

Student Counseling Center Boundless Help for Extraordinary Need

In normal times, the Student Counseling Center (the Center) at Mercy College provides students with access to free and confidential counseling services that can help them with issues ranging from anxiety and depression to substance abuse.

But these are not normal times. During the months of isolation, disruption and difficulties of adapting to remote instruction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of hopelessness, panic and more serious mental health challenges are on the rise among college students.

These harmful effects on student well-being are of prime concern at the Center. “What we’re seeing now are much more acute conditions brought on by loss and stress,” said the Center’s Director and Associate Professor of Psychology Dr. Ori Shinar. “This goes well beyond the typical cases that a student counseling center sees in normal times.”

In March, when Mercy closed campus operations and shifted all classes online, the staff at the Center — which includes Shinar and social workers Karen Reed, Kaitlyn Mercurio, Kylie Cleesattel and Katie DeVoll — pivoted their normal operations to continue providing mental health support. Within two weeks of the shutdown, appointments for short-term individual counseling services were available to all students through two secure and HIPAA compliant virtual platforms. Group counseling and referral services soon followed.

The Center’s next step was to expand online programming to accommodate a range of needs, from alleviating isolation to providing stress relief. Weekly coffee chats offer students connection and casual conversation with peers. Drop-in hours provide sessions with counselors for on-the-spot problem solving, no appointment required. A wealth of wellness resources, some of them launched pre-pandemic, address varying levels of need and involvement. All resources are available 24/7 through the Connection Center portal on Blackboard, the distance learning platform.



Several of the new wellness options are the brainchildren of staff member Reed. Originally intended to provide a virtual substitute for in-person programming, Reed hoped to devise more ways for students to find stress relief and opportunities for connection. A certified yoga instructor, she began offering yoga classes on Zoom that participants could do at their desk.

But she didn’t stop there. “We researched practices embedded in many cultures, like salsa dancing from Latin

America, pranayama breathing from India, Tibetan singing bowls and other stress-relieving activities like crafts, music and drumming,” said Reed. The result is the highly popular Worldwide Wellness Series. “We introduce one new practice at each session, describe the benefits and give participants a taste of the activity. If they like it, they can incorporate the practice into their wellness goals. If not, next time they can try something new. We’re all learning new things together.”



The response has been heartening. “We hear from students who are struggling to balance responsibilities of school, work, parenting and remote learning in addition to their anxiety around COVID,” said Reed.

In all, more students are finding outlets for combating isolation and normalizing their emotional responses to daily struggles. Said Shinar: “They are learning from each other, providing mutual support and finding comfort in the fact that they are not alone.”