

Living at Baseline:

A Letter of Navigation and Reflection on the College Mental Health Journey

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Spring 2025

Preface

Trigger Warning: This work speaks largely on mental health struggles and suicide. Please do not read this if you are not in a place to do so. If you are needing resources or help, there is an attached “Mental Health Toolbox” document with relevant resources and tips to help with their mental health.

There are so many people from the past 5 years of my life where I’ve been a student at CSU that I have to thank for where I am today.

Without them, I would not be here nor have confidence and capabilities to share what I do in this thesis. Among these impactful individuals are some very dear friends, memorable professors, insightful advisors, and other supportive professionals that have encouraged me throughout my time at college.

When I had the opportunity to write a thesis free from creative requirements, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to personally reflect on my time at college and to be able to share my story with others. This writing speaks about my lived journey as a college student with mental health struggles.

I want to share this because I went far too long without any sort of support and understanding about my mental disorders. Through this, I hope that I can provide others with a vulnerable perspective, a possible push of courage, and at the very least, a place to start for anyone who feels lost.

This thesis has 3 main components:

1. A reflection about my time in college, trying to navigate life and my mental health.
2. A supplemental literature review which speaks about the research and knowledge surrounding college students and mental health trends.
3. A short “toolbox” which serves as a guide to relevant mental health resources available at CSU, in the Greater Northern Colorado Area, and at a global level for anybody to use, regardless of where they are in their current mental health journey.

1. Reflection

This reflection speaks about the past 5 years of my time at college. Due to its personal contents, the writing itself is omitted from the public. Should anyone come across this and be interested in reading it, please reach out at e.bekah12@gmail.com.

I have become a strong advocate in telling your story and being able to relate to others, especially when you're not doing "good" in life. I am proud to say that, where I am today, I am in a space where I can be open and vulnerable. This has taken a lot of work but in those tough moments, I have been able to have some of the most genuine conversations and connections as a result with that.

If you happen to be reading this, I hope you know that you are doing a great job, regardless of what might be going on. **And please**, if you're in need of a listening ear or a lived story through mental struggles, please reach out! I'd love to hear from you.

Until then,
Ella Kim

2. Mental Health Toolbox

This "Mental Health Toolbox" is meant to serve as a quick reference for those who may not know how to start their mental health journey or know what to do in a given mental health crisis. As somebody who had received little to no help regarding these struggles growing up, when the time came for me to get assistance, I was lost and the process was made much more difficult than it needed to be.

My hopes is that, with this short booklet, others will not feel as lost wherever they may be in their journey. Additionally, I hope it facilitates conversations about mental health—the struggles that accompany it, what it actually looks like, and how we can support each other even if we don't experience the same thing. Having honest, educated conversations about mental health is a small but vital step to combatting the mental health crisis that so many face today.

Online Link: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:231e4052-bcf0-4ea9-9a2e-ebc4b0c92a22>

3. Supplemental Research

Current Trends and the College Mental Health Landscape

In recent years, mental health among college students has become a central focus in higher education, reflecting the profound changes and challenges that come with the transition from high school to university life. This period is marked by increased independence and freedom, but also heightened stress as students juggle academic demands, social relationships, work, and personal responsibilities. Research shows that these pressures can be overwhelming, with 76% of college students reporting moderate to severe psychological distress in 2023; anxiety (59%), depression (43%), and burnout (58%) are among the most common issues.

Despite growing awareness, support systems often lag behind the rising prevalence of mental health concerns on campuses. The unique combination of environmental and internal challenges makes the transition to adulthood especially complex for students, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of these factors to effectively address the mental health crisis in higher education.

Environmental and Internal Factors Affecting Student Well-being

A student's mental health is shaped by a web of environmental influences such as campus culture, housing dynamics, and a different social environment. Looking more closely into each of these aspects, with campus cultures, many universities foster competitive or perfectionistic environments, discouraging vulnerability and self-expression. Students may feel pressure to excel while hiding their struggles, which can exacerbate mental health issues.

For students moving from their home environment to completely new housing dynamics, there can be a lot of anticipated and unforeseen issues. Dorm life introduces new social dynamics and potential conflicts with roommates, while off-campus living requires managing household responsibilities-both can be sources of stress, especially for those with little prior experience.

Lastly, the new and sometimes intimidating social environments that are introduced in college often require students to build new social circles and define personal boundaries, a process that can be both exciting and daunting. Internally, students must navigate the loss of immediate family support, define their own values and priorities, and develop coping strategies for managing independence. The constant flux of academic schedules, housing situations, and social groups adds to the challenge, making it difficult to establish stable routines for managing mental health.

Barriers to Seeking Help

Many students will often encounter significant obstacles when trying to access mental health support. Examples of these barriers include combating stigmas, fitting in treatment logistically, financial restrictions, or personal hesitations.

Regarding stigma, a fear of judgment or misunderstanding remains a very prevalent major barrier, discouraging students from seeking help even when resources are available. Logistically, **there may be** long wait times for campus counseling, difficulties finding suitable providers, and lack of awareness about available resources are common issues that deter students from receiving help that they need.

Financially, therapy and other services can be prohibitively expensive, especially for those without adequate insurance or family support. At an individual level, cultural and personal factors such as religious beliefs may discourage help-seeking, create additional fear of judgment, and be hard to overcome. These barriers highlight the urgent need for colleges to expand access to services, normalize help-seeking, and address both systemic and individual challenges

Effective Strategies and Resources for Student Mental Health

Navigating mental health in college requires intentionality and adaptability. Students benefit from evaluating both external (campus culture, living arrangements, social dynamics) and internal (values, coping mechanisms) factors that influence their well-being.

Some common evidence-based therapy techniques that can be especially helpful for those beginning their mental health journey include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and mindfulness and meditation.

CBT helps students reframe negative thought patterns and develop healthier coping strategies. DBT skills such as distress tolerance and emotion regulation provide practical tools for managing overwhelming emotions. Mindfulness and meditation practices like yoga and mindfulness-based interventions reduce stress by promoting present-moment awareness. Finding spaces in to have mindful moments can be difficult yet, at CSU, reflection rooms can be found all around the campus in buildings such as the Lory Student Center, Morgan Library, and the CSU Health and Medical Center.

Building a personalized support network is also crucial. Students often first turn to friends and family-90% rely on friends for mental health information, and 77% seek guidance from parents. Community-based resources like crisis hotlines (e.g., 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), local mental health organizations, and peer support groups can offer immediate assistance. Telehealth and online platforms (such as SilverCloud) provide accessible, flexible options for therapy and self-guided support.

At the university level, most colleges offer counseling and psychological services, wellness workshops, and peer-led programs, which foster open conversations and reduce stigma. Student-led initiatives and campus-wide campaigns further promote a sense of belonging and support.

Navigating the Journey: Flexibility and Persistence

Ultimately, managing mental health in college is not a one-size-fits-all journey. The dynamic nature of student life requires ongoing self-reflection, flexibility, and adaptation. By combining self-awareness, evidence-based strategies, and proactive use of available resources, students can create pathways to well-being even amid the challenges of college life.

Taking the first step can be intimidating, but building familiarity with campus and community resources, reaching out to trusted individuals, and maintaining a willingness to seek help are all critical for navigating the complexities of mental health during this pivotal stage.

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