

## Mental health concerns arise among students, faculty amid global crisis



Haley Han/Pipe Dream Illustrator

### University, student groups aim to combat mental health issues caused by social isolation By MELANIE GULBAS - APRIL 20, 2020

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Binghamton University students, faculty and staff are working together to coordinate mental health resources and meet the University community's needs.

Health conditions, racial discrimination, adjustments to a new way of living, inability to meet with friends, financial insecurity and concerns about finishing the semester as originally planned are just some of the worries students have. Student Association (SA) Vice President for Academic Affairs John Santare, a senior double-majoring in biology and comparative literature, said all of these reasons can lead to mental health burdens that should not be put on the back burner.

“With such broad levels of social uncertainty and extended periods of isolation, people are psychologically and emotionally challenged,” Santare said. “Obviously, the physical health of our students is the ultimate priority of the University, the [SA] and the greater Binghamton community. That does not diminish the importance of mental health at this time. If anything, the spotlight for mental health should be brighter than ever before.”

BU is currently offering a variety of online resources for students, including assistance with connecting students to home care, including BetterHelp, an online counseling service, as well as the University Counseling Center's (UCC) telecounseling. Along with the UCC, there are other offices and resources available to support students virtually or by phone, including the Consultation, Advocacy, Referral and Education (CARE) Team, [Health Promotion and Prevention Services \(HPPS\)](#), the Fleishman Center for Career and Professional Development, the Mental Health Outreach Peer Educators (MHOPE), Real Education About College Health (REACH) and 20:1.

The UCC and HPPS are providing outreach and are collaborating on a project to offer a “Zoom-in” to classrooms to provide mental health support and education. With this, instructors can have a counselor give a 10-minute presentation to their class on how to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are also self-help options listed on the UCC and [HPPS' websites](#), such as self-care apps

including Sanvello, Breathwrk: Breathing Exercises and Aloe Bud. Faculty and staff can receive help through the [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) and can schedule appointments to speak to a counselor via Zoom or phone sessions.

Kimberly Peabody, director of HPPS, wrote in an email that staying positive may be difficult during this time, but showing as much love and compassion as possible is important.

“We are all being faced with challenges and with situations we have never encountered before and we are all doing our best,” she wrote. “Be flexible and adaptable, be willing to change your approach and be willing to cut yourself a break if you don’t immediately adjust to a completely new lifestyle.”

Peabody also noted that while people may have increased free time, students should not necessarily place pressure on themselves to pick up new hobbies or even carry out usual activities.

“You do not have to come out of isolation with six-pack abs, you do not have to use this time to be extra productive, you do not have to learn to crochet or speak German,” she said. “You just have to take care of yourself. It is okay if all you are doing right now is surviving.”

Mental health has been a topic of concern among students for years, with many voicing their discontent with the lack of funding, counselors and resources available on campus. In February, many students commented about their frustrations online when a \$60 million gift was donated for the use of a new baseball stadium, stating that donations of that size would be better used to improve mental health resources on campus.

According to Mark Rice, clinical director of the UCC, the University is exploring web-based applications and platforms that may allow for online self-help support to be available in the fall. Peabody and Rice both said a reevaluation of mental health resources will take place next semester.

“We all understand that the landscape has been rapidly evolving in the past two months,” Rice said. “Student mental health concerns have emerged in multiple areas: anxiety about health, stress of changing to online platforms, coping with social distancing, navigating new life routines and loss of important life events or grief over the loss of loved ones.”

Student organizations are also providing support to their members and speaking out about mental health. Shannon Schierenbeck, founding member of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and a senior majoring in psychology, wrote in an email that the organization is hosting their annual “Out of the Darkness Walk” virtually through Zoom on April 26 in an effort to raise money for suicide prevention and continue the discussion about mental health.

Although Support, Empathy, Empowerment, Kindness (SEEK), a student-run helpline, had to shut down because of COVID-19, student volunteers are currently training new interns and preparing to support student mental health next semester. Kailey Williams, SEEK executive vice president and a junior double-majoring in psychology and social work, suggested virtually talking to loved ones via Zoom and FaceTime to reduce stress and bring people together.

“Discussing mental health normalizes the fact that it is okay to struggle and to not be okay,” Williams said. “Everyone responds to a crisis differently. My advice to students would be to allow themselves to feel all their emotions as they come.”

Williams said she was pleasantly surprised by University administrator’s response to mental health needs amid the pandemic.

“The University has a history of not investing enough funding into mental health resources,” Williams said. “In my opinion, mental health should be a top priority for the University. That being said, I do believe the University is prioritizing mental health right now more than they have in the past. I think one of the most important ways a university can support our mental health in a crisis is to provide us with resources and educate us on our options.”

A guide to all of Broome County’s mental health resources can be found [here](#).