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“College of the Overwhelmed”, Jossey Bass/Wiley 2004 Richard
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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the extraordinary increase in serious mental illness on our college campuses today and what we can do about it. If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault, car accidents, and so forth); and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student suffering depression has doubled, suicidal ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled. The information on student mental health presented throughout this book is shocking – yet it is the elephant in the room that no one is talking about.

I have written this book for parents, students, and college counselors and administrators to open a dialogue, get us talking, and to suggest ways we all can face these facts and do something about them.

Having worked in student health for 25 years, I’ve have been blessed with the opportunity to be involved with young people during the most exciting time of their lives – a time full of potential, dreams and infinite choices. But over the years I’ve seen the pressures and expectations increase and have seen more and more students struggling with severe mental health issues. I’ve also seen frustrated parents who feel shut out and unsure of how to help. This book is my response to this increasingly common situation.

In Part I entitled, “The Problems: Why Are Some Kids So Unhappy at College?” together we will explore the varied stresses that cause so many college students to suffer mental health problems. I hope that realizing what today’s students are facing will help you better understand how the push and pull of dependence and independence can sometimes be overwhelming. In this first section, we will take a close look at developmental issues such as identity development, relationships, sexuality, and roommate problems. Then we’ll explore the effects of academic pressures, extracurricular demands, parental expectations, and racial and cultural differences that affect self-worth. We’ll also talk about the enormous financial pressure to pay the college bills and compete for post-graduate employment. And finally, we’ll see how the culture of fear created by the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01 have affected our college-age children.

Those on college campuses across the country who feel hopeless and helpless respond with a variety of dysfunctional coping mechanisms. Part I will conclude with a discussion of the warning signs and symptoms I see most often: depression, sleep disorders, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, impulsive behaviors (that include out of control sexuality and cutting/ self-mutilation) and suicide. I’ll also share the personal stories of students who have experienced these problems. I am grateful to the students who had the courage to come forward and talk about their experiences so that other students may not have to suffer in the same way or “reinvent the wheel.”

In Part II, I ask you to consider the roles that college personnel, parents, and the students themselves play in balancing academic and mental health needs. We'll see that college mental health service programs are under the same pressures as other units of academic institutions and must lobby for limited budgetary resources. Rapid changes in health care and the diminishing public resources for referral add to the crunch. Psychiatric hospital beds are shrinking as is funding for public clinics. Medication utilization has gone up dramatically and the cost of this medication can be prohibitive.

This situation has created a dilemma for college administrators: How does the students' emotional well-being fit into the academic picture? With the highly publicized suicides and law suits at schools like M.I.T. and N.Y.U., institutions must choose between trying to ignore or minimize the serious emotional challenges faced in college, versus seeing emotional development as part of the intellectual, developmental, and spiritual growth that is integral to the college experience. Most have chosen wisely.

But unfortunately, even with the increased awareness among college administrators of their role in nurturing the students' mental health, there is only so much college counselors can do. Mental health services are often under-financed, understaffed, and generally unequipped to handle the number of students who desperately need help. Many of these situations are hidden and never known, as kids suffer silently, drop out, return home or disappear on their own. Mental health directors on college campuses across the country are beginning to seek help, public consciousness, and parental support but the problems remain.

That is why Part II includes an important how-to chapter for parents. It's ironic that just at the time when you feel you are setting your children free is the time when children often need your support and attention more than ever. Although you cannot solve all the world's problems for your young adult children, you can still be involved and proactive in guarding their mental health. To start, you need to consider the chosen school's attitude toward and resources for providing emotional growth and stability in their students. Then you need to become aware of the problems that college students face so you can be attentive to the warning signs of emotional distress and prevent major emotional breakdowns. You must also know how to intervene if an emotional crisis should strike.

And finally, I'll turn my attention away from the college administrators and parents and speak directly to those living in the midst of this high-pressure environment – the students themselves. This last chapter provides checklists, tips, and advice pertinent to the day-to-day life of all college students. It offers “do-this-now” suggestions about things that students can do in order to maximize their potential and lower their risk of developing common emotional and psychological problems. It discusses specific, but simple, steps that the students can take to avoid becoming over-stressed, to recognize signs of trouble, and to address real problems when they arise.

All of our sons and daughters attend the college of the overwhelmed. It is my hope that the information in this book will get us talking about that. We all can be part of the solution if we learn to recognize the symptoms associated with being overwhelmed, take steps to insure that students have access to appropriate care (especially since most of the problems are very treatable), and do our part to reduce the sources of stress that push too many college kids to the edge.