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Top 10 Strategies for Bolstering Students' Mental Resilience

AS A FACULTY adviser at Regis University, I have seen countless students who feel under stress and wonder if they are up for the challenge of college life. That stress has only been compounded by the financial difficulties that many more students and their families are now facing. But the good news is that those of us who work on campuses can encourage mental resilience among students, even—perhaps especially—during these tough economic times, if we:

Scan the environment. We should open our minds as if we were anthropologists 50 years from now, returning to our campuses to understand students' stress in 2009. What are the messages in the campus media? How does the institution's ebb and flow during the year contribute positively or negatively to a thriving community? Who are the heroes? What are the rituals? How do professors and administrators talk about coping? What are other cultural cues that might be sending explicit or implicit messages?

Serve as models of emotional intelligence and mental wellness. We can forget that, at times, we feel as overwhelmed as our students do. I recently attended a conference where the presenter asked a room full of student-life professionals if within the past year they had ever felt so overwhelmed that it was difficult to function. Every person's hand went up.

I certainly struggle with that every day. As a parent balancing family responsibilities with a full-time job and part-time nonprofit work, I am committed to making mental wellness a priority. While I am far from perfect, working at Regis reminds me to strive for the Jesuit ideal of *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person.

Normalize and integrate mental health. It is curious to me that as Americans start to climb aboard the wellness bandwagon, with fitness and nutrition programs, they often leave mental health on the side of the road. But everything is related: Insomnia is not often just a physical problem; it frequently has underlying mental-health components. Changes in weight and energy often show up as medical issues but might be manifestations of a larger issue in brain chemistry.

We should treat mental and emotional health in the same way as physical issues—in a matter-of-fact way, with the same amount of resources and dignity. We should educate students to view mental-health practices as normal, everyday activities that we do to keep ourselves fit—whether taking medication, seeing a counselor, setting limits, keeping a journal, sharing concerns with a friend, meditating, or learning new coping strategies.

Offer easy access to an array of services. On the one hand, counseling centers increasingly find themselves inundated by referrals, often high-intensity cases. On the other, no matter what we do, some students will not voluntarily seek help from a mental-health professional. What's more, not all students in distress actually need psychother-

apy or psychotropic medication—instead they might need financial assistance, spiritual guidance, or tutoring. Thus we should make sure we have a wide continuum of services and can match each student with the right type and level of assistance.

Foster multiple identities. If all of a student's identity is within only one dimension of his or her life—a relationship, academic success, athletics accomplishment—and something unfortunate happens, that student can be devastated. Just as with financial portfolios, people need to diversify. We should help students find balance between work and play, between activity and rest, between being and doing.

We should also encourage them to pursue areas of interest with moderation. Sometimes just good enough is fine, but many high-performing students have been conditioned to think

that only excellence and perfection are allowable, so they try to be simultaneously top scholar in the class, student-body president, and marathon champion.

Variety can help buffer against the single-source identity. It doesn't make a real difference if a person is "diversifying" by being a basketball player, a soccer player, or a weight lifter. One major injury and all of those activities can get wiped out. Students can best succeed by finding opportunities in uncharted territories, by getting involved in things slightly out of their comfort zones.

Train students in life skills. Many of today's students have been raised by helicopter parents who took care of things for them. They especially can benefit from workshops that teach courses like money management and time management. Two other important abilities are communication skills and how to help a friend. In a recent survey at the University of Texas, researchers discovered that of students who admitted that they had been suicidal, 67 percent had first disclosed their troubles to a peer rather than a parent or professional. We need to train students to learn empathetic communication as well as the warning signs and risk factors of despair, dysfunction, depression, and even suicide.

Engage student leaders in mental-health advocacy. I teach a series of leadership classes, each one with a component that discusses mental-health issues. By positioning those issues as social-justice issues, many students become excited about making a difference in this work. They often regularly examine their own mental health so that they can be models for others. Students find meaning in their lives by volunteering for causes they believe in. Why not make their cause mental health? I have found that once students learn how many people suffer in silence because of the social and financial barriers our society places in the way of dealing with mental-health conditions, and suicide in particular, they become passionate about making change. They also realize that as young adults, they have extraordinary influence to change the conversation around those topics. I have witnessed them participate in mental-health-awareness community walks, writing contests, theatrical performances, art shows,

movie nights, and much more. Their willingness to be open about mental-health issues helps other (read older) generations do the same.

Explore the wisdom of the crucible. The organizational consultant and author Warren Bennis studied many people and found that those who learned from their darkest days were often transformed into even better leaders than they were before. He called such experiences "crucibles"—vessels that turn base metals into gold, or, in the case of leaders, fiery ordeals into magical experiences. Many students have not experienced life's great traumas by the age of 18, and if they have, many have not fully worked through all the lessons to be learned from those experiences. We must help students understand that wounding is inevitable and part of a leadership cycle. That will allow them to view the experience as a catalyst for the next stage of growth and accomplishment.

Increase a sense of belonging. Miller McPherson, a professor of sociology at the University of Arizona, published a study with his colleagues that gave strong evidence that, despite all the social networking online, we have fewer true relationships. He asked people how many confidants they had and found that, in 1985, those whom he surveyed had at least three confidants. But by 2004, that number had shrunk to only one. (The most common area of that shrinkage was in nonfamily relationships.)

We in higher education can help strengthen social bonds by encouraging small-group interactions such as retreats, dialogues, and clubs. We can train our students in communication tools to give them the skills needed to resolve conflict and reach out to those who are struggling.

Help students in their search for meaning. As advisers to students, we can find one of our greatest joys in helping them find how their talents and passions match up with the needs of the world. For example, one of my students, Drew, enjoyed art and was interested in leadership, but he wasn't sure how he might tie the two together. Through volunteering for a local mental-health organization, he discovered that he had a passion for the cause and decided to create a calendar of artworks that tell stories of hope and recovery. Today the third edition of that "Peace of Mind" calendar hangs in thousands of offices and homes, helping to increase awareness of mental-health issues. It became clear that he had come upon a way to connect his deep gladness with the world's deep sadness—a true gift when found.

We must help students connect the relevance (or not) of all the things they have on their overscheduled plates, so that they can be more selective in lining up what will help them reach their goals while keeping up their mental resilience. Once they get a compelling mental picture of what the future could be like, they will have the energy to help them through the dark nights of the soul.

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By Sally Spencer-Thomas