

# Stigma: just one of many obstacles to achieving mental health

BY WILL SORRELL | Published 7 hours ago | Updated 14 hours ago |

"I am proud to attend The University of Alabama." This is a statement naturally proclaimed by much of campus, but unspoken or even opposed by many students as well. Personally, I am proud to attend our university, and one of the many reasons is our organized stand against mental illness and suicide. Whether it be awareness walks in the cool of the spring or a winning homecoming queen campaign, we fight tooth and nail to "erase the stigma" and prevent tragic loss of life.

However, while our efforts are multifaceted and diversified across campus partisan lines and sectors, I humbly assert that we have made a mistake.

"Mental illness." "Suicide." The images these words evoke are harrowing, uncomfortable and difficult to confront. Throughout my lifetime, I have known and loved several individuals with mental illnesses and suicidal thoughts, but in my opinion, these issues were not their greatest battle. I would argue that there is a challenge more difficult to confront than illness or suicide alone.

The greatest battle in the war for mental health is the ability to recognize the need for help and act upon it.

Mental illnesses, suicidal thoughts and a host of other struggles cloud and mar one's ability to admit the criticality of therapy, psychiatry or even the gravity of situation at hand. This is a crying shame, and this is where our efforts must primarily be focused.

According to Emory University, there are over 1,000 suicides on college campuses per year. Ten percent of all college students have made a plan to commit suicide at some point, and thoughts of suicide spanning a lifetime occur amongst 18 percent of undergraduates.

These numbers are completely unacceptable, but why is it so?

Perhaps, at least in part, we've created a college culture that is difficult to survive. Amidst the 3 a.m. study sessions, incessant overcommitment, relational nuisances, intercampus conflicts, incessant responsibilities of adulthood, incessant wanderlust of childhood and internal and external pressures to perform at higher levels in all aspects of undergraduate life, there is no time for clinical depression. There is no time for severe anxiety. There is no solace for those with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

We the patrons and participants of college campuses do not find ourselves in environments that allot grace for a pause in the rhythms of our lives in order for us to honestly assess our own mental health and act accordingly.

We are told to speak up and speak out and seek help, but the implicit pressures of expectation and duty around us rarely relent for us to simply breathe and admit, "I am not okay." This admission becomes intricately more complex once we realize the trauma mental illness causes on the thought patterns of the brain, increasing the necessity of cultures where self-assessment and peer-assessment are the norm.

There is a stronger power in the acceptance of need than in any fabrication of artificial stability our baser instincts beckon us to conjure. Do not believe the lie that you must fight alone.

If you see a need, seek help. If you think you may have a need, seek help. If loved ones assert that you may have a need, seek help.

We have a competent and compassionate counseling center on campus, and there remain a plethora of other resources in the greater Tuscaloosa community for those seeking psychiatric assistance or greater privacy of care. Countless courageous students have dedicated their college careers to raising awareness of the reality of the brutality of mental illness and suicide on communities and families. We are fortunate to dwell in a campus primed for success in shifting the tide away from the statistics and into healing.

All we need now is to be okay with not being okay.

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