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 12\textsuperscript{th}, 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”
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 Department Level

- Ask faculty members to attach the one-page compendium of mental health resources and the self-care chart, and discuss it on first day of class.

- Promote attendance at planned monthly self-care workshops for students.

- Provide TA/graduate student training: Thomas Connolly conducts an annual TA training at the Cockrell School, but supplement this; Can we include this in some form in 398T?
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
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

Care of your physical self
- Good *sleep* hygiene
- Regular *exercise*
- Healthy *nutrition*

Care of your emotional self
- Build a *supportive network*
- Make time for *social connections*
- Practice *self-compassion*

Care of your psychological/mental self
- Practice *meditation*
- Practice *yoga*
- Keep a *journal*
- Engage in a *creative hobby*
- Practice *deep breathing*
- Unplug from technology

Care of your spiritual self
- Practice *meditation*
- Read *spiritual literature*
- Practice *gratitude*
- Spend *time in nature*

Care of your professional self
- Develop a *peer support group*
- Maintain a *working relationship* with your professors.
- Maintain *boundaries* between personal and professional life

What is self-care?
Activities and behaviors that help you take care of your overall well-being.