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Under Pressure

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Under Pressure

Illinois Wesleyan students are finding resources to help them cope with stress and its adverse effects.

**By Tim Obermiller
and Sarah Hedgespeth '04**

At midnight Carrie brewed a pot of strong coffee and sat down at her laptop, expecting to toil through the night. After three cups, she could feel her heart thudding against her rib cage and her teeth began to grind uncontrollably. She tried to begin a few sentences of her thesis statement but her thoughts meandered in a panicked jumble. What she had regarded as a straightforward assignment a few weeks ago — a paper for her sociology class that counted for 20 percent of her grade — now seemed enormous and complex. The pressure of her deadline felt like a weight on her chest that grew heavier as the passing minutes turned to one hour, then two.

A good student, well-liked on her floor and respected by her professors, Carrie appeared stable, secure, normal. But lately she was feeling anything but normal. Her boyfriend of seven months had broken up with her the previous week. Typically she would have confided in her best friend, but Monica was away for the semester, studying in Barcelona. Carrie fought the urge to call her mom, remembering that she had recently been laid off from her job and didn't need any extra worries.

She'd gone out the night before to an off-campus party, hoping it would lift her spirits, but woke up the next morning feeling hung over and just as nervous and depressed. Carrie had spent most of her Sunday tackling little projects or watching T.V. — anything to put off having to think about the fact that her sociology paper was due tomorrow.

Now, as she stared at her blank computer screen, she suddenly, uncontrollably, began to sob. Awakened by the noise, her roommate rose from her bed. "Carrie, what's the matter?" she asked with bewildered concern.

She responded with a moan. "I don't know. Nothing. Everything." Carrie cupped her hands over her face, embarrassed that she was making such a spectacle. Choking back her emotions, she took a big breath. "This isn't like me," she scolded herself.

Forcing a smile, she said, "I'm okay. I'm just feeling a little too stressed out is all. Go back to sleep. I'll be just fine."

Chances are, Carrie would be fine, but there is also a chance that her moment of panic would develop into problems far more serious.

Escalating reports of mental-health difficulties among college students, both mild and acute, have set off alarm bells on campuses across the country. In recent years more than 80 percent of colleges and universities have noted significant increases in serious psychological problems among their students — including severe stress, depression, anxiety, and panic attacks — according to an annual survey of counseling centers conducted by the University of Pittsburgh.



Dr. Connie Horton helps students cope with the challenges of college life. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

At Illinois Wesleyan, students are finding increased support in dealing with such problems, according to Dean of Students Jim Matthews, whose office helped lead efforts to establish a counseling center on campus in 2001. Counselors were available to help students in the past, but Matthews says the establishment of a center with full-time staff has enabled the University to “get out of a reactive mode and become more proactive in dealing with stress and other mental-health issues.” Indeed, Matthews regards the presence of such a center on campus as “essential in this day and age in helping students get the most out of their educational experiences.”

Counseling and Consultation Services (CCS), located next to Arnold Health Services on the ground floor of Magill Hall, supports two full-time and several more part-time counselors who see as many as 70 students on a busy week. In the 2003-04 academic year, a total of 292 students — or 14 percent of IWU’s entire student population — visited Counseling Services at least once. Dozens more were helped through CCS outreach seminars on subjects such as dealing with homesickness, perfectionism, and academic stress.

CCS Director Connie Horton — a Ph.D. licensed clinical psychologist who was on Illinois State University’s faculty for 10 years and also counseled at IWU prior to her 2001 appointment— feels positive about the number of students that she and her fellow counselors are reaching. Her greatest concern is for those who need help but don’t seek it. Left to

their own devices, these young adults may follow a path that, in extreme cases, can even lead to an emergency-room visit as a result of a drug or alcohol overdose, attempted suicide, violent outbursts, or a mental breakdown.

“What’s scary is that when we get that call, and we’re in the hospital at 3 a.m., and we haven’t met that student,” Horton says. “With our clients, we know who they are, we know when they’re vulnerable, we can assemble support, we can help them. It’s the students who are in such great distress and, for whatever reason, have not accessed our services yet that we worry most about.”

Horton says a common denominator in many of these serious cases is unmanaged stress. IWU students also recognize stress as a major problem in their lives. When asked why they were seeking counseling, 58 percent of the students seen by CCS last year cited “general stress.”

The stress response

Our bodies respond to stress in direct, measurable ways. The heart rate increases, muscles tense. Greater amounts of hormones, such as adrenaline, are released, potentially causing long-term detrimental impact to the immune system. Common symptoms of stress include nervousness, memory blocks, poor concentration, and sleeping problems.

Stress can grow into a persistent state of anxiety that, over time, may shift to feelings of futility and depression, and even lead to suicidal thoughts. Others may turn to alcohol or drugs to relieve the pressure they’re feeling, even if they fool themselves into thinking that they’re just doing it to “have fun,” Horton says.

Despite these serious, even life-threatening, consequences, Horton says that stress “is not, by definition, good or bad. Stress means it’s taxing you, it’s challenging you. Some of our most important life events — like having a baby, buying a home, getting married — are very stressful. But that doesn’t mean that you didn’t want to do them or that you regret doing them.

“Stress becomes bad when the factors that are stressing us overwhelm our coping resources. Then something has to give. Either we need to lift off some of the stressors that have tipped us off balance or we need to better improve our coping mechanisms.”

Often, students come to Counseling Services not even aware that their problems relate to anxiety and stress, according to CCS staff counselor Bob Rogers. “Sometimes they’ll say ‘I’m concerned about my use of alcohol, or ‘I’m having trouble sleeping’ or ‘For some reason I can’t write right now.’ And it may take a little unpacking to get to the realization that the writing problem is not a lack of writing ability; it has to do with anxiety. Where is the anxiety coming from? Dealing with that question is the next step.”



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-- Bob Rogers

So what is stressing Illinois Wesleyan students? Lofty standards, for one thing, Horton says. “Students here, as a group, are very motivated, conscientious, high achieving, and set high standards for themselves. They want to be at the top of their class, they want to build a great resume, have great internships, they want to have an excellent experience socially. They want to be the best at so many things, and I think that’s part of it.”

Too much of a good thing

Stress, anxiety, or depression may be signs that a student has taken on too much and needs to consider what — from her academic, extracurricular, or social agendas — could be pruned back. A student struggling with the weight of a double major, for example, might need to consider changing one of those majors into a minor.

“Illinois Wesleyan offers its students a tremendous number of opportunities,” says Matthews. “Sometimes students in this environment want to take advantage of so many things, which is great, but when the load becomes too much you can reach a point of diminishing returns.”

Because Illinois Wesleyan students tend to be high achievers, they may also feel stress in dealing with disappointments and setbacks. Students who found it relatively easy to achieve perfect marks in high school, for example, may find the greater challenge of their college courses intimidating. Often, Horton says, students’ own views of their academic performances can become distorted. Such students may think they’re struggling, but when their counselors contact their professors (after being given permission by students to do so), “we’re often surprised to discover that the student is doing fine,” says Horton. “They’re getting A’s in their classes, but they were just so worked up about one test or paper.”

Such anxiety attacks can snowball into actual academic underperformance, or even paralysis, says Horton. Professors may observe students who don’t turn in their papers or participate in class, and assume they don’t care about the course, “when in fact the problem is they care way too much. They care so much about meeting their professors’ expectations or their assignments have become so huge in their minds that they don’t even know where to start.”

CCS staff counselor Robyn Walter, who led a seminar last spring on how perfectionism causes stress, explains that counseling interventions focus on helping students explore the source of their perfectionist thinking. Students are encouraged to challenge some of their self-imposed expectations and consider creating more realistic or flexible goals. “They need to learn to give themselves permission to be human and make mistakes,” Walter says.

Finding the right balance

Another common problem suffered by stressed-out students is difficulty with time management. It’s a skill many students simply never learned prior to college, Horton says. With the best intentions, parents often lend a guiding hand to support their children’s intensive schedules of activities in middle- and high school. Students who have come to rely too heavily on this support can flounder when forced to take charge of their own schedules in college.

In the same way, the emotional support that parents offer is often less available to students as they enter college, and that loss can create feelings of isolation or abandonment. According to Horton, students often haven’t learned to “self-soothe, to calm themselves down, to just hang out. They haven’t learned the proper balance of work, rest, and play.”

Over-commitment, perfectionism, poor time-management skills, and other stress-inducing behaviors often lead to procrastination. As homework and other responsibilities pile up, students can begin to feel hopelessly swamped with work.

“Though it’s a bit silly as an analogy,” says Horton, “what we often tell them is to think of it like you were eating an elephant. Whether it’s a test or a paper or a presentation, you need to start eating it, just one bite at a time. Instead, these students spend a lot of time walking around the elephant and thinking to themselves, ‘It’s big, it’s huge, I’ll never be able to get through it.’ And they begin to lose their perspective.”

Other stress-fighting solutions suggested by counselors sound deceptively simple: Eat well. Sleep more. Get regular exercise.\

Sleep deprivation, in particular, is “a major problem among our students,” says Horton, “especially during high-pressure times of the school year. We did a screening on how students were coping with stress during finals. And one of the questions was, true or false, ‘I received an average of seven hours of sleep in the past three nights.’ And students just laughed and said, ‘Come on! I can’t afford the time to sleep that much!’ Our answer is, ‘You can’t afford not to.’

Horton says the average person needs eight or nine hours of sleep each night to feel healthy. “So if you’re getting nowhere near seven, then that, by itself, is going to put you in a very fragile state, mental-health wise.”

A place to unwind



During the Hansen Student Center's "Surviving Final Exams" event, Pamela Solowski '07 enjoyed a massage from Marcella Hicks. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

There's a broad smile on Kevin Clark's face as he recalls an event held at the Hansen Student Center during finals week last spring. As an assistant dean of students and head of the Office of Student Activities, Clark frequently consults with Horton and other CCS personnel about creating events designed to help students "relax, have fun, and let off some steam."

All week during finals, the Hansen Student Center stayed open late, offering "free food and drinks — coffee, trail mix, those types of things," says Clark. One night, CCS arranged for a massage therapist to come in who was supposed to work two hours. But as a long line of students began to form, "she agreed to stay longer," says Clark, "and in fact she gave massages to our students for five hours! And that was on her own time. She said she didn't mind at all; she was just having such a great time talking with everyone, finding out how they were doing."

With the goal of improving student life — and in response to the familiar lament, "There's nothing to do here" — Clark's job was created in 2001-02, the same academic year that the Hansen Student Center officially opened. This greater emphasis on the quality of Illinois Wesleyan student's social lives is visible almost every Friday and Saturday night during the school year, as the new student center hosts a variety of activities: live music and comedy shows, movies, and more.

"Just five years ago when I started here (as a residence hall director), students referred to Illinois Wesleyan as a suitcase campus," says Clark,

"which was true to some degree. On weekends, students often went home because they felt there were better things to do there. From a mental-health standpoint, it just makes sense that you won't enjoy your college experience and pay attention to everything this school has to offer if you're going home every weekend and spending time with all of your friends from long ago."

By creating a more visible social life on campus, Clark believes the University is offering its students healthier options in how they spend their free time. Before the opening of Hansen, "Fraternities were saying that they felt pressured to always have big 'party' events, and a lot of students were saying, 'We want to go out and meet people, but we don't always want to go out and party really hard.' Now, at the Hansen Student Center, there's always an option."

A proactive approach

The creation of the Hansen Student Center is just one area in which the University is striving to address the mental-health needs of its students. Another area is the Office of Residential Life (ORL). According to ORL Director Matt Damschroder, Counseling and Consultation Services works closely with ORL in training its resident assistants. "We do eight full days of RA training each year before school starts," says Damschroder. "The better portion of at least three of those days goes to Counseling Services issues.

"They help prepare RAs for their roles in a number of ways. They work on listening and crisis-management skills. They learn what signs to look for — what symptoms might be indicators of an eating disorder, what signals indicate transitioning problems, what behaviors signal depression — and then how to help a student struggling with these types of issues."

There's also emphasis placed on proactive approaches that help residents deal with problems before they grow serious. RAs are given tips on how to advise students about "relaxation techniques, dealing with stress, and time-management skills," says Damschroder.

Beyond their initial training, RAs are encouraged to seek advice from CCS counselors when helping students with specific issues. At the same time, RAs are coached in how to address students' reluctance to use CCS services and even use their own experiences as an example.

“Not only do we (in ORL) refer students to Counseling Services, we're some of their best clients. It's really important for our staff to make sure we're role-modeling good mental health,” says Damschroder. “And it helps to be able to tell students, ‘I've gone to this counselor for help. I know this person.’ Or they might say, ‘Hey, Counseling Services is having this workshop tonight that I thought you might be able to get something out of. A bunch of us are going to go check it out. Would you like to go over with us?’”



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— *Jim Matthews*

In such exchanges, an idea is being communicated that “mental health is really everyone's issue” on IWU's campus, says Matthews. “Dr. Horton and her staff deserve a lot of credit for helping to educate other offices on campus about these issues; about how we can be more receptive to students' needs and how those needs may shift over time.

“Our faculty are very receptive to that information and how it reflects on their interactions with students,” Matthews adds. “So that's a real asset — that the faculty are actually embracing these issues.”

Matthews cites a general rise in retention rates over the past 10 years as evidence that efforts to improve student life and address mental-health issues have had a positive impact at Illinois Wesleyan. While many factors likely play a role in this retention rise, Matthews believes that “it's certainly true that Counseling Services has contributed to a greater sense of care for students on campus, which can only help retention.”

For Horton and her staff, communicating that sense of care for the University's students remains the most important and rewarding aspect of their jobs. “The most significant thing we can convey to them,” she says, “is that we're here if they need us. We want to assist students as they learn to manage the problems and meet all the challenges they'll face during their four years here. We also want them to know that if they're struggling with an issue like stress, anxiety, or depression, they don't have to face it alone. We want to help. That's why we're here.”