

CSE Mental Wellness Committee

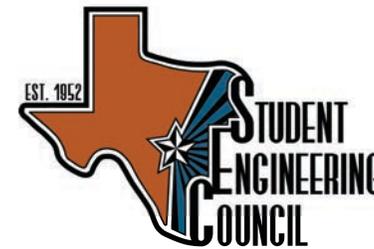
DRAFT: JULY 26TH, 2020



The University of Texas at Austin
Cockrell School of Engineering

Abbreviations

- ▶ CSE: Cockrell School of Engineering
- ▶ SEC: Student Engineering Council
- ▶ CSC: Cockrell School Cares
- ▶ CMHC: Counseling and Mental Health Center



Overview



- ▶ Charge to Committee
 - ▶ Provide input to the university working group on academic planning
 - ▶ Develop mental health/wellness recommendations for the Cockrell School
- ▶ Members: Traci Laird (CSEE), Srinivas Bettadpur, (ASE/EM), Lacy White (BME), Brian Korgel (ChE), Kristen Kessel (Ramshorn Scholars' Program), Nina Telang (ECE), Terrie Chandler (ME), Chandra Bhat (CAEE)
- ▶ Honorary Member: Althea Woodruff (Project Coordinator, Well-Being in Learning Environments, CMHC)

The Process

- ▶ First meeting: May 12th, 2020
- ▶ Meetings held every week thereafter
- ▶ Presentations made on current Canvas and other resources
- ▶ Discussions internally in departments with students
- ▶ Discussions across departments related to departmental communications
- ▶ Focused on student mental wellness and things we can address
- ▶ Held undergraduate and graduate student panels



Motivation

- ▶ 80% of students feel overwhelmed*
- ▶ 50% become so anxious they struggle daily*
- ▶ 25% have a diagnosable mental illness*
- ▶ 40% do not seek any help*
- ▶ Depression episodes among those 18-to-25 years of age surged between 2012 to 2017
- ▶ Covid-19 has exacerbated the mental health problem, but the problem existed even before (above figures are pre-COVID)
- ▶ Mental health problems have spiked in broader population too during COVID; 70% of adults met criteria for moderate to serious mental illness



* National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Mental Health of Students Affects their Physical Health and More



- ▶ Substance Abuse
- ▶ Sleep Deprivation
- ▶ Depression/Feeling Isolated
- ▶ Panic Attacks
- ▶ School Drop-out
- ▶ Attempting/Committing Suicide

Three Basic Issues

- ▶ Stigma, Stigma, Stigma
- ▶ Mental health problems are treatable
- ▶ Distinguish mental wellness from mental illness; mental wellness is “preventive medicine”; promoting mental wellness **MUST** be part of the fabric of individual departments and classrooms, and not simply outsourced to a counseling center



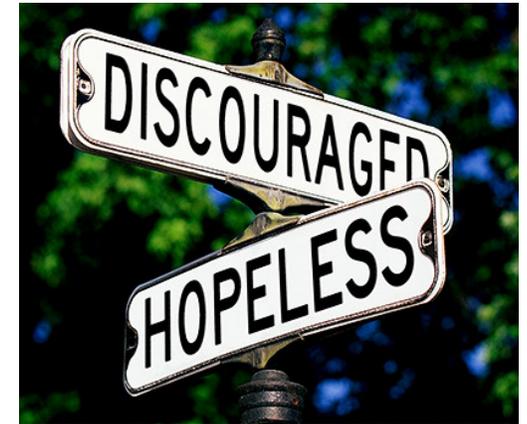
Need for Faculty Member Involvement

- ▶ Much of mental health discussions happening between staff and students
- ▶ But this must be a shared responsibility
- ▶ Top issue for students: “We want to hear from faculty members, and see them address mental wellness”, feedback based on student panels as well as a survey conducted by the CMHC
- ▶ Faculty and staff need to put the focus back on students
- ▶ “Faculty are simply unapproachable; they just do not get it”
- ▶ Promoting mental wellness is also about effective knowledge transfer



What students DO NOT want to hear from faculty

- ▶ “How can I trust you that your absence was related to a mental health problem?”
- ▶ “No pain, no gain, buddy; just suck it up” (valorization of stress)
- ▶ “30% of this class will fail; only 5 of 35 in this class will get an “A””
- ▶ “This is a weed-out class”
- ▶ “You are having it handed to you; in my time....” (yeah, yeah yeah)



Bottomline: Don't say things that (a) discourage team spirit, (b) promote unhealthy competition, and (c) dampen camaraderie. Emphasize learning; empathy and academic rigor can go hand-in-hand

What students would like faculty to do

- ▶ Trust us when we say an absence was for mental health reasons (Per an SEC survey, 70% of CSE students missed a class for mental health reasons)
- ▶ Show that you care about us; present yourself as being available; do this right off the bat on the first day of class
- ▶ Talk to us about your stories, your failures; showing you are vulnerable will help make connection at a deeper emotional level
- ▶ “You folks can really learn from your staff members, you know”
- ▶ Think – “Are you being rigorous, or are you just being intolerant?”
- ▶ Don’t make a course hard simply for the sake of making it hard



Other general remarks

- ▶ “When I need to talk, I need to talk NOW. UT counseling not available NOW”
- ▶ “Need someone with good active listening skills, not necessarily a psychologist”.
- ▶ “Sometimes, I just need a little venting and I can feel better”
- ▶ “Are advisors there simply to guide academic work? I am just not sure, and so sometimes do not bring up issues I would like to share with my advisor”
- ▶ “TAs sometimes shame UGs; TAs/grad students need training to be sensitive and not patronizing”



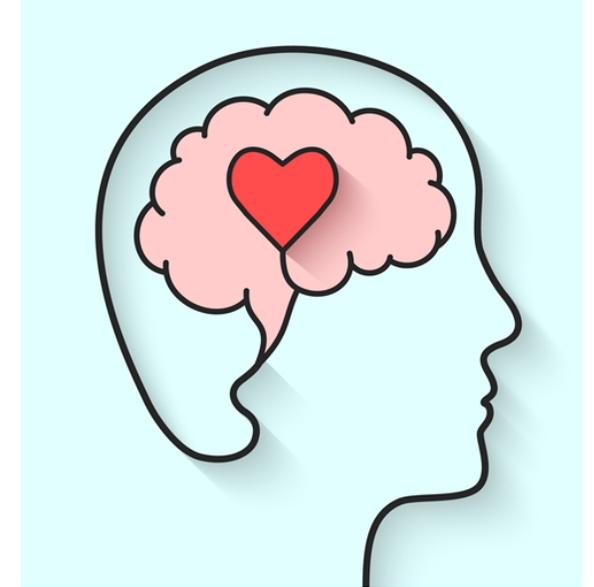
Recommendations at the Faculty Level

- ▶ Level 1: Critical level of engagement
 - ▶ Inform students about a video collage prepared by CSE (based on faculty/staff contributions on self-care activities); video collage is being prepared, and should be ready two weeks before fall start; consider playing video on first day of class
 - ▶ Distribute a one-page compendium of UT mental wellness resources (this compendium is being prepared, and should be ready two weeks before fall classes begin); discuss this compendium on the first day of class
 - ▶ Promote the practice of self-care on first class day; can be as simple as “Please take care of yourself, and consider adopting a self-care activity from the distributed chart” (see last slide for self-care chart)



Recommendations at the Faculty Level

- ▶ Level 2: Helpful level of engagement
 - ▶ Include more than one wellness activity during the semester; a package of ready-to-implement self-care activities is being prepared by CMHC
- ▶ Level 3: Supplemental level of engagement
 - ▶ Infuse awareness of wellness in every day instruction, instructional methods, and student engagement; this can be ongoing and continual



Recommendations at the Department Level

- ▶ Publicize video collage on self-care, and play at different public spaces
- ▶ Consider having a departmental point mental wellness person; this person must go through a formal “mental health first-aid” training workshop and an “active listening” workshop (CMHC has volunteered to provide these workshops; duration: 1.5 hours/workshop)
- ▶ Constitute a task force of mental wellness volunteers; members should go through the “active listening” workshop
- ▶ Set up informal walk-in time for students to discuss mental wellness/health issues. Coordinate so that one member of the task force is available to talk to students, say 3 hours each afternoon or each other afternoon



Recommendations at the School Level

- ▶ Draft a policy for excused absences due to mental health; ask faculty members to consider a reflection assignment: why taking time away from class was important for well-being?
- ▶ Release a statement about the purpose of teaching, including words/statements to avoid (needs to be carefully worded, so as to not patronize/offend faculty sensitivities)
- ▶ Work with individual departments to provide graduate student and TA training



Staff Mental Wellness

- ▶ Miss the personal connections; virtual meetings are just not a great substitute for in-person interactions
- ▶ Darn this virus – it is creating so much anxiety; do we have to get back in the fall? What about my safety?
- ▶ Overwhelmed and overloaded; it is simply difficult to be as polished in our work/be as productive as during normal times
- ▶ Some clear acknowledgment from leadership about our concerns would be appreciated
- ▶ Worried about kids' schooling, among other concerns about how to manage things in the fall



Faculty Mental Wellness Issues

- ▶ Appreciate the resources being provided to prepare for virtual/hybrid classes; but overwhelming...
- ▶ There appears to be an expectation that, because of these resources, courses will be polished and smoothly delivered
- ▶ Concerned about teaching evaluations, especially the younger faculty. Will my teaching scores during this pandemic be held against me?
- ▶ Need clarity on how to deal with sick students and students who do not want to come into class for in-person courses; Need details about how in-person classes will work (mics, how to handle a person not wearing a mask, how to maintain distancing, etc.)
- ▶ Committee is preparing a one-page compendium of mental wellness resources for staff/faculty



Charles M. Schultz' Charlie Brown

References



- ▶ National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org)
- ▶ “State of Mind in the College Classroom”, Stacy Roth, Faculty Focus
- ▶ “New Study Shows Staggering Effect of Coronavirus Pandemic on America’s Mental Health”, Jean Twenge, The Conversation

Practicing Self-Care

