms and lack of support, or intense supports (e.g., hospitalization) can be disruptive
- Medication changes are disruptive

*I ended up being out of school for a year, in and out of hospitals. I took a year off trying to emotionally get myself back together with therapy and day programs and this and that.*

# Barrier to Success: Executive Functioning

Young adult college students with mental health conditions (n=598) endorsed the following challenges *due* to their mental health condition:

- Trouble writing papers: 32%
- Trouble taking tests: 29%
- Trouble prioritizing tasks: 36%
- Difficulty maintaining organization: 31%
- Trouble concentrating: 45%
- Trouble studying for exams: 37%
- Trouble memorizing information: 30%
- Difficulty with time management: 37%

# Barrier to Success: Interpersonal Challenges, Inability to Advocate

- Interpersonal challenges with peers, supervisors, or school staff
- Difficulty advocating, knowing and speaking up for their needs
- How to communicate effectively



# What helps: Flexibility & Support

- Ability to take frequent breaks
  - Online learning sometimes helpful (self-paced)
  - Flexible assignment deadlines
- 
- Supportive peers, trusting adult allies
  - Empathetic professors
  - Mental health literacy among others



# A note on formal supports

## Formal accommodations:

- Can be confusing and difficult to navigate
- Lack of awareness
- Young adults don't always understand their mental health condition and HOW it impacts them in school Individualized (i.e., not "one size fits all")

## Formal services and supports:

- Their existence isn't enough, more resources needed
- Culturally-sensitive supports important





## Part IV: Implications for supporting young adult college students with mental health conditions

## Implications #1: Help young adults manage stress and anxiety

- Coping strategies
- Nervous system regulation techniques
- Peer-to-peer supports (i.e., “you are not alone”)
- Crisis plans (who, what, when)
- Executive functioning skills

## Implications #2: Help young adults strengthen interpersonal communication & advocacy skills

- How to manage conflict
- Effective communication with authority figures
- Self-advocacy skills, and associated knowledge of supports needed
- Research and outreach to formal supports that may be available to them

## Implications #3: Be flexible and helpful

Flexible deadlines  
and expectations

Increase mental  
health literacy and  
understanding

Low-barrier  
services when  
possible

Have empathy

## Implications #4: Help young adults develop executive functioning skills

- A structured, but flexible schedule for study and class time
- Note-taking & test taking strategies
- Organization for individual courses (e.g., 3 ring binders, spiral notebook and folders, setting up laptop folders)
- Task management and monitoring tools (e.g., Google Calendar, reminders, etc.)
- Time management (putting assignments/deadlines into a calendar/planner and in their phone, time budgeting)



# Part V: Innovative models & resources

# 1. PASS: Peer Academic Coaching

## Principles of Coaching

- Wellness-oriented
- Person-centered
- Relationship-focused
- Strengths-based
- Voluntary
- Active

## Peer coach qualifications

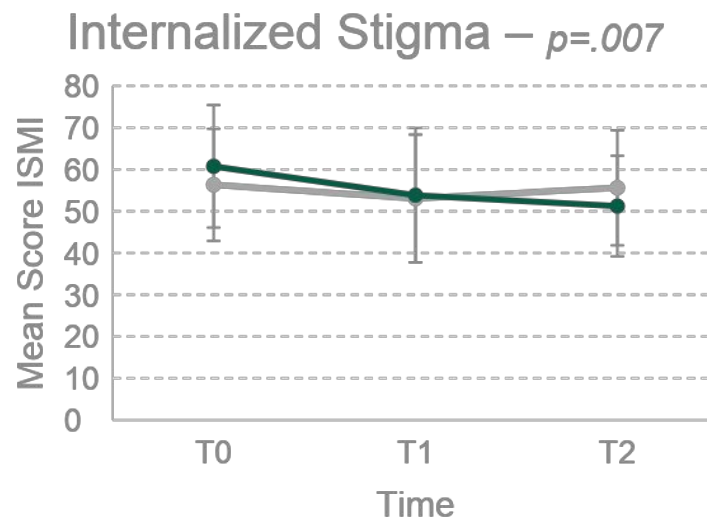
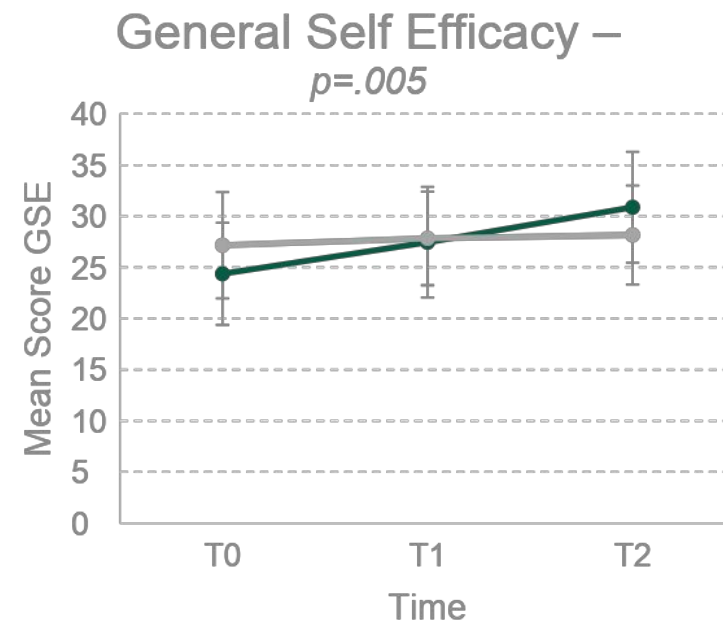
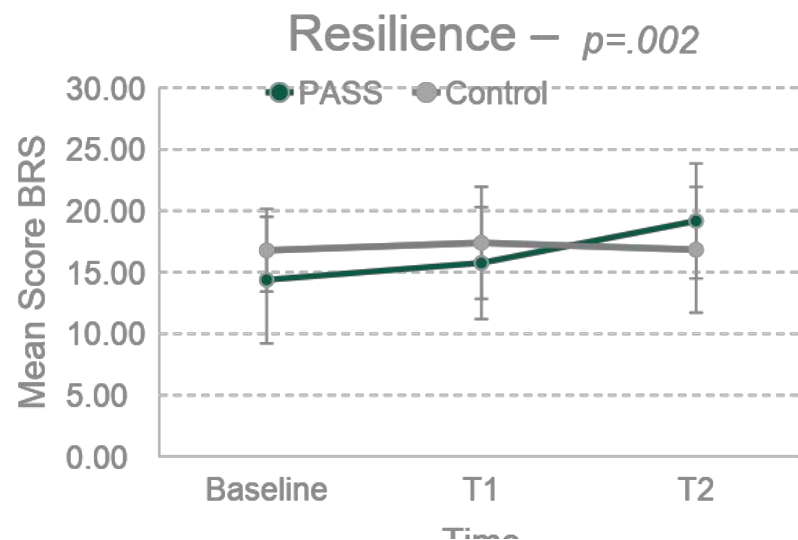
- 18-25 years old
- Juniors/Seniors at the University
- Academically successful and thriving on-campus
- Lived experience a plus but not requirement

## PASS Coaching Targets

- Executive functioning skills
- Resiliency
  - Emotional agility
  - Stress-coping abilities
- Social supports
- Academic self-efficacy
- Self-determination
- Ultimate goal= Graduation

<https://www.umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR/models/pass/>

# PASS Promising RCT results (n=45)



## **PASS improved more than Control**

Generally, those in the PASS condition improved more over time than those in the control condition, or sustained the improvement for longer.

## 2. HYPE on Campus

### HYPE supports

- Individualized support from a HYPE practitioner
- Executive Functioning curriculum
- Meet 1-2 times a week
- Education and career/employment support

### HYPE values

- Flexible supports
- Helpful supports
- Solution-focused
- Partner with young adult
- Age-typical support

### HYPE targets

- Increased executive functioning
- Increased academic self-efficacy
- Reduced academic barriers
- Reduced academic disruptions
- Increased satisfactory academic progress

<https://www.umassmed.edu/hype/>

# HYPE on Campus: RCT underway

- Participants enrolled at Binghamton University in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters
- Follow-up data collection until December 2022
- N=103 students (control condition or HYPE)
- Preliminary positive benefits of executive functioning curriculum

# The College Faculty Guide to Academic Supports for College Students with Serious Mental Health Conditions

<https://www.umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR/models/pass/>

*Students indicate that faculty mental health training is the most important awareness training that a campus can provide*

Video 1



Video 1 describes mental health conditions and dispels common misconceptions regarding college students who experience them.

Video 2



Video 2 summarizes ways in which having a mental health condition can impact a student's academic performance.

Video 3



Video 3 details the purpose and nature of academic accommodations for students with mental health conditions and offers examples of such accommodations.

Video 4



Video 4 offers strategies for faculty members regarding how to support the academic success of students with mental health conditions.

Video 5



Video 5 is a continuation of the previous video (Video 4). Video 5 offers additional strategies for faculty members regarding how to support the academic success of students with mental health conditions.





## Supporting the Educational Goals of Young Adults with Mental Health Conditions

**By:** Marsha Langer Ellison, Michelle G. Mullen, Deirdre G. Logan

College education or training can be the passport to economic self-sufficiency for young adults with a mental health condition. Research has shown that young adults with mental health conditions struggle to complete high school and college more so than any other disability group...

<https://www.umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR/publication/education/tip-sheets/>



## Outside-The-Box College Accommodations: Real Support for Real Students: Tools for School II

Most schools are used to providing typical accommodations such as: note taker, extra time for assignments, and assistive technology for students of many different disabilities. Yet, the challenges of having a mental health condition are unique. This tip sheet will help you to think “outside-the-box” to get the educational accommodations that help you with your unique struggles. A Spanish translation of this publication is available.



## Getting Accommodations at College: Tools for School

**By:** Amanda Costa

This tip sheet is for college students having trouble with school due to mental health. Schools are obligated to provide extra supports and services to help students succeed called accommodations. Topics covered include what accommodations can be asked for, how to get accommodations, and confidentiality. This tip sheet is also available in Spanish.

**Early career  
exploration  
and education  
is pivotal to  
long-term  
career  
trajectory**

In closing.....



# Thank you!

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