



College Student and Graduate Behavioral Health Report

United
Healthcare®

Inside this whitepaper



Executive summary and key findings



**Mental health among college students,
2022-2024**



**Trends in the transition from college to
post-graduation**



**Seeking support: Trends in how young people
engage with mental or behavioral health care**



Key takeaways



Methodology



Executive summary



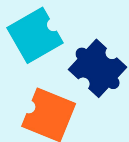
Mental and behavioral health remains a critical issue throughout young adulthood, especially as students transition from college into post-graduation life. So, what can parents and educators consider to help support young adults' mental and behavioral health needs during these pivotal years?

The **2024 College Student and Graduate Behavioral Health Report**, a survey commissioned by **UnitedHealthcare** and conducted by YouGov¹ among college students and college graduates aged 20–28 (hereafter referenced as "college graduates"), uncovers key insights about the mental health experiences among young adults, as well as parent perceptions. The survey findings, detailed in this report, highlight trends in the prevalence of mental health experiences, the ways in which young people may seek mental or behavioral health support and gaps in understanding between young adults and parents.

With these insights, college students, college graduates, parents and institutions may better understand the mental health landscape today and help ensure young people have the resources needed to navigate these transitional years.

¹Fielded among 507 college graduates (ages 20-28 and graduated since 2018), 505 parents of college graduates, 516 college students and 509 parents of college students who are currently enrolled in a U.S. institution of higher education. YouGov is an international internet-based market research and data analytics firm. See the Methodology section of this report for further detail.

Key findings



The “parent-child perception gap” widens significantly at graduation:

For college graduates, the perception gap — the difference between the mental and behavioral health experiences they self-reported vs. what parents said their children experience — more than doubled compared to college students and parents.



Concerns remain, despite overall decline in college students’ mental health experiences:

Self-reported data from 2022–2024 revealed consistent rates of eating disorders, suicidal ideation and intent and substance abuse disorder among college students. Overall, however, college students displayed a 10% drop in their experience of mental or behavioral health concerns.



College graduates experienced more issues but said they feel better than before: Despite reporting increased mental or behavioral health concerns, college graduates also said their mental or behavioral health is better than when they were in college — and reported seeking help for these concerns at higher rates than college students.



College students and graduates sought help more often after talking to friends:

Among those who reported seeking help or knowing somebody who had, when asked what influenced them to seek help for mental or behavioral health concerns, both college student and graduate cohorts said they “talked to a friend.” However, parents believed that talking to a trusted adult was the greatest influence.

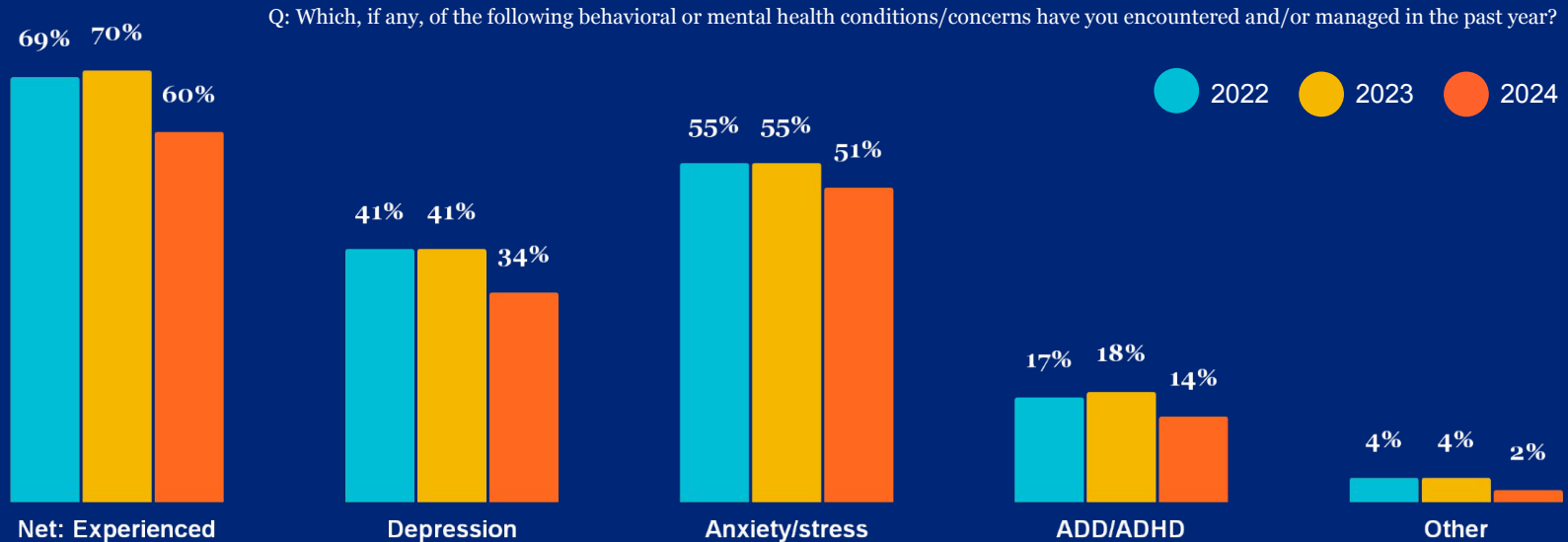




Mental health among college students, 2022–2024

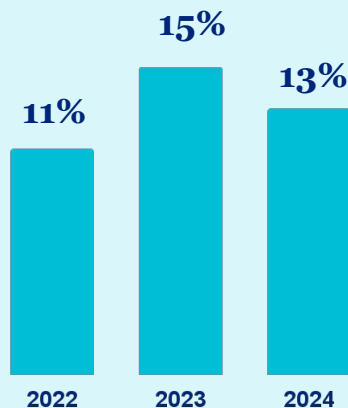


Despite overall decrease in college students' mental or behavioral health concerns...

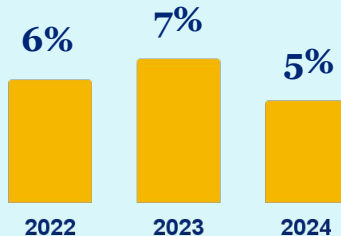


...rates of three serious health conditions remained stagnant

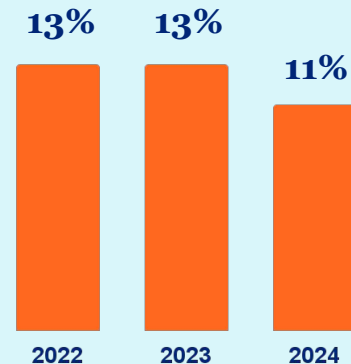
While overall incidence dropped by 10% from 2023 to 2024, college students continued to self-report serious mental or behavioral health concerns at levels relatively consistent since 2022.



Eating disorder



Substance abuse disorder



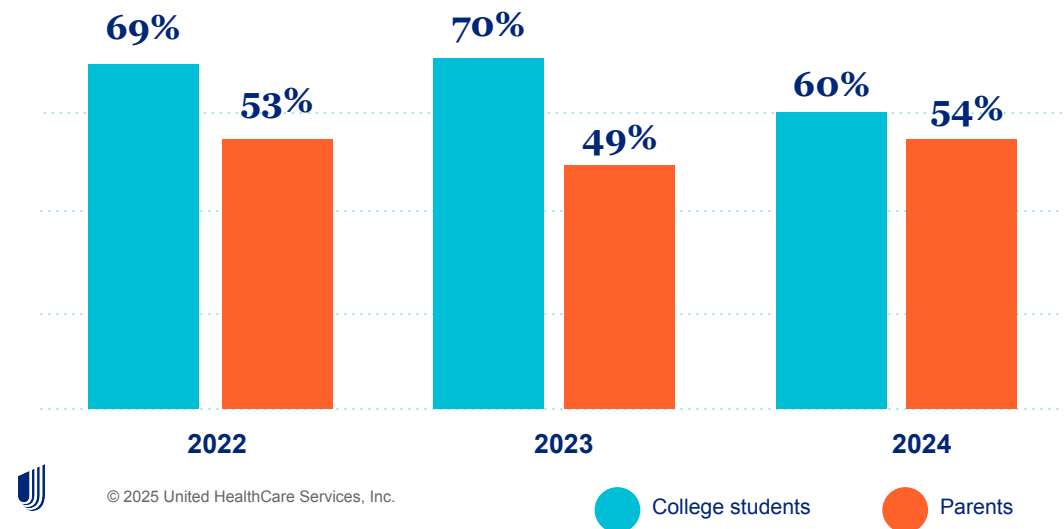
Suicidal ideation and intent



Parents of college students showed greater understanding in 2024

The “parent perception gap” — the gap between the mental or behavioral health challenges college students self-reported and what parents believed their children are experiencing — did persist, but was at its narrowest since 2022.

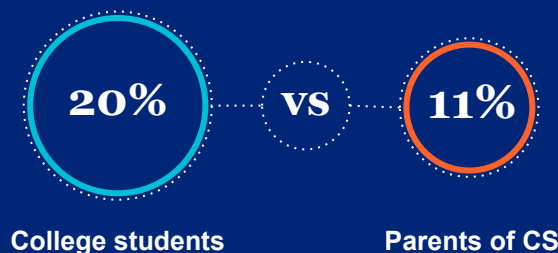
Q: Have you or your college aged child experienced any mental or behavioral health concern in the past year?



A potential disconnect about changes in college students' mental/behavioral health

When asked to describe changes in their current mental or behavioral health since high school, **1 in 5 college students reported their health had declined**. However, only about 1 in 10 parents of college students said their child's mental or behavioral health had declined over the same period — highlighting a potentially critical gap in parental understanding.

Reported mental or behavioral health decline since high school:



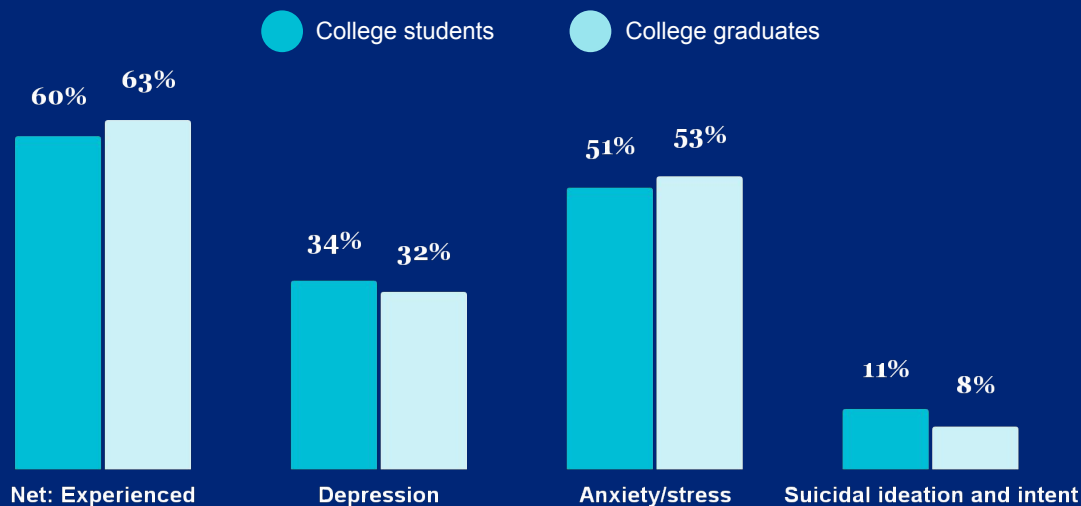


Trends in the transition from college to post-graduation



College graduates' mental/behavioral health concerns were similar to those of college students...

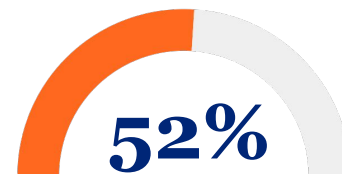
Compared to college students, college graduates (aged 20–28) self-reported experiencing slightly higher rates of mental or behavioral health concerns overall, but showed a decline in depression and suicidal ideation and intent.



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...but many perceived their mental/behavioral health as “improved”

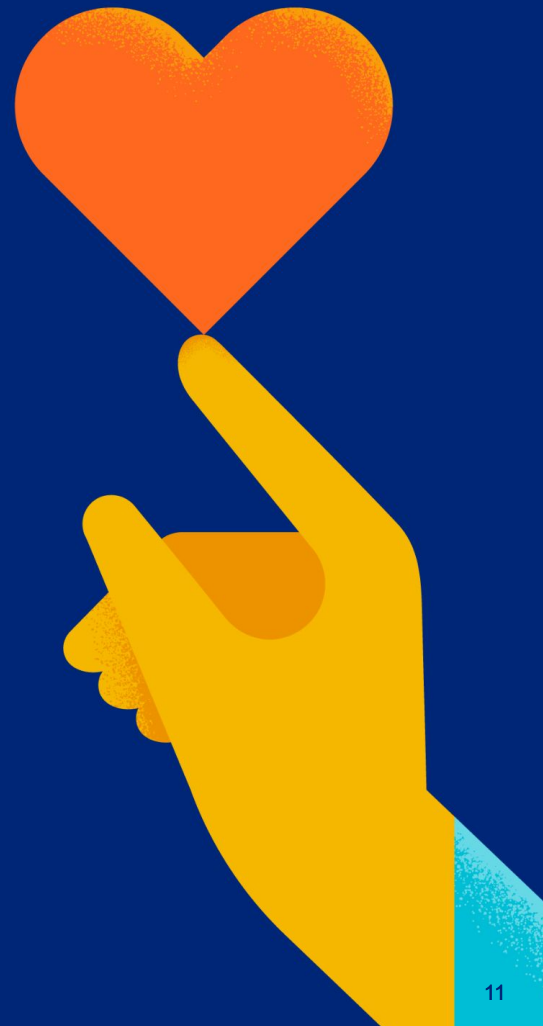
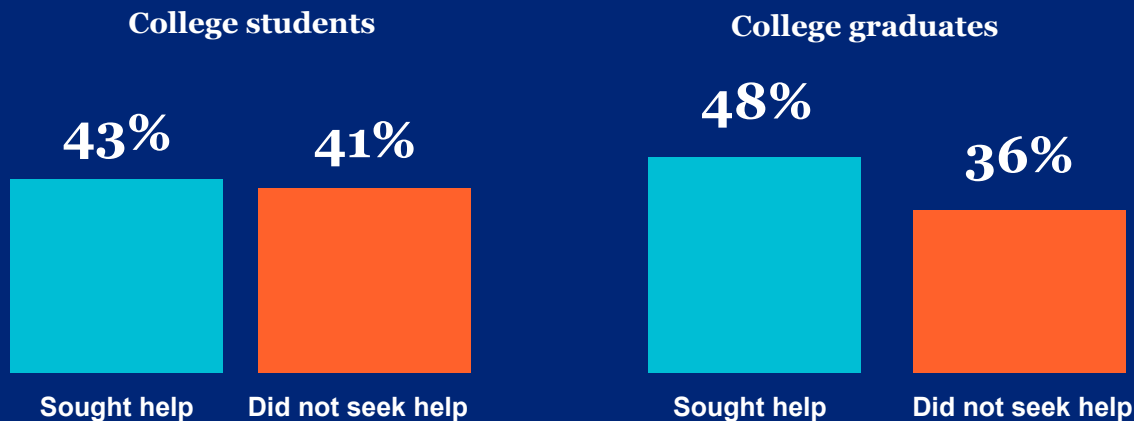
Despite similar rates of mental or behavioral health experiences compared to college students (63% and 60%, respectively), **more than half of college graduates said their health had improved since graduation.**



College graduates
said that their mental/behavioral
health improved since graduating

College graduates were more likely to seek help for mental or behavioral health concerns

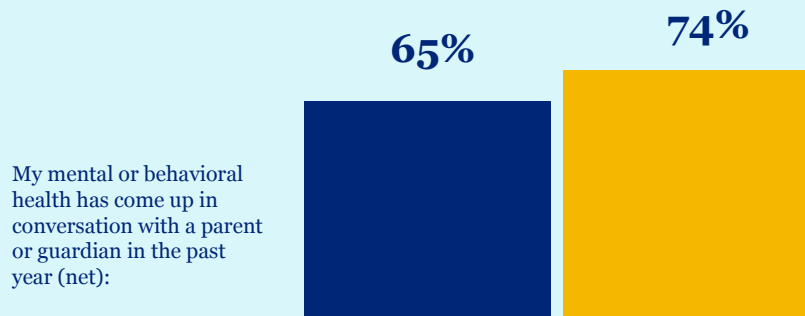
More college graduates self-reported seeking help than those who did not (48% vs. 36%), whereas college students were fairly evenly split across seeking versus not seeking help (43% vs. 41%).



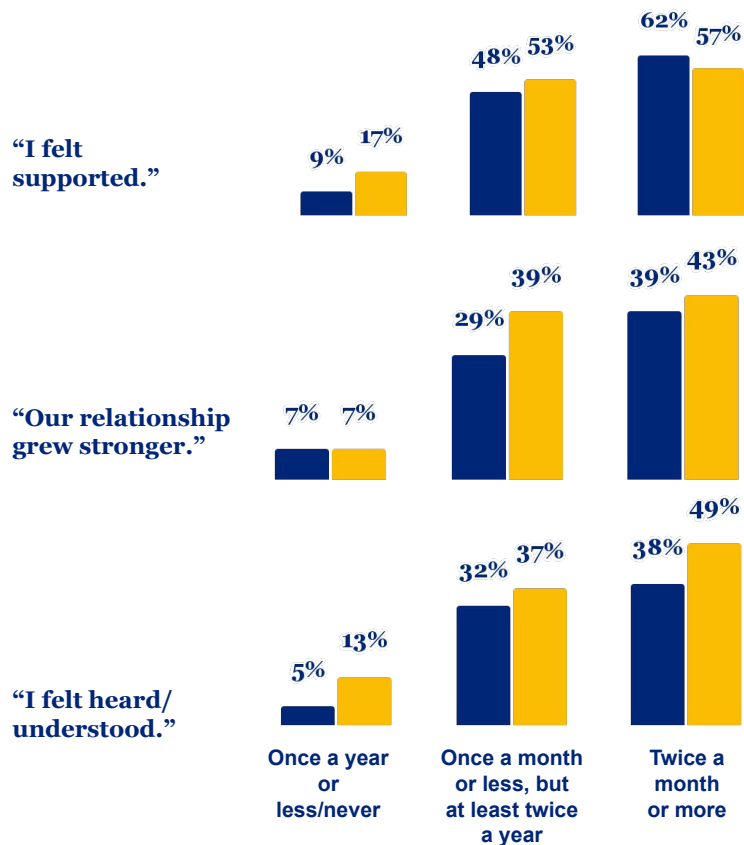
Graduates had more frequent mental or behavioral health talks with parents

For all young adults, higher frequency of these conversations was associated with positive outcomes.

● College students ● College graduates

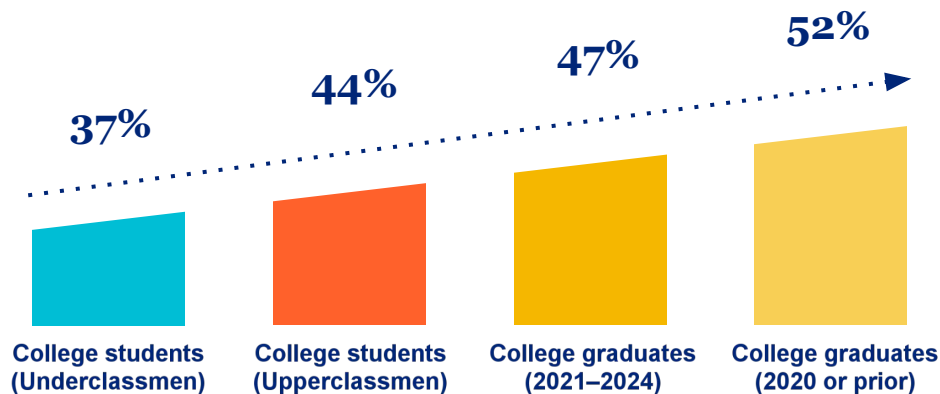


Q: What happened or changed after this conversation?



Importance of parental engagement and understanding continues after college

Those who graduated in 2020 or earlier¹ were more likely to have sought help for behavioral or mental health concerns in the past year compared to more recent college graduates or college students.



¹ Or a roommate/friend or coworker.

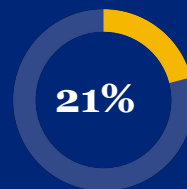
² Among respondents who reported they or people they knew did not seek help for mental/behavioral health concerns in the last year.



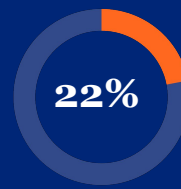
Around graduation, financial stress may become a barrier

When asked about **reasons for not seeking mental or behavioral health support²**, upperclassmen in college and recent college graduates (those who graduated in 2021 or later) were more than **twice as likely to cite cost** as a deterrent.

College graduates
(2021–2024)



College students
(Upperclassmen)



College students
(Underclassmen)

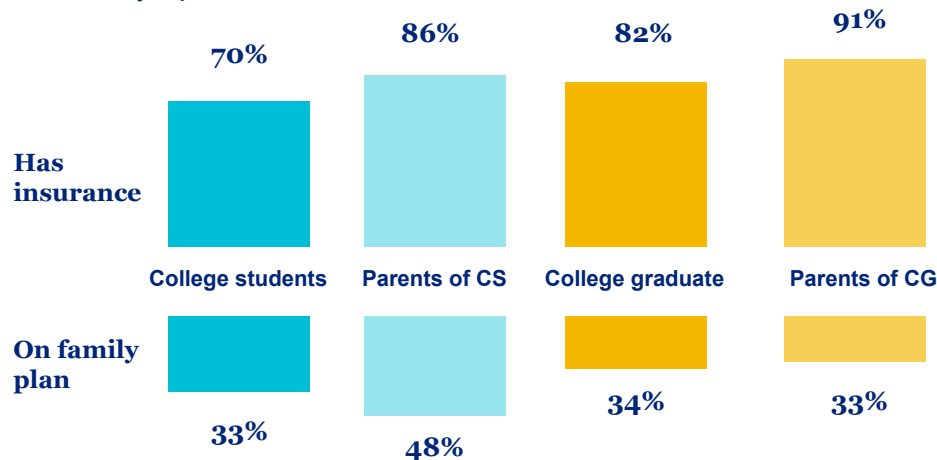


College graduates
(2020 or prior)*

**48 respondents selected financial stress as a barrier; this total was too small to include in the analysis.*

Parental engagement and understanding still matters after college

Parents' knowledge of their young adult's mental health remains critical, as family health plans may influence their access to care. Survey data show that, according to parents of college students, nearly half (48%) of all college students were still on their family's health insurance plan during the past year. Among college graduates, roughly one third (34%) remained on their family's plan.



Data show a dramatic jump in the “parent perception gap” at graduation

While it's not unexpected for parents to know less about their child's mental health as they head into adulthood, the parent perception gap **more than doubled at graduation**.

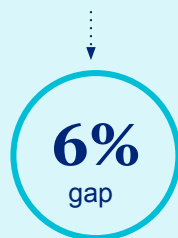
Q: Did you or your child encounter and/or manage a mental or behavioral health condition during the past year?

College students

60%

Parents of CS

54%



College graduates

63%

Parents of CG

49%





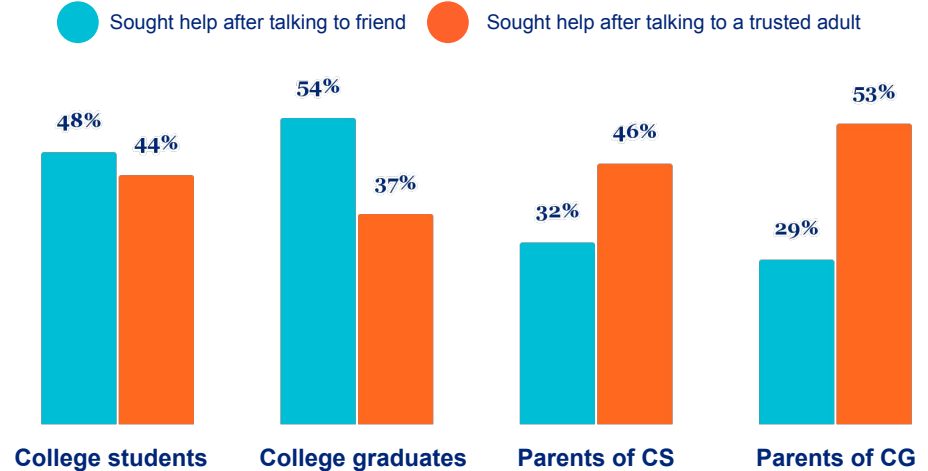
Seeking support: Trends in how young people engage with mental or behavioral health care





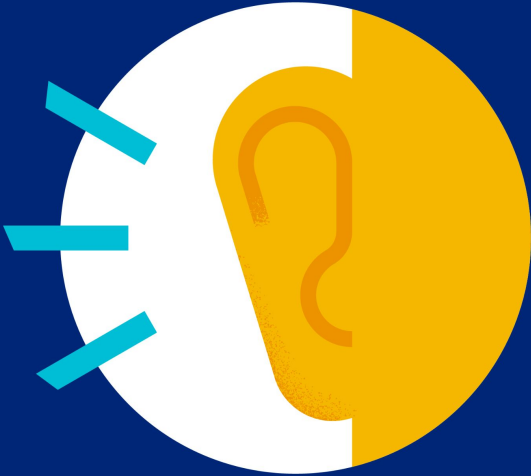
Talking to friends was the greatest outside influence on seeking help

While parents believed that their children were inspired to seek help after speaking to trusted adults, both college students and college graduates¹ self-reported that **talking to their friends significantly influenced their willingness to seek mental or behavioral health care.**

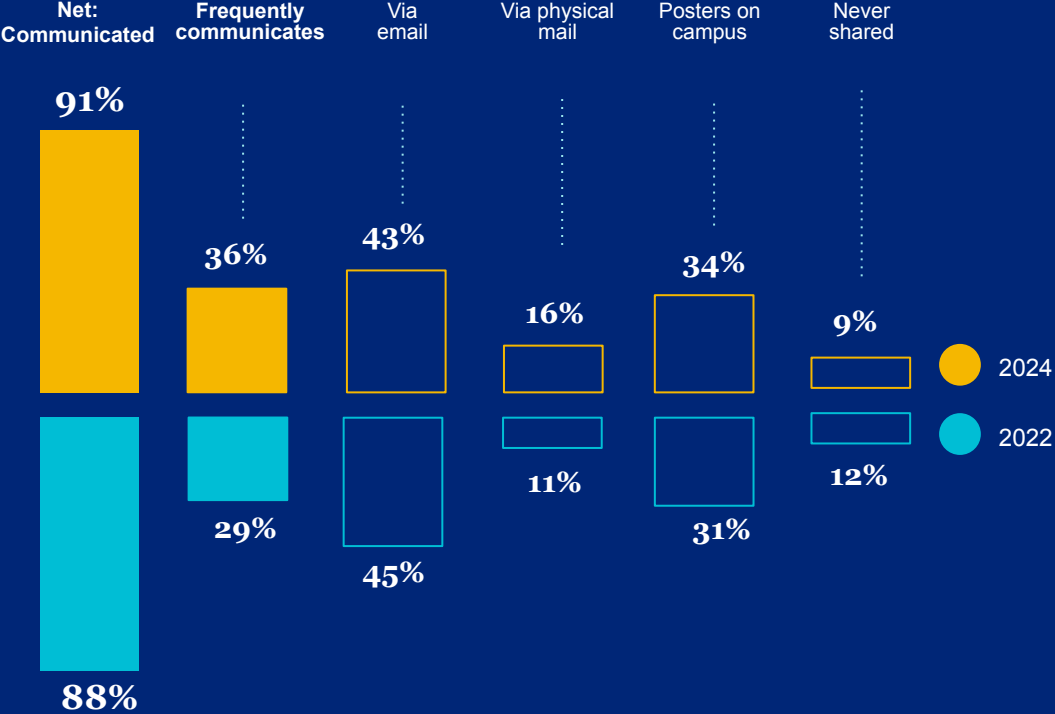


¹Among those who have sought help or know somebody who has.

Campuses are communicating about mental health resources



College students reported hearing from their campuses about mental or behavioral health resources **more often in 2024** than they did in 2022.

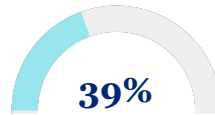


Payers can provide valuable information to college graduates

Among those enrolled in an insurance plan, nearly 9 out of 10 college graduates said that their insurance provider had shared information regarding mental or behavioral resources.



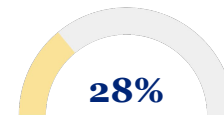
Frequently communicates



Via email



Via physical mail



Advertisements



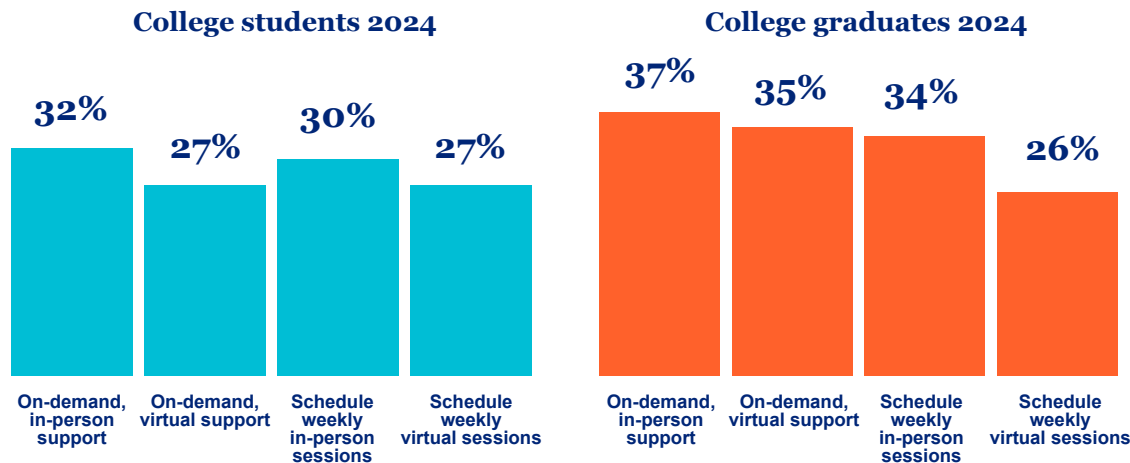
Never shared



Understanding how young people may want to access support

When it comes to engaging with mental or behavioral health support, college students said they prefer in-person options, whether on-demand or scheduled weekly, rather than virtual. In contrast, college graduates favored on-demand options, regardless of venue.

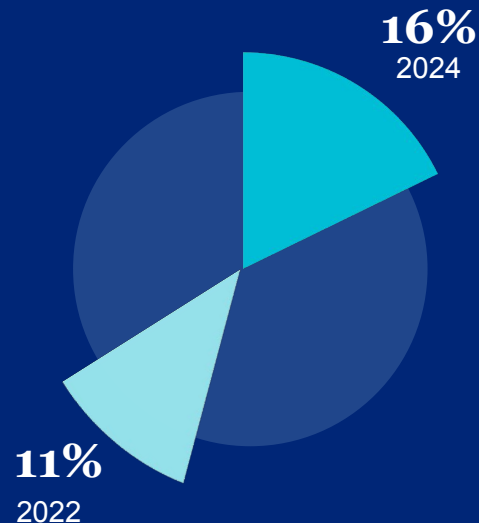
Q: What would make you more likely to engage with mental or behavioral health support?



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In 2024, college students were more likely to visit student health than they were in 2022, when asked to rank which resources they would seek first if they or a friend were dealing with a behavioral or mental health crisis.

Visited student health services:

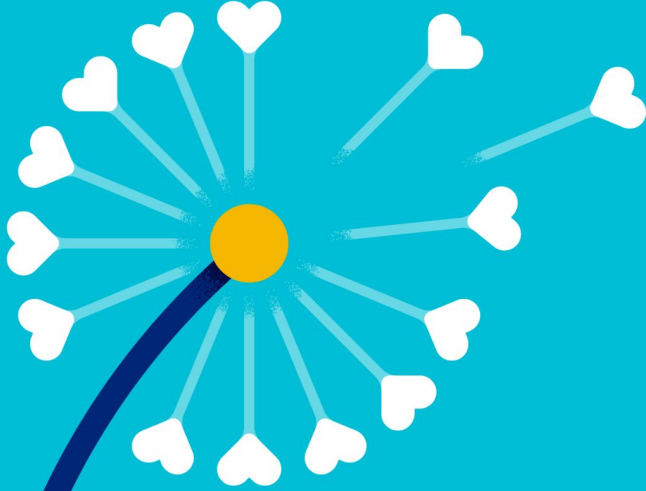




Key takeaways



Survey insights: three ways to help support youth mental health through college and beyond



- ✓ **Understand new challenges may arise during key transitional moments** – take note of additional concerns that may come up for young adults transitioning to college or post-graduation life, and be sure to continue conversations about mental health across life stages.
- ✓ **Continue to have regular conversations** with your young adult about their mental health concerns – and the mental health resources available to them – especially if they're part of the family health insurance plan.
- ✓ **Ensure young people are equipped to support their friends and peers** facing mental health challenges, as “talking to a friend” emerged as an important motivator for college students and graduates seeking mental or behavioral health care.

Methodology

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,037, of whom 516 U.S. college students, 509 parents of college students, 507 recent college graduates (ages 20–28 and graduated since 2018), and 505 parents of college graduates. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st October–1st November 2024. The survey was carried out online.



About UnitedHealthcare

UnitedHealthcare is dedicated to helping people live healthier lives and making the health system work better for everyone by simplifying the health care experience, meeting consumer health and wellness needs and sustaining trusted relationships with care providers. In the United States, UnitedHealthcare offers the full spectrum of health benefit programs for individuals, employers and Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, and contracts directly with more than 1.7M physicians and care professionals and 7K hospitals and other care facilities nationwide¹. The company also provides health benefits and delivers care to people through owned and operated health care facilities in South America. UnitedHealthcare is one of the businesses of UnitedHealth Group, a diversified health care company.

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¹UnitedHealthcare internal analysis, Dec. 31, 2024.

