



SUPPORTING Minds, SUPPORTING Learners

Addressing Student Mental Health
to Advance Academic Success

Acknowledgments

In 2023, the White House released a report recognizing that “the United States is in the midst of an unprecedented mental health crisis among people of all ages.”¹ College students are not immune to this crisis; in fact, recent studies show that depression and anxiety are on the rise among this population.² Colleges are well positioned to help their students, but to do so effectively, they must understand what their students are experiencing—and how students want to be helped.

CCCSE gratefully acknowledges The Kresge Foundation for funding the Mental Well-Being and Academic Success project, which allowed us to investigate community college students’ mental health and well-being so that institutions have a better understanding of the needs of their students.

The foundation provided support for the selection of additional survey items focused on student mental health and well-being, interviews with students at three community colleges, and the development of this national report.

The following advisory panel of experts provided guidance on the selection of the additional survey items:

- ⚙️ Dr. Sara Abelson, Assistant Professor, Lewis Katz School of Medicine, and Senior Director of Training and Education, The Hope Center, Temple University
- ⚙️ Dr. Alison Brown, Coordinator, Center for Wellness & Wellbeing, Santa Monica College (CA)

- ⚙️ Dr. Tia Dole, Chief 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Officer, Vibrant Emotional Health
- ⚙️ Tiffany Gusbeth, Vice President, Student Success Services, American Indian College Fund
- ⚙️ Dr. Darryl Ann Lai Fang, Senior Director, Transformation Support, UNCF
- ⚙️ Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, Chancellor, Austin Community College District (TX)
- ⚙️ Markie Pasternak, Senior Manager, Higher Education, Active Minds
- ⚙️ Dr. Lynn Tincher-Ladner, President and CEO, Phi Theta Kappa

We owe a debt of gratitude to The Healthy Minds Network for the use and adaptation of several of its survey items.

We would also like to thank the participating colleges and their students for sharing their perspectives through the survey administrations and interviews. Without these student voices, we would not be able to demonstrate how students are experiencing mental health and well-being issues at a national level.

This report is dedicated to community colleges across the country working to help their students overcome all challenges in their way and find success in higher education.

The findings and conclusions contained within are those of CCCSE and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of The Kresge Foundation.

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FOREWORD

Maria needs you. You need this report.



Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart
Chancellor
Austin Community
College District (TX)

It is moving to see and hear students. Because student voices are powerful, colleges are most successful when they reimagine their work and the institutions themselves based on those very student voices.

At Amarillo College, we named our typical student Maria. When I began leading Austin Community College, I found her again. And I am certain you also see her when you walk on your own campus. Maria is woven into each data point in this incredible, and incredibly important, report.

Maria is smart, ambitious, and self-aware. I want you to know her because she will challenge you to rethink your work. Maria's story is found in almost every CCCSE report. Maria (like most students in higher education across our country) is overwhelmingly first generation; attends part time; and frequently navigates financial, social, and health challenges. Maria is a 27-year-old Latina mother of 1.2 kids, working—on average—two part-time jobs while attending college.

Maria is THE typical community college student. Your institutions' students may look different from Maria. Your students' demographics may shift in different ways. Whoever your student is—whether you think of her as Maria, use another name, or do not give her a name—she deserves institutional transformations centered on her needs.

As this report codifies, students from all backgrounds and demographics face serious mental health challenges as they navigate their learning pathway.

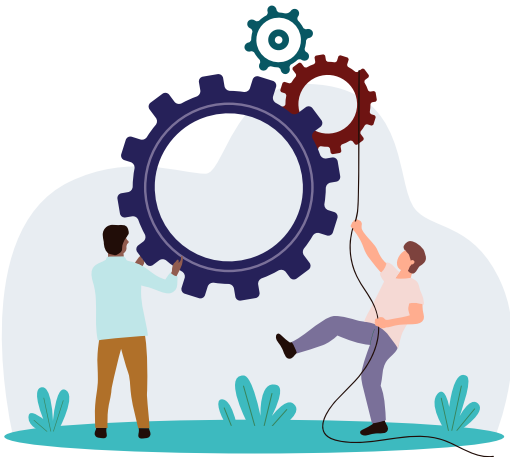
After reading this report, you will understand that mental health is at the center of our students' academic and social challenges. Your students need you to read, internalize, and activate around the insights revealed through this research. This report will challenge institutions, and employees, to build a culture of care, a system of support, and a sense of belonging and connection.

The data in this report show that higher education was not built for students like Maria. While a high percentage of students reported that colleges talk about mental health and well-being, the students who most need mental health and well-being supports do not know where and how to access them.

Institutions can no longer afford to simply send emails explaining what services and supports are available. Even when students know how to access the needed help, they typically will not engage it. Almost half of the students who said they needed help also said that they never sought it.

Stigma, bureaucracy, modalities, timing, and so many more issues often get in the way of our abilities to connect with our students. By learning who our students are, listening to them, and understanding the reality of their lives, we will transform our institutions (and ourselves) around the issues of mental health services. Instead of telling students what they need, let's listen to them by internalizing *Supporting Minds, Supporting Learners*.

Maria needs you. You need this report.



Mental Health Challenges: On the Rise and Threatening Academic Success

Since its inception, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) has demonstrated one clear point: Recognizing and addressing students' challenges helps more students succeed.

Today, mental health concerns are a significant challenge for college students across the country. A recent study found, "In 2020–21, more than 60% of students met criteria for one or more mental health problems, a nearly 50% increase from 2013."³

While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges, it did not create them. Mental health symptoms among college students have been rising dramatically for the past decade,⁴ and the easing of the pandemic will not make them evaporate. These symptoms cause distress in all aspects of students' lives. In terms of college, they can affect a student's ability to focus on their academic work—and result in lower grades and a higher likelihood of withdrawing from classes.

Community colleges must act to better support their students, and colleges' actions must be grounded in a better understanding of their students' mental health and well-being. The 2023 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and 2023 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) provide data to help colleges undertake this essential work.

“When the work really starts to pile up, like if I miss a day or if the professor posts an assignment late ... it kind of gets hectic and cluttered and gray. ... After I'm done crying, I usually take a nap. I call a friend or my fiancé, and then when I'm feeling up to it, I just get right back to work, because I have to do it.”

—STUDENT

Community College Students' Mental Health and Well-Being

CCSSE and SENSE respondents report high levels of mental health concerns. For example, when asked about the two weeks prior to their taking the survey, 50% of CCSSE students and 47% of SENSE students report feeling down, depressed, or hopeless for at least several days. In addition, 66% of both CCSSE and SENSE students report being bothered by feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge for at least several days.

Most CCSSE respondents are returning students, and all SENSE respondents are entering students. The similarities in the two surveys' findings indicate that colleges should intervene early and continue to support students throughout their college experience. The importance of early intervention is further supported by the fact that roughly 40% of community college students do not persist from their first fall enrollment to the following fall.⁵





Understanding the Nuances of Mental Health and Well-Being

Like physical health issues, mental health challenges affect students in a range of ways. Mental health conditions include both the presence of mental illness, such as anxiety and depression, and the lack of mental well-being, which is reflected in an individual's difficulty experiencing happiness, realizing their own potential, and feeling a sense of belonging.⁶

A person who is “feeling sad or anxious” might be in the midst of a particularly stressful few weeks that will pass, or those feelings might indicate a more serious, diagnosable mental health disorder, such as a depressive or anxiety disorder. For this reason, the 2023 *CCSSE* and *SENSE* administrations included questions from two validated short-form instruments that screen for depression and anxiety:

- ⚙ Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2), a standardized initial screening tool for depressive disorders
- ⚙ Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2), a standardized initial screening tool for generalized anxiety disorder

Students' scores on these questions determine if they *likely have a depressive disorder* (PHQ-2) or *likely have generalized anxiety disorder* (GAD-2) and should have further screening.

Students' responses to these items, along with the other *CCSSE* and *SENSE* data presented in the report, can help colleges understand how many and which students may be experiencing mental health challenges—and the impact these conditions have on their studies.

The appendices (pages 34 and 35) show the PHQ-2 and GAD-2 questions used for this report as well as the data from *CCSSE* and *SENSE* respondents.

“Everything just collapses, and you don't really know how to handle it.”

—STUDENT

The data in this report come from Mental Health and Well-Being item sets that were administered in 2023. Select *CCSSE* and *SENSE* findings are displayed in this report. For the full analysis, see the methodology at <https://www.ccsse.org/reports/smsl-methodology.pdf>.

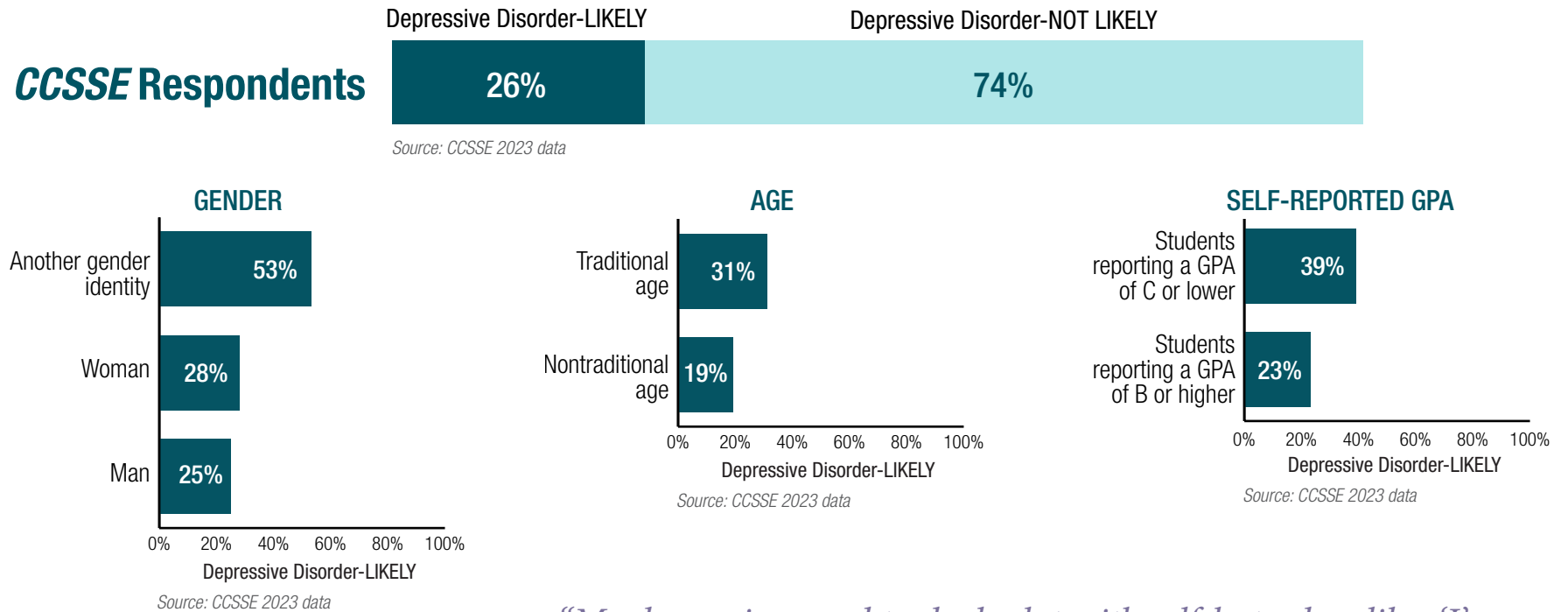
Findings in this report include the following:

- ⚙ Data from 61,085 students across 149 community colleges who participated in the spring 2023 administration of *CCSSE*
- ⚙ Data from 13,950 students across 61 community colleges who participated in the fall 2023 administration of *SENSE*

Depression Among Community College Students

The PHQ-2 instrument can help colleges and the field better understand how many and which students may be experiencing depression. It uses two survey questions to screen for a depressive disorder (see Appendix A, page 34). Overall, 26% of *CCSSE* respondents and 23% of *SENSE* respondents *likely have a depressive disorder*.

The data vary among institutions. At some colleges, as many as 44% of *CCSSE* respondents and 37% of *SENSE* respondents *likely have a depressive disorder*.



“My depression used to deal a lot with self-hatred ... like, ‘I’m stupid,’ or like, ‘Everything I do is worthless.’ Like, ‘It’s never going to amount to anything.’ Like, ‘I’m a failure’ ... where you’re doing other people a disservice, essentially by existing.”

—STUDENT

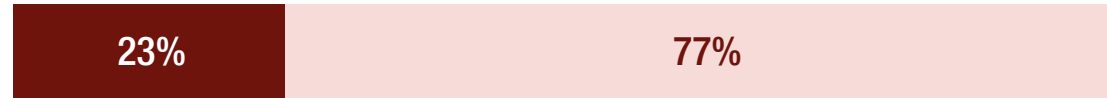


Depression Among Community College Students

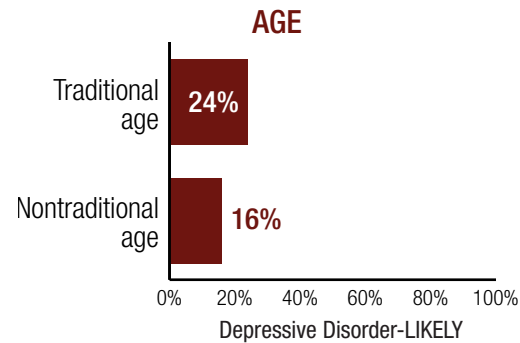
SENSE Respondents

Depressive Disorder-LIKELY

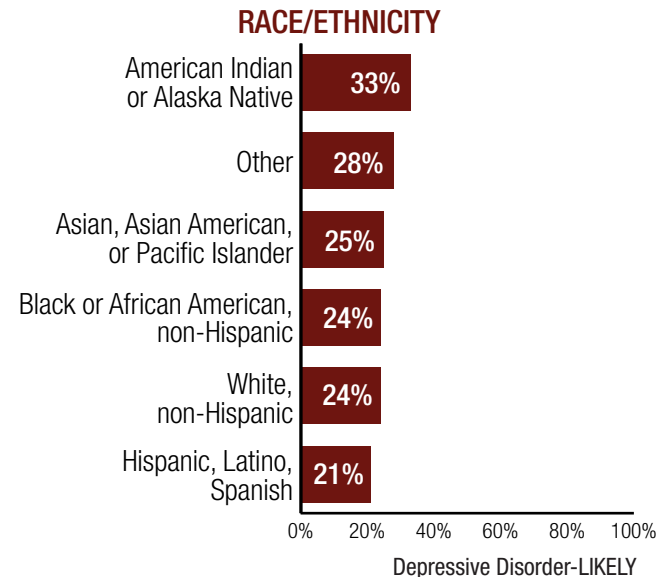
Depressive Disorder-NOT LIKELY



Source: SENSE 2023 data



Source: SENSE 2023 data



Source: SENSE 2023 data



“I always factor in that I’ll have at least one mental breakdown during the semester.”

—STUDENT

Anxiety Among Community College Students

The GAD-2 instrument can help colleges and the field better understand how many and which students may be experiencing anxiety. It uses two survey questions to screen for generalized anxiety disorder (see Appendix B, page 35). Overall, 32% of *CCSSE* respondents and 29% of *SENSE* respondents *likely have generalized anxiety disorder*.

The data vary among institutions. At some colleges, as many as 46% of *CCSSE* respondents and 47% of *SENSE* respondents *likely have generalized anxiety disorder*.

CCSSE Respondents

Generalized Anxiety Disorder-
LIKELY

32%

Generalized Anxiety Disorder-
NOT LIKELY

68%

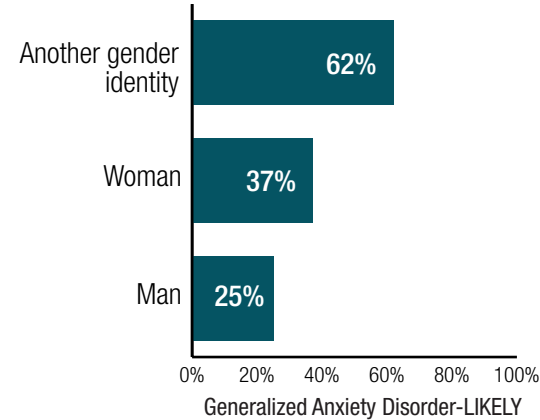
Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“Every single student here that I talk to [is] struggling mentally.”

—STUDENT

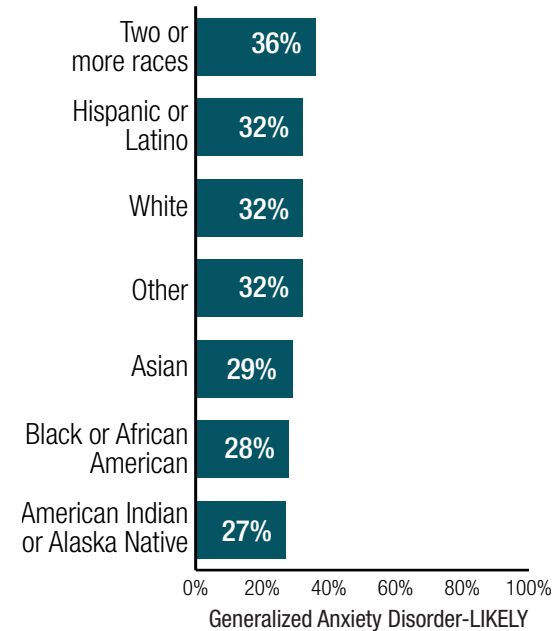


GENDER



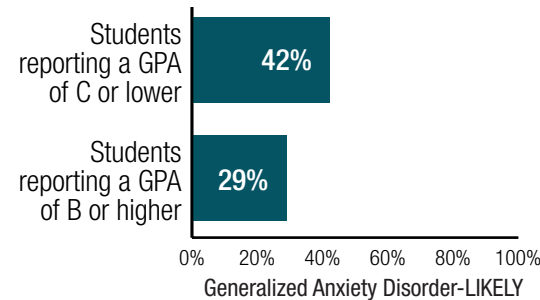
Source: CCSSE 2023 data

RACE/ETHNICITY



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

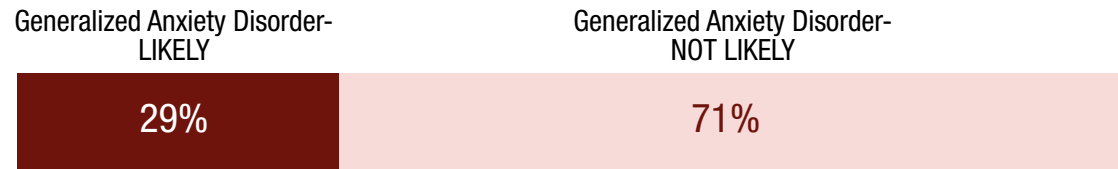
SELF-REPORTED GPA



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Anxiety Among Community College Students

SENSE Respondents



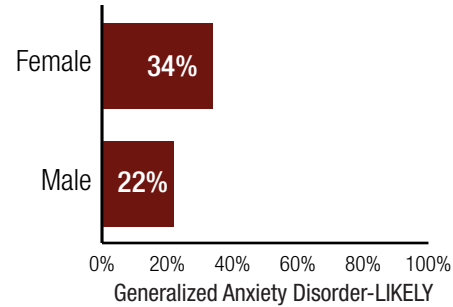
Source: SENSE 2023 data



“If I know that I need the help, then that’s my business; if they want to judge me for it, then that’s their choice.”

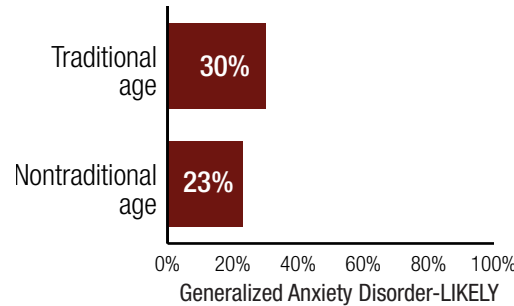
—STUDENT

SEX



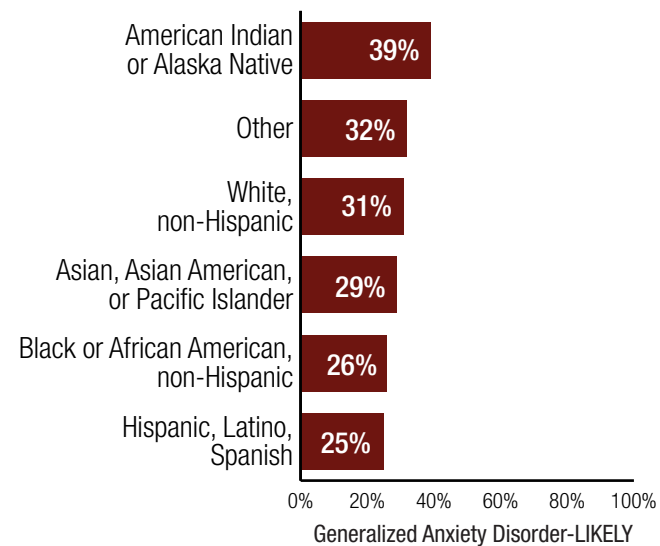
Source: SENSE 2023 data

AGE



Source: SENSE 2023 data

RACE/ETHNICITY



Source: SENSE 2023 data

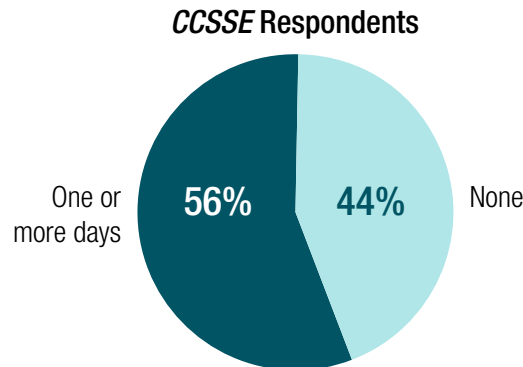
The Impact of Mental Health Issues on Academics

In the past 4 weeks, how many days have you felt that emotional or mental difficulties have hurt your academic performance?

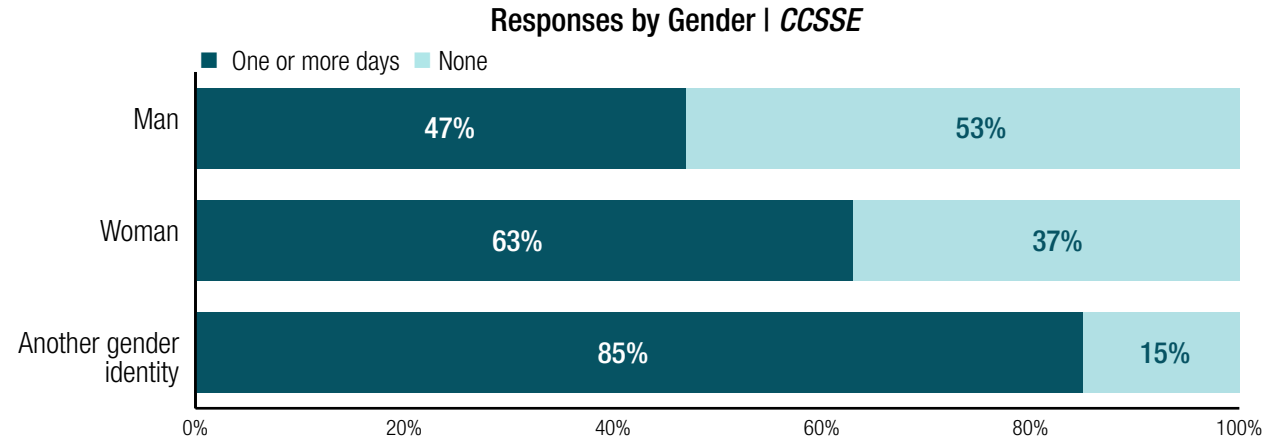
More than half of CCSSE respondents (56%) report that emotional or mental difficulties hurt their academic performance in the previous four weeks. Three in 10 students say that issues with their mental health hurt their academic performance for three or more days.

Responses by gender align with earlier data about experiencing symptoms. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of

women and 47% of men report that emotional or mental difficulties hurt their academic performance in the previous four weeks. And while students who have another gender identity compose a small percentage of respondents, the vast majority of those students (85%) report difficulties with their academic performance due to mental health issues.



Source: CCSSE 2023 data



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

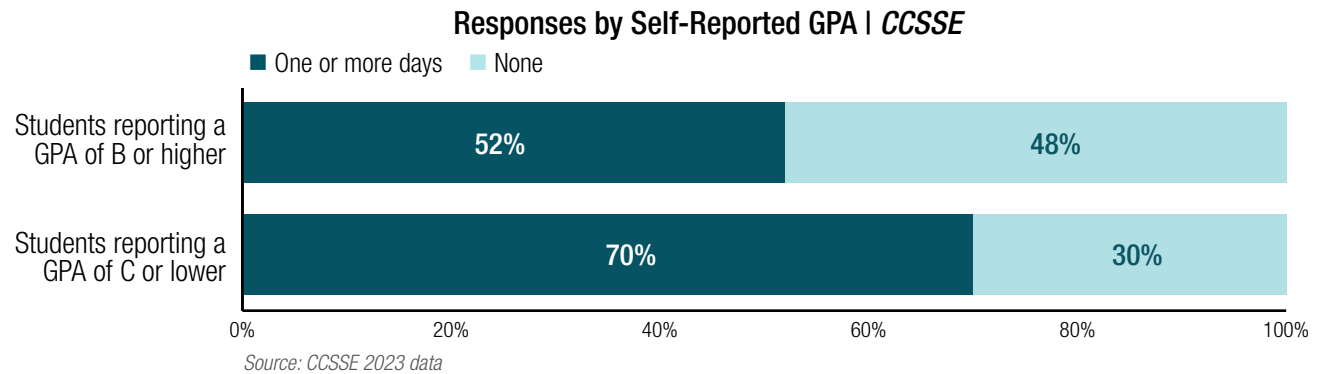
“I’ll go through the depression slumps where I have no will to do anything. It’s like I’m so paranoid [and always thinking], ‘Oh, I’m gonna fail. Oh, I’m gonna fail. Oh, I’m gonna fail.’ ... I’m recognizing that even though I am studying so much, I’m not retaining anything.”

—STUDENT



In the past 4 weeks, how many days have you felt that emotional or mental difficulties have hurt your academic performance?

Students who report lower GPAs are more likely to say that mental health difficulties hurt their academic performance. Among students who report having a GPA of C or lower, 30% say they had no days when emotional or mental health difficulties hurt their academic performance. Almost half (48%) of students who report having a GPA of B or higher say they had no such days.



“I’m constantly anxious. I’m constantly freaking out. It’s like for the first three weeks of school, I was having legitimate anxiety attacks. I would be sitting in class, and I’d just be gone. It’s like I’m so entrapped by fear and anxiety that I can’t focus. I don’t know what’s going on in class. It’s bad. It’s bad. I need help.”

—STUDENT

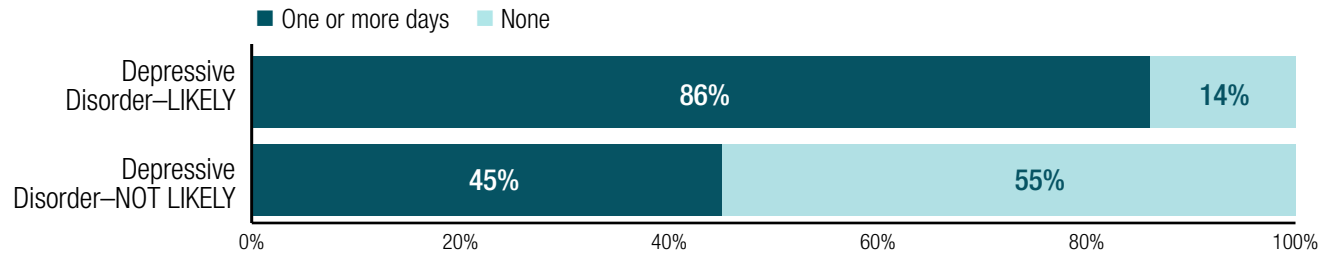




In the past 4 weeks, how many days have you felt that emotional or mental difficulties have hurt your academic performance?

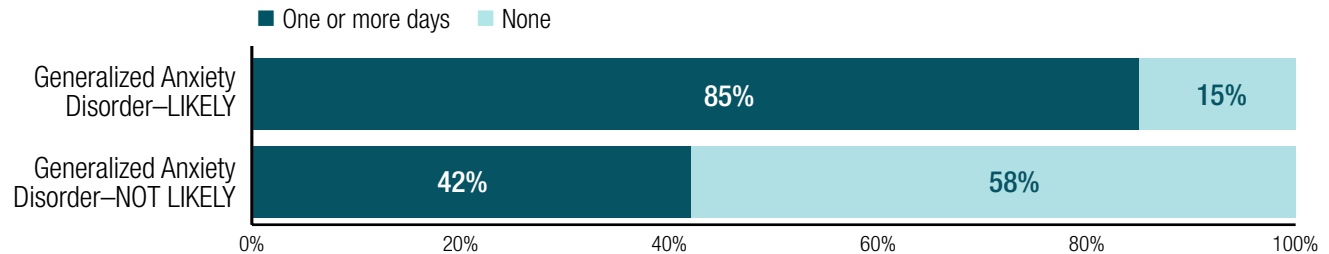
Students who *likely have generalized anxiety disorder* are twice as likely—and students who *likely have a depressive disorder* are almost twice as likely—to report a drop in their academic performance due to emotional or mental difficulties, compared with students who likely do not have these disorders.

Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data



“Combining [my] personal and work schedule with my school schedule and making sure all my times and days are maintained does cause me anxiety. ... I can’t stop thinking about it sometimes.”

—STUDENT

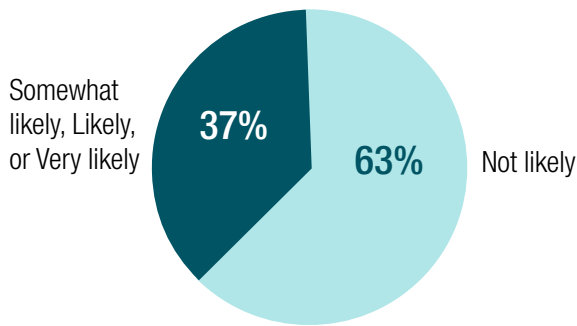


How likely is it that issues with mental health or emotional well-being would cause you to withdraw from class(es) or from this college?

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of students who have another gender identity—compared with 39% of women and 29% of men—say that issues with their mental health or emotional well-being are *somewhat likely, likely, or very likely* to cause them to withdraw from classes.

More than half (53%) of students who report having a GPA of C or lower—compared with one-third of students who report having a GPA of B or higher (33%)—say that issues with their mental health or emotional well-being are *somewhat likely, likely, or very likely* to cause them to withdraw from classes.

CCSSE Respondents

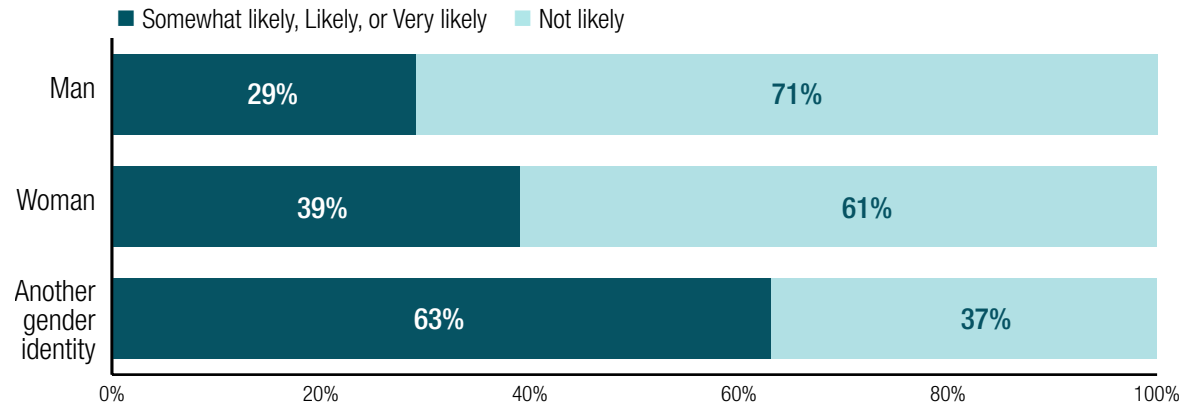


Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“Mental health, if it is not treated properly, could cause you academic suicide.”

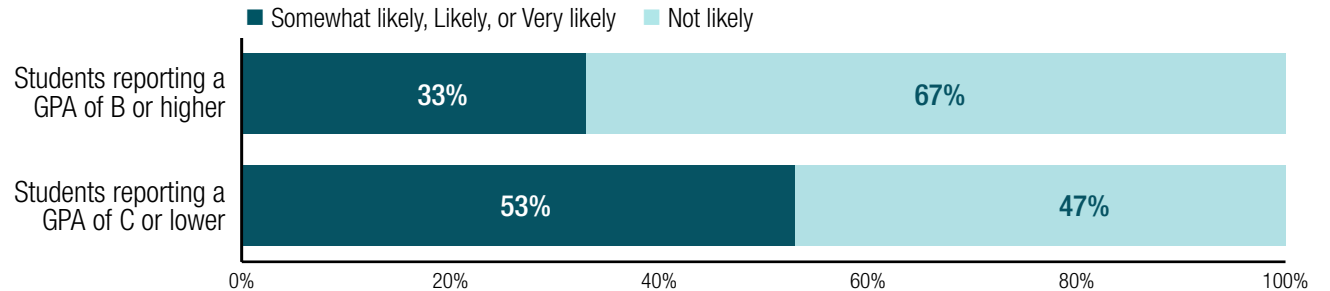
—STUDENT

Responses by Gender | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by Self-Reported GPA | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data



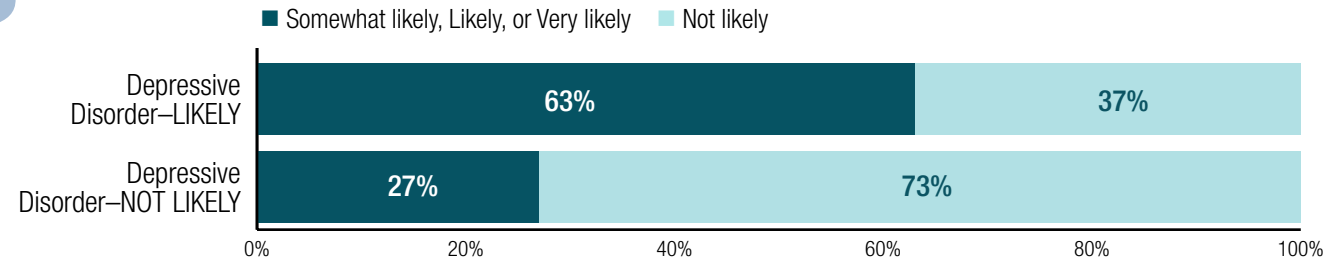
How likely is it that issues with mental health or emotional well-being would cause you to withdraw from class(es) or from this college?

Twice as many students who likely have a depressive or general anxiety disorder, as opposed to those who likely do not, report that issues with mental health or emotional well-being could cause them to withdraw from classes.

“My mental health, my physical health—none of it matters if I fail. My fear of failing gets heightened when I have anxiety or when I’m feeling extremely depressed.”

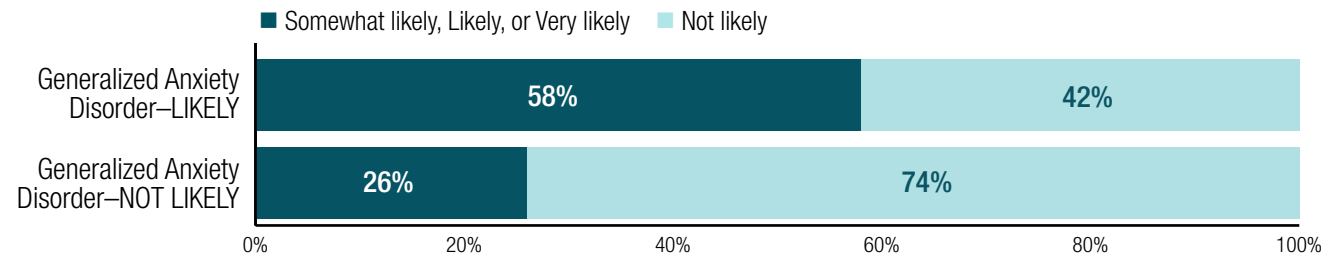
—STUDENT

Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data



Five Questions Colleges Should Ask About Their Students' Mental Health and Well-Being

Colleges that want to effectively support their students should ask these five questions:

1. Do our students believe their mental health and well-being is a priority at our college?
2. Do our students know where they can seek help on our campus?
3. If our students need help, how often do they seek it?
4. What barriers prevent our students from seeking help?
5. How do our students want to receive help?

“A lot of times, students may be focused on, ‘I have to get good grades. I have to pay my rent.’ We may miss the flyer that’s posted up. [It would be good to have] more outreach so that students understand there is the help that’s available.”

—STUDENT

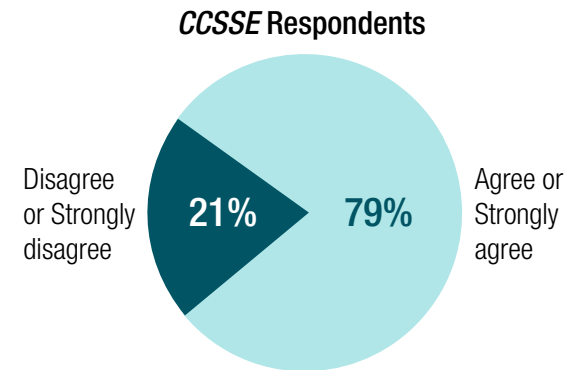


1. Do Our Students Believe Their Mental Health and Well-Being Is a Priority at Our College?

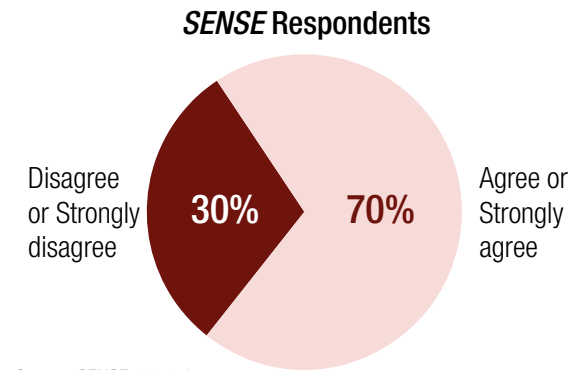
At this college, I feel that students' mental health and emotional well-being is a priority.

High percentages of all students say that their college makes their mental health and well-being a priority. However, *SENSE* respondents are less likely than *CCSSE* respondents to report this belief. Moreover, students who likely have a depressive or general anxiety disorder are much less inclined to believe their college prioritizes their

mental health and well-being. These findings underscore the importance of providing information about mental health resources early in students' interactions with the college and repeatedly throughout their college experience.



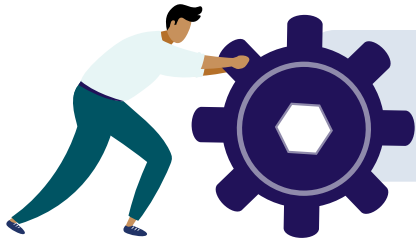
Source: CCSSE 2023 data



Source: SENSE 2023 data

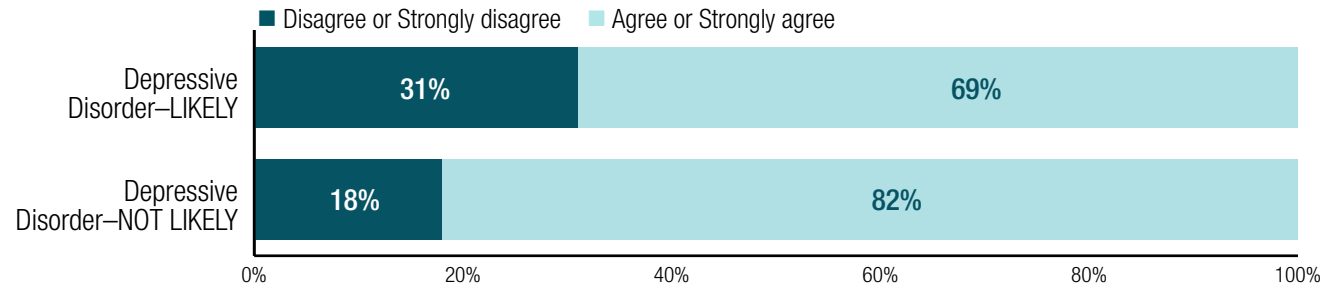
“I went to go see one of the counselors because [I needed] to talk to someone about ... my problems with procrastination, the depression I was feeling, how I feel about my family in relation to my education. ... The counselor has been very helpful.”

—STUDENT



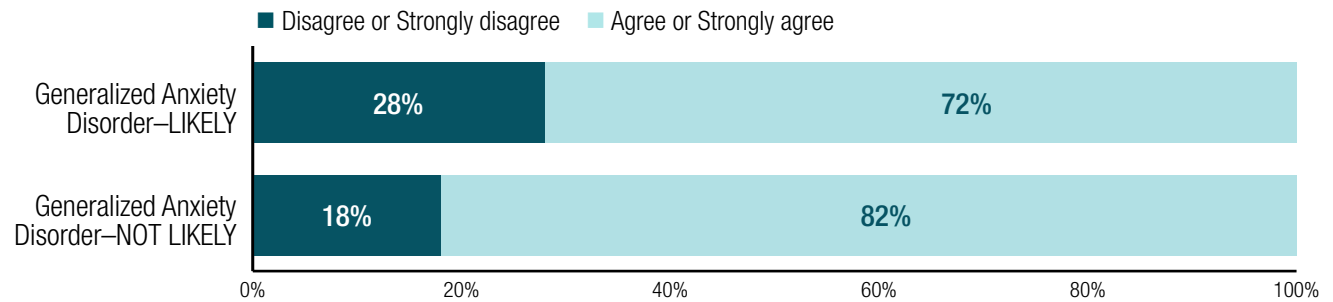
At this college, I feel that students' mental health and emotional well-being is a priority.

Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

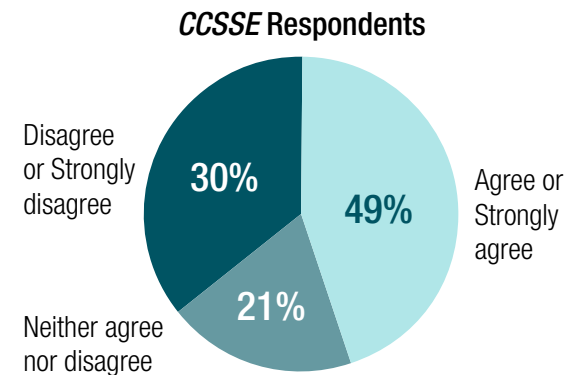
“[Seeking help] is very, very taboo because I know my mom, for example, she doesn’t believe in it. She doesn’t think a therapist is a thing that would help you. It’s just for crazy people.”

—STUDENT

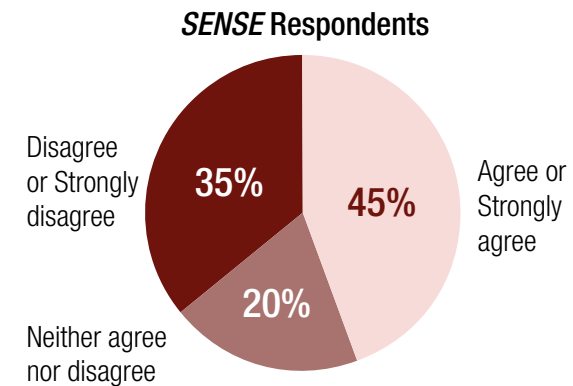
2. Do Our Students Know Where They Can Seek Help on Our Campus?

If you needed to seek professional help for your mental or emotional health while attending this college, you would know where to go.

About a third of CCSSE respondents say they would not know where to go for help with mental health issues if they needed it, and that figure is slightly higher for SENSE respondents. Among different race/ethnicity groups, Hispanic or Latino students were the most likely to report that they would not know where to turn for help if they needed it, with more than a third responding in this way.



Source: CCSSE 2023 data



Source: SENSE 2023 data

“I wanted to go talk to the professor, but I just couldn’t bring myself to. Because all I can think about is, ‘Oh, I could’ve studied better. Oh, I could’ve done better.’ ... Even though I’m literally in this book 24/7. I don’t know what I could’ve done better.”

—STUDENT

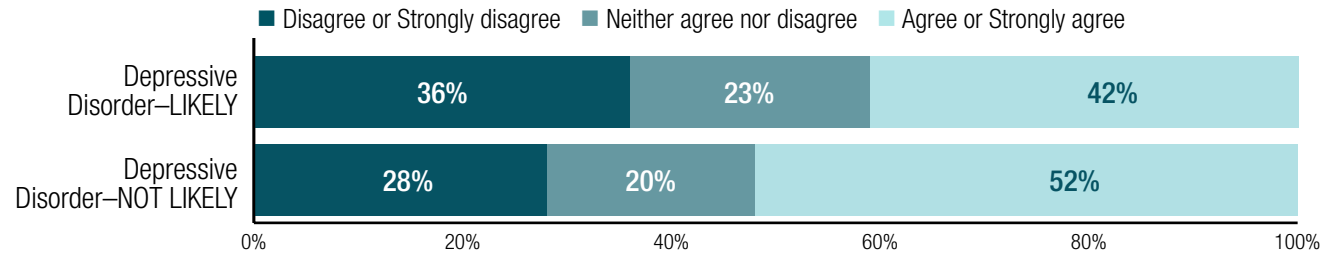




If you needed to seek professional help for your mental or emotional health while attending this college, you would know where to go.

The students who most need support for their mental health are least likely to know where to find that support. More than a third of students who likely have a depressive or general anxiety disorder say they do not know where to go if they need professional help for their mental health.

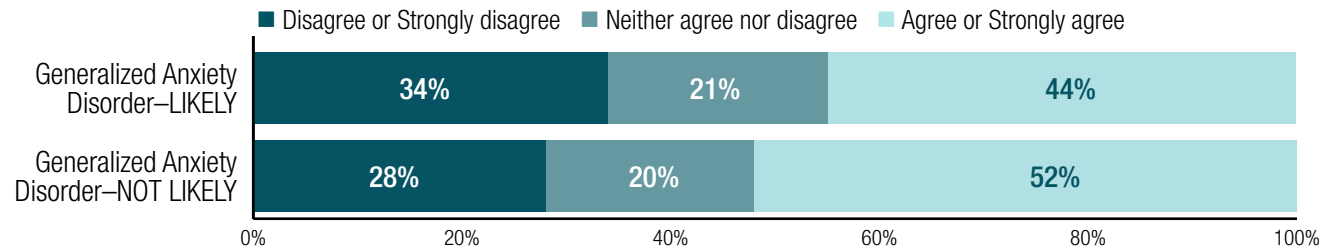
Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“I didn’t want other people to know that sometimes I’m not okay.”

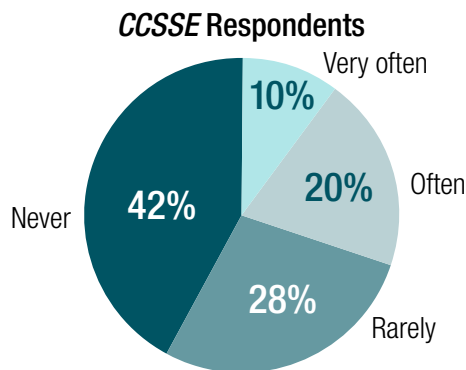
—STUDENT

3. If Our Students Need Help, How Often Do They Seek It?

If you needed help for your mental health and emotional well-being in the past 12 months, how often have you sought such help?

Less than a quarter (23%) of CCSSE respondents report not needing help for their mental health and emotional well-being in the past year. Among those who say they needed help, 42% *never* sought it.

Hispanic or Latino students are more likely than students from other race/ethnicity groups to report *never* seeking help for their mental health or emotional well-being in the past year. Men are also more likely than women or students who have another gender identity to indicate *never* seeking help.

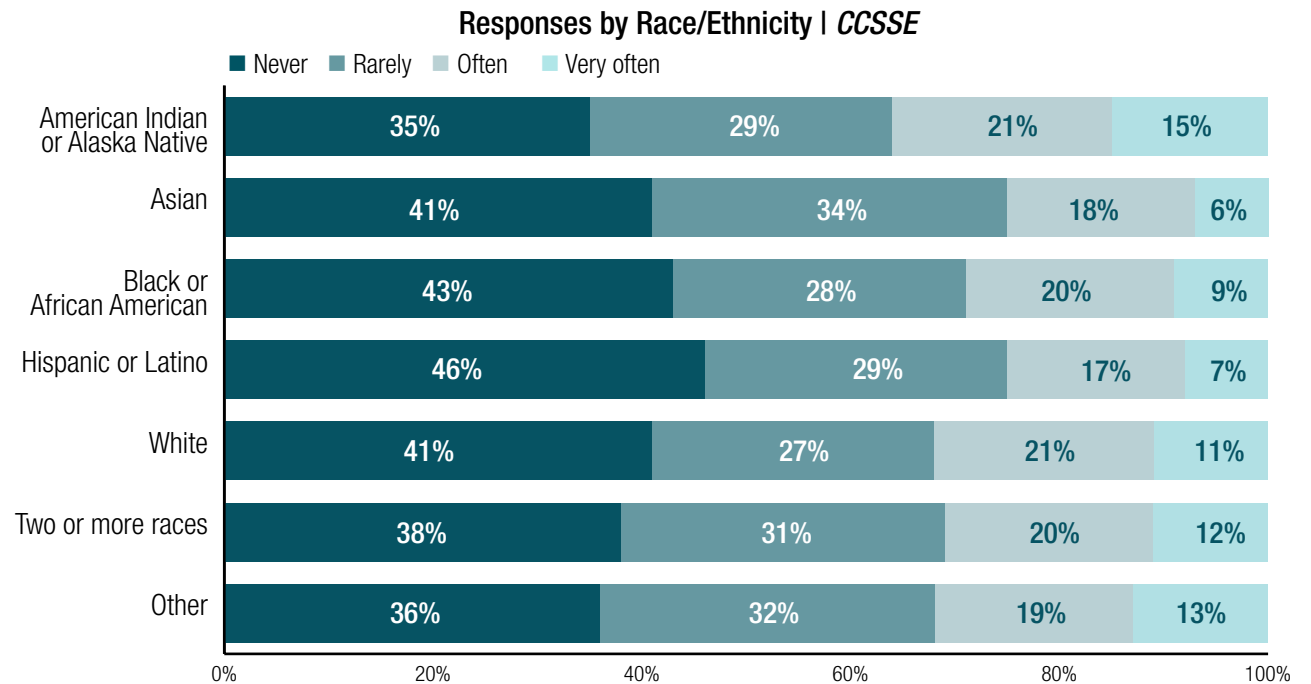


Note: This chart shows responses only for students who indicated that they needed help for their mental health and emotional well-being.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“I’ve struggled with my mental health for many, many years.”

—STUDENT



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Note: This chart shows responses only for students who indicated that they needed help for their mental health and emotional well-being.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data



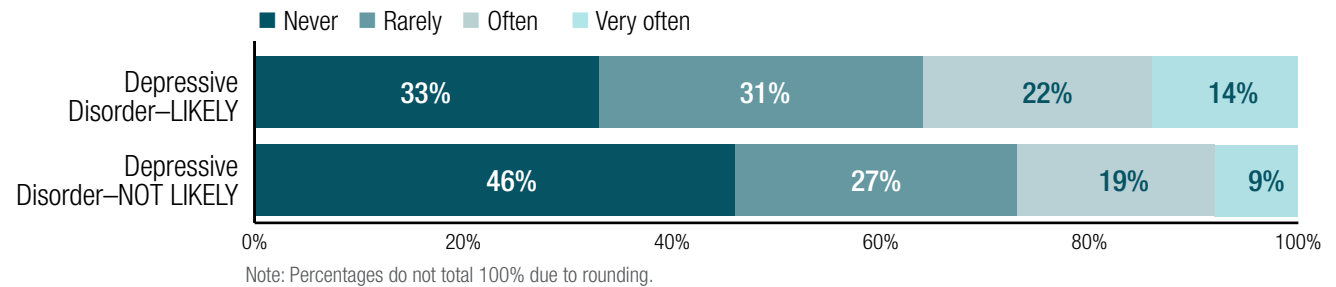
If you needed help for your mental health and emotional well-being in the past 12 months, how often have you sought such help?

About a third of students who likely have a depressive or generalized anxiety disorder *never* seek help.

“Sometimes it gets so overwhelming because I don’t have a healthy outlet for these confusing emotions. Or I don’t know how to deal with them or manage them better.”

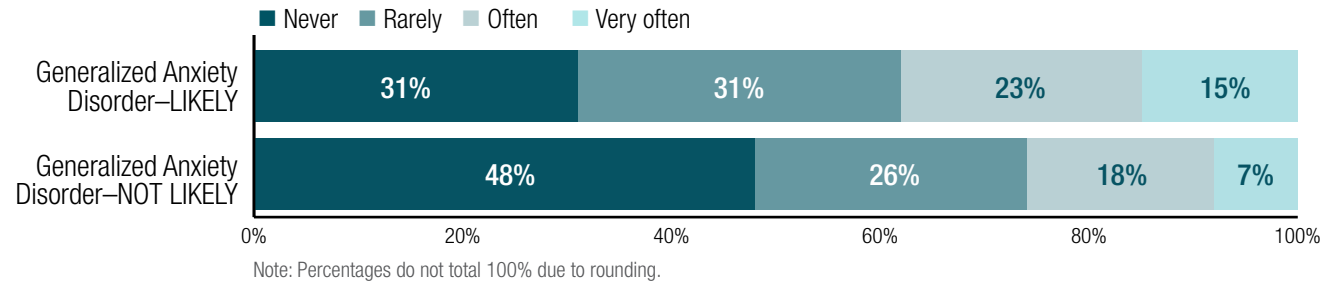
—STUDENT

Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE



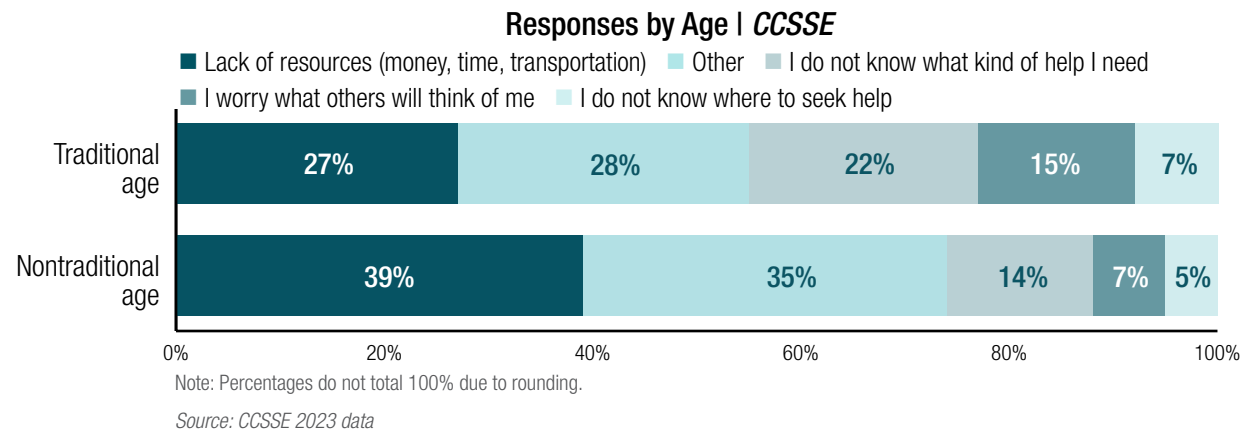
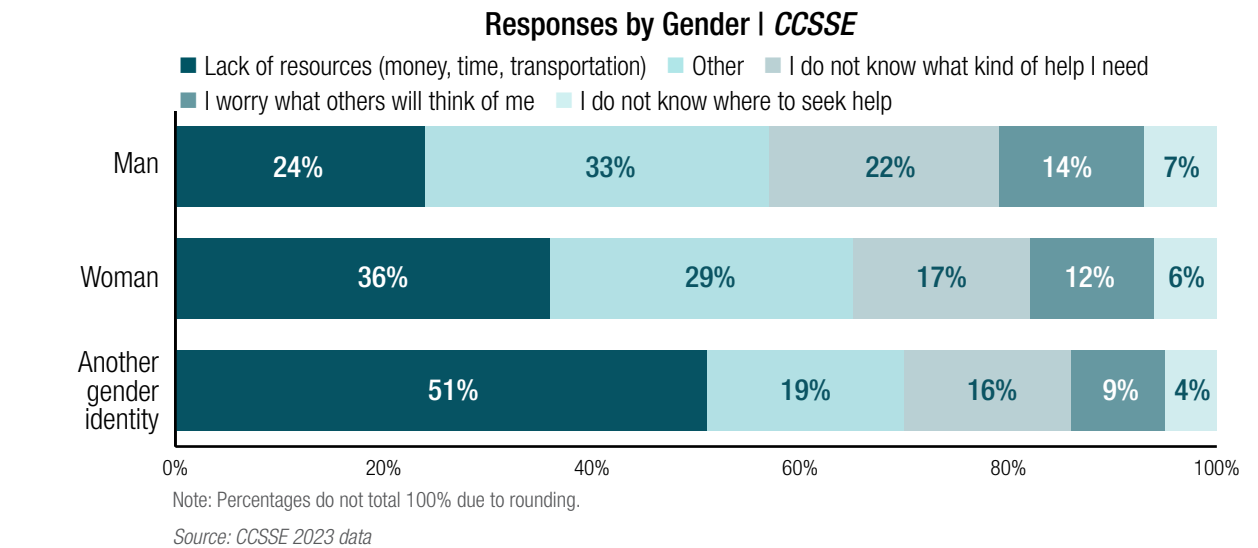
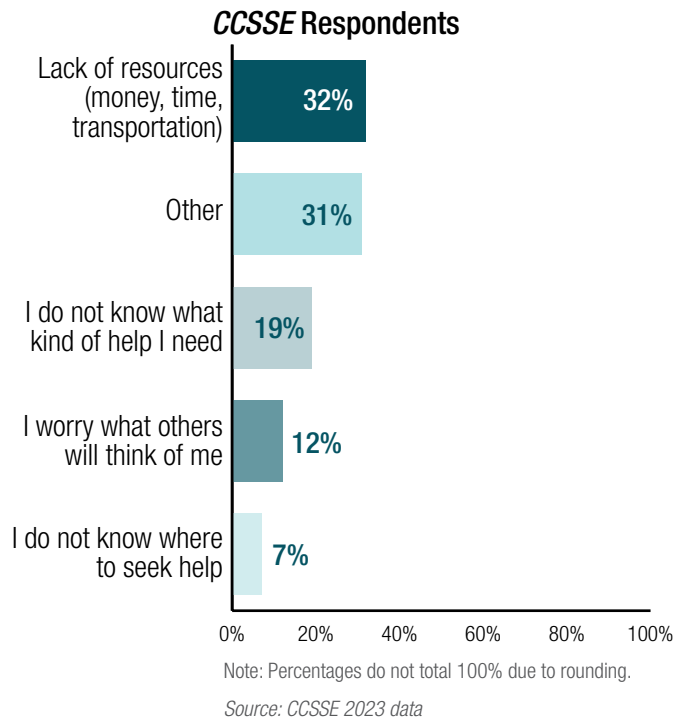
Source: CCSSE 2023 data

4. What Barriers Prevent Our Students From Seeking Help?

If you needed help with your mental health and emotional well-being, what would be the greatest barrier that would keep you from seeking that help?

Students report a variety of barriers to seeking help, many of which colleges can act to remove. Many students report a *lack of resources* as the primary barrier to seeking help. Traditional-age students and men indicate *I would worry what others think of me* and *I don't know what kind of help I need* at higher rates than their peers.

In addition, a high percentage of both *CCSSE* and *SENSE* respondents indicate *Other* when asked what barriers would prevent them from seeking help. This finding suggests that colleges should conduct interviews or focus groups with students to better understand what factors prevent them from seeking help.





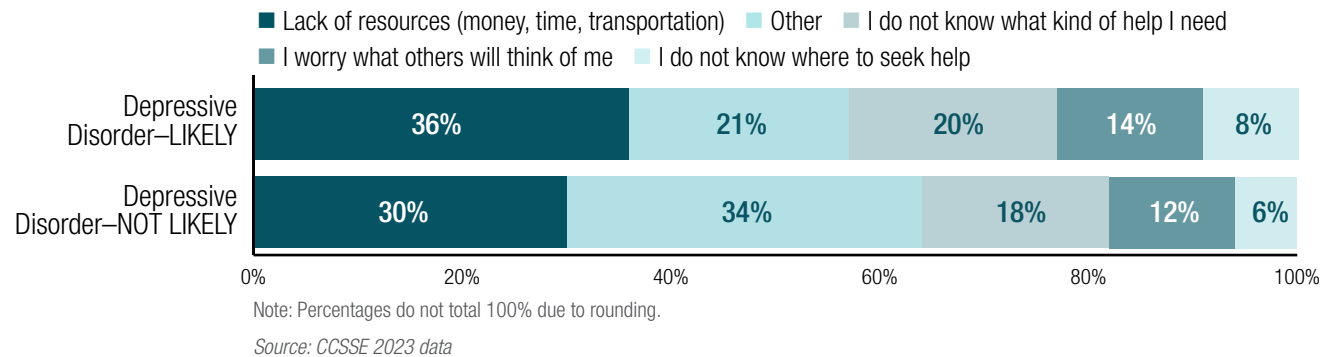
If you needed help with your mental health and emotional well-being, what would be the greatest barrier that would keep you from seeking that help?

For students who likely have a depressive or generalized anxiety disorder, *lack of resources* is the primary barrier to seeking help.

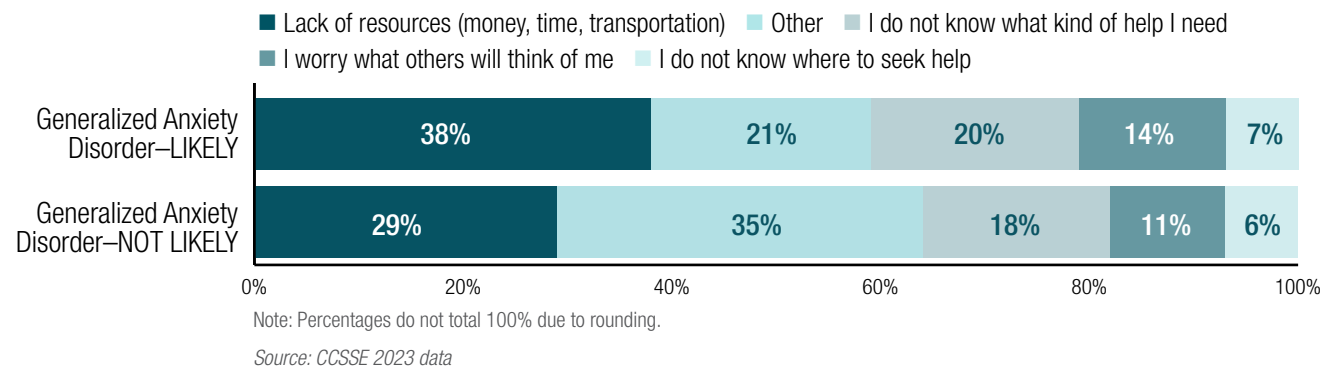
“I had to be convinced by my other friends to see the counselor here [at the college]. ... They were like, ‘We want to help you, but we can’t help you, so we’re going to highly encourage you, as many times as it takes, for you to go somewhere that can help you.’”

—STUDENT

Responses by PHQ-2 | CCSSE



Responses by GAD-2 | CCSSE

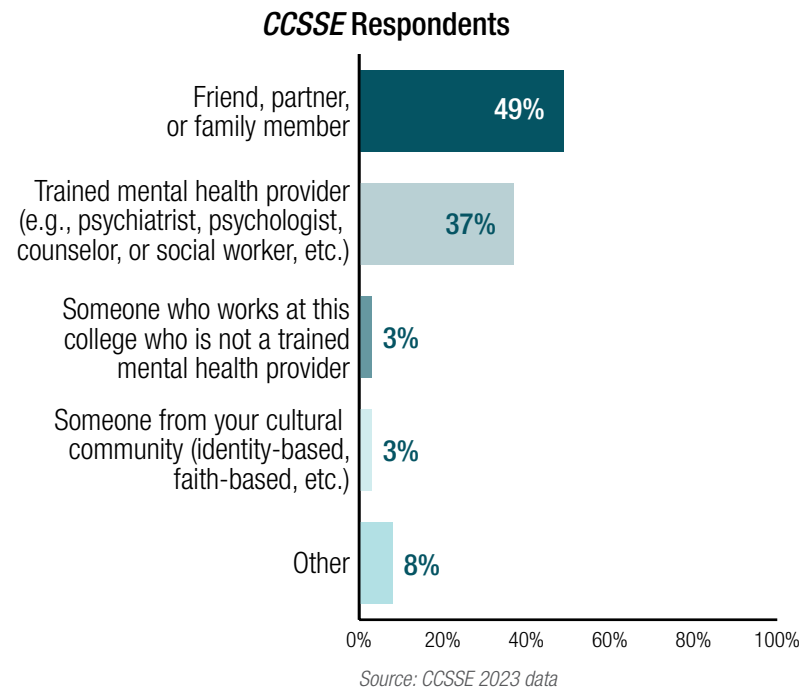


5. How Do Our Students Want to Receive Help?

If you were experiencing emotional or mental health problems such as feeling sad, blue, anxious, or nervous, whom would you most prefer to talk to about this?

Most students say they would like to talk about emotional or mental health problems with a trained mental health provider or with a friend, partner, or family member. Between those two responses, both men and women prefer a friend, partner, or family member, with men more likely to select that response.

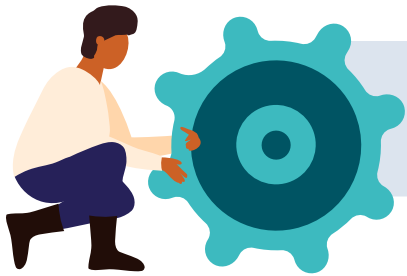
Students who have another gender identity, however, prefer a trained mental health provider. Likewise, older students prefer a trained mental health provider while traditional-age students prefer a friend, partner, or family member.



“What the college counselor helped me with was giving me an avenue to talk. ... I love my parents, but they are not people who I can really talk to about my mental health.”

—STUDENT





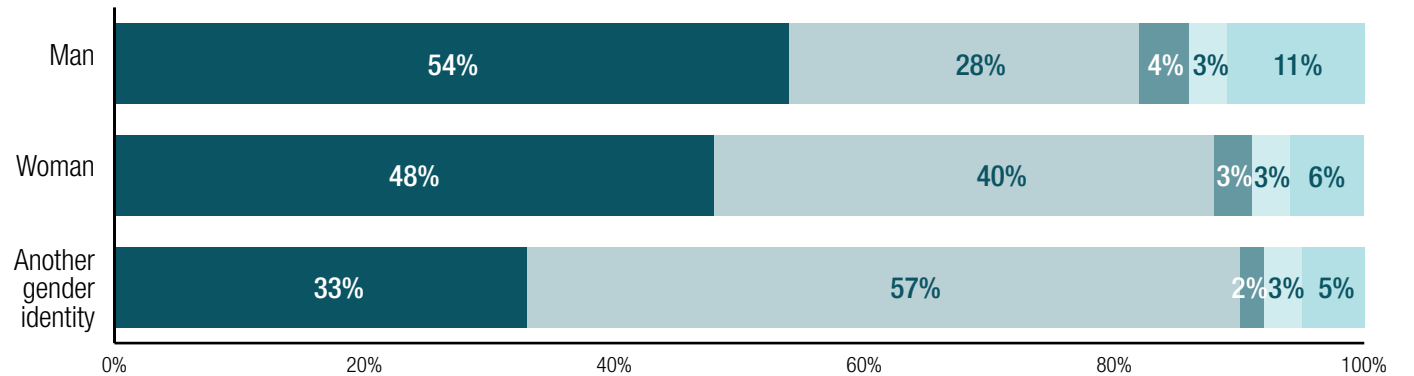
If you were experiencing emotional or mental health problems such as feeling sad, blue, anxious, or nervous, whom would you most prefer to talk to about this?

“I’m actually excited to see the counselor because I just now realized [mental health] is something that you have to learn to deal with. ... Nobody teaches you.”

—STUDENT

Responses by Gender | CCSSE

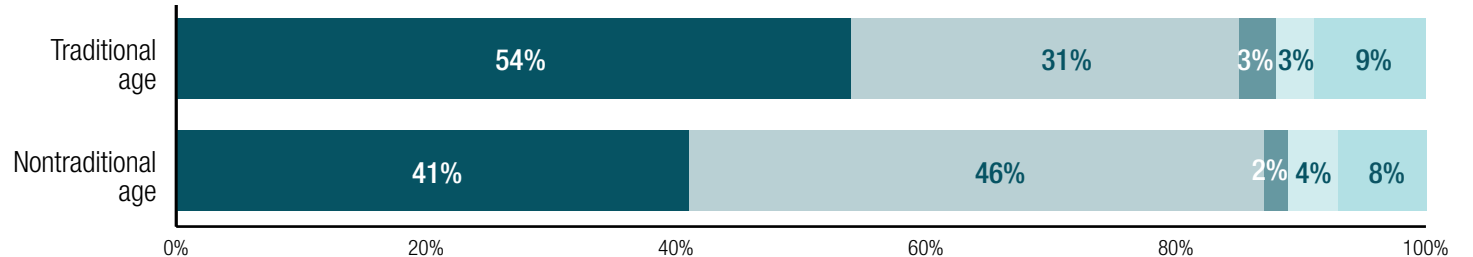
- Friend, partner, or family member
- Trained mental health provider (e.g., psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, or social worker, etc.)
- Someone who works at this college who is not a trained mental health provider
- Someone from your cultural community (identity-based, faith-based, etc.)
- Other



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

Responses by Age | CCSSE

- Friend, partner, or family member
- Trained mental health provider (e.g., psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, or social worker, etc.)
- Someone who works at this college who is not a trained mental health provider
- Someone from your cultural community (identity-based, faith-based, etc.)
- Other



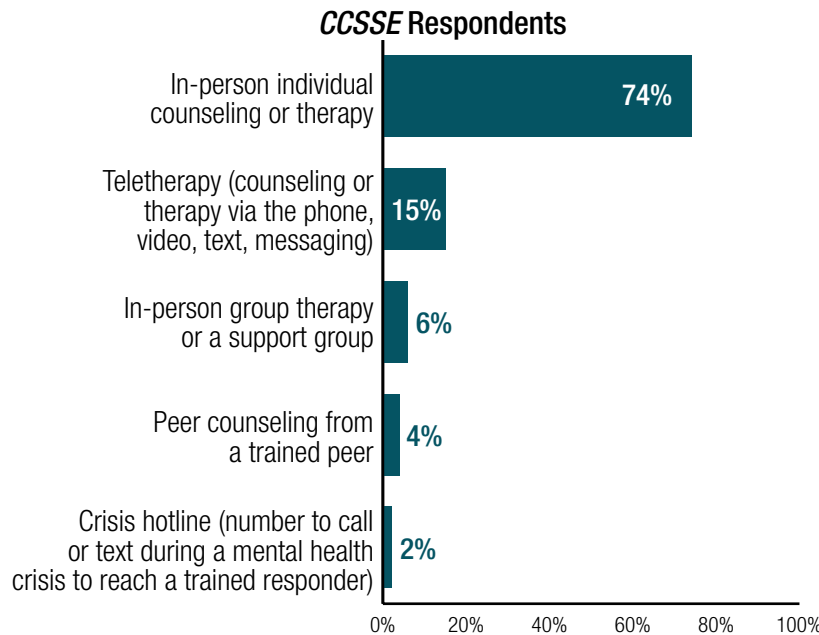
Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data



If you were experiencing emotional or mental health problems such as feeling sad, blue, anxious, or nervous, which of the following supports from a trained mental health provider would you most prefer to use?

Students across all groups prefer in-person counseling or therapy to teletherapy or other support options.



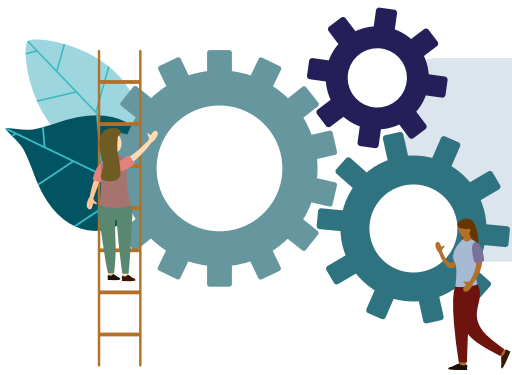
Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“My friends know that I have anxiety. They are aware of the fact that I’ve been clinically diagnosed as depressed. ... My family, they don’t know. They will never know. ... They don’t believe in mental health.”

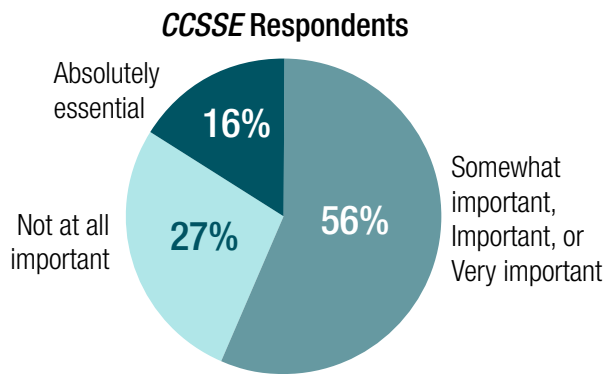
—STUDENT





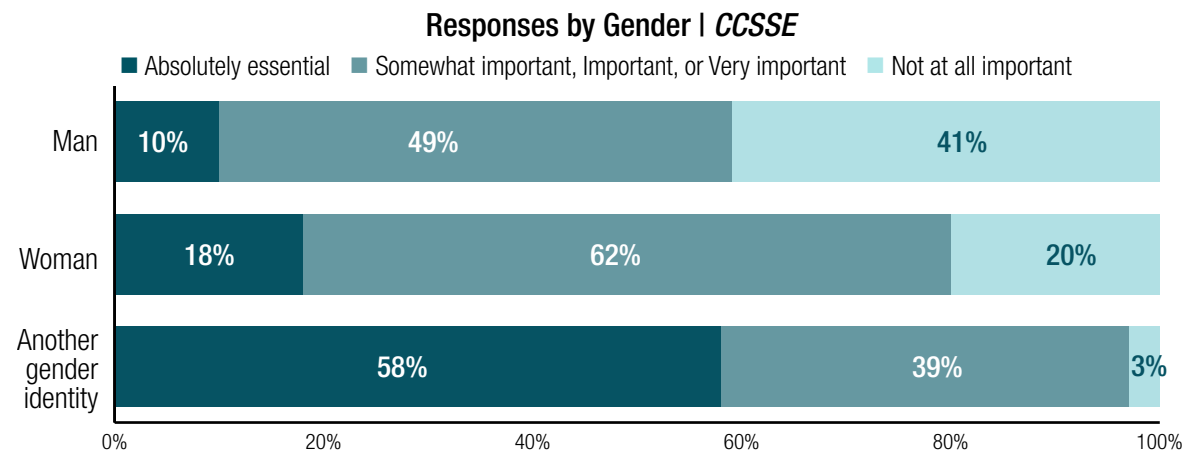
If you needed help with your mental health and emotional well-being, how important is it to you that your mental health provider understands your cultural community (racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, religious identity, LGBTQIA+ identity, etc.)?

Only 16% of CCSSE respondents report that it is absolutely essential that their mental health provider understands their cultural community. However, certain groups of students, including those who have another gender identity and Black or African American respondents, are more likely to place value on having their mental health provider understand their cultural community or identity.



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data



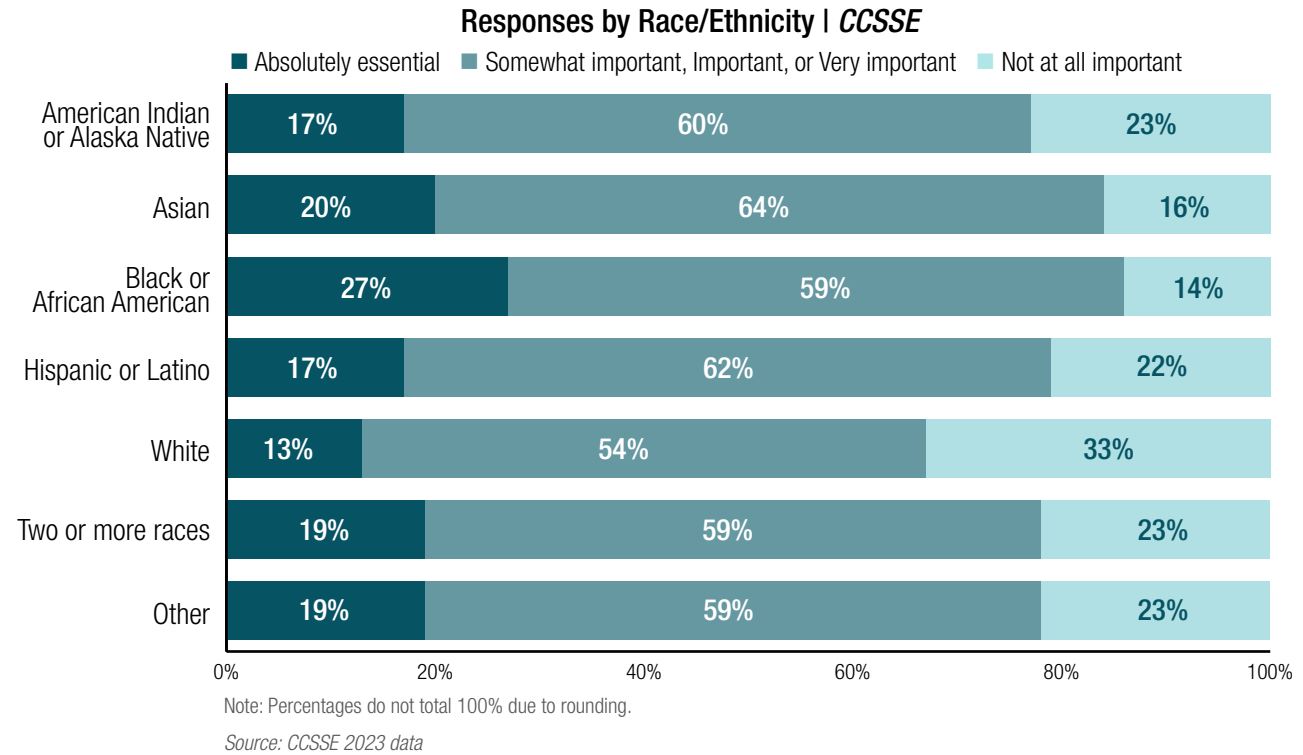
Source: CCSSE 2023 data

“The original psychologist I went to ... was more specialized in ADHD and trauma. He did not really work with any queer people. ... When I tried bringing it up with him, he didn’t really know what to do with it except to almost just like validate my feelings and repeat back to me what I said. It wasn’t constructive.”

—STUDENT



If you needed help with your mental health and emotional well-being, how important is it to you that your mental health provider understands your cultural community (racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, religious identity, LGBTQIA+ identity, etc.)?



“It’s really hard because you’re in that deep state of mind of sadness, and you don’t really want to do anything. Yeah, I’ve just been cooped up in my room and just crying.”

—STUDENT

How Colleges Are Helping Students in Need of Mental Health Support

In 2022–2024, the **Alamo Colleges District (TX)** used a \$200,000 grant from Trellis Foundation and \$300,000 from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to increase mental health and well-being services. As part of this work, Alamo created the Alamo Thrive Cross College Committee to support students as they returned to campus after COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted.

Alamo Colleges also used a train-the-trainers model to provide suicide prevention training across the five district colleges. Six counselors received the training and then taught more than 100 faculty, staff, and student employees to recognize and address the dangers of student suicides. As of 2024, more than 1,300 faculty and staff have been trained in mental health support.

All five Alamo Colleges are JED Campuses, and a JED Campus Advisor helped each campus develop a strategic plan using data from the Healthy Minds Survey and the HOPE Survey of Basic Needs. The Alamo Board approved funding for several new positions to support students' mental health and meet their basic needs. The board added two additional counselors, raising the total number of counselors from 9.5 to 11, and created slots for one social work case manager for each campus.

Students at **Cochise College (AZ)** can use the Meta App, which provides teletherapy. The app allows users to view information about providers and choose one who seems like a good fit. It also offers filters to help users find a provider who meets their criteria. The app is free for Cochise College students.

Columbus State Community College (OH) takes a comprehensive approach to student mental health and well-being. In 2021, the college established a Department of Student Well-Being to address key wellness dimensions that are essential for student success. The college offers on-campus counseling with staff and interns, typically available within a week for intake appointments. In addition, the college provides 24/7 virtual counseling and crisis support through an online platform. The same platform offers on-demand wellness workshops and videos. Finally, the college uses grant funding to help some students cover fees for therapy outside of the college.

The college also addresses foundational wellness needs, such as housing, health, transportation, childcare, and food security. The college has partnered with a local health clinic that provides services at free or reduced rates. Students with transportation challenges receive bus passes, while childcare support is available through the on-campus childcare center and community vouchers. The college's on-campus food pantry is available to all students and does not require proof of need.

In 2021, Hudson County declared **Hudson County Community College [HCCC] (NJ)** a Stigma-Free campus, a designation based on the college's work on mental health and substance abuse awareness. In addition to providing short-term therapy by licensed mental health professionals and 24/7 access to remote support, the college brings many stakeholders into the work of supporting students' mental health.



HCCC is helping faculty and staff develop the skills they need to help students who need mental health support and connect them to appropriate resources. The college is training staff, faculty, and students in Mental Health First Aid, which gives participants the skills they need to identify signs of mental illness and substance use disorders and provide initial support to anyone struggling or experiencing a crisis. The college also provides Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) training, which teaches crisis warning signs as well as how to question, persuade, and refer someone to get help.

HCCC also is a JED Campus. Through the JED Campus program, HCCC has implemented a Mental Health Leave Policy, launched an Active Minds club, printed hotline numbers on all Student ID Cards, launched a campus-wide educational campaign, and designated safe/calm spaces on campus. The college works with partners—including the Hudson Pride Center, Bridgeway Crisis Intervention Services, Women Rising, and Partners in Prevention—that help create a stigma-free environment and provide students with additional resources. Through the HCCC Graduate Internship Program, up to 15 masters-level social workers from area colleges and universities provide services at HCCC as part of completing their master’s degree requirements. With the support of a clinical supervisor, the graduate students provide counseling to HCCC students and facilitate mental health events.

The Student Wellness initiative at **Metropolitan Community College (NE)** is a campus-wide effort to support students in the eight dimensions of well-being: social, physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, financial, occupational, and environmental. Student Wellness includes events, trainings, and virtual learnings. For example, every week the college offers a free 30-minute workshop focused on mental health and wellness tools, resources, and skill building. Students, faculty, and staff are welcome to attend all the workshops or choose the ones that most interest them.

The **Panhandle Partnership (TX)** was established by **Amarillo College** in 2022 with support from Trellis Foundation to support mental health needs across the expansive Panhandle region of West Texas. The four-institution partnership of **Amarillo College, West Texas A&M University, Clarendon College, and Frank Phillips College** maintains a centrally located Panhandle Partnerships Wellness Clinic, which opened in fall 2023 and provides free mental health services—including in-person counseling, online counseling, and mental health screening tools—to students from all four colleges.

Victoria College (TX) provides support through the Counseling Center Without Walls, a program with a full-time therapist who supervises graduate student interns. The college also has a bank of community partners that provide referral pathways and specialty services; teletherapy options; and health promotion activities, including campus awareness of mental health supports. With targeted awareness campaigns and the addition of graduate-level interns, the counseling center tripled the number of students served from spring 2023 to fall 2023. More than three-quarters (77%) of students who used counseling services indicated they would not have been able to obtain mental health support or intervention without these free services.

Waubonsee Community College (IL) offers students and community members multiple ways to access mental health and wellness support. The college provides an online anonymous, confidential, free mental health screening tool. This tool uses a small set of questions to help students determine if they or someone they care about should connect with a behavioral health professional. For those who are seeking support, the college has licensed counselors who provide short-term mental health counseling. In addition, the college partners with the Association for Individual Development to offer a 24/7 talk line and a drop-in resource connection. The college also connects students with peer support leaders who are trained in mental health support, stress management, and mentoring. Services are offered in both English and Spanish.

The Alamo Colleges District, Panhandle Partnership, and Victoria College programs were featured in Key Learnings from the Trellis Foundation Postsecondary Mental Health and Wellbeing Learning Community, convened by the Meadows Institute.

Next Steps

Given the impact mental health concerns have on academics—including the likelihood that students will withdraw—colleges should take a more active role in both understanding and addressing students’ mental health and well-being.

Colleges have an opportunity to be the place where students can find the mental health support they need. Colleges that act on this opportunity can improve their students’ chances to thrive in college and beyond. And colleges cannot intervene too soon. The similarities between *CCSSE* and *SENSE* data indicate that many students are starting college while coping with mental health issues. Colleges that want to help more students succeed should assess all students’ mental health at intake and then provide support to those who need it.

Everyone who comes in contact with community college students can play a role in supporting students’ mental health and well-being. Many colleges now focus on developing a culture of caring to build these efforts into the day-to-day work of all faculty and staff.

College employees in all areas and at all levels can:

- ⚙️ Be attuned to students’ mental health needs.
- ⚙️ Connect students with mental health resources.
- ⚙️ Help students believe that they belong at the college and show students that the college cares about their mental health.

College-wide efforts should include having resources that are easy to find and access. They also should make sure students hear about the resources regularly—multiple times from multiple sources, beginning with the students’ earliest interactions with the college.



Presidents and senior leaders can:

- ⚙️ Develop a formal, comprehensive plan for student mental health that addresses prevention, integrates mental health support throughout the college’s existing structures and practices, and involves a range of employees.⁷
- ⚙️ Commit to developing a culture of caring, and make sure each person on campus understands their role in building and maintaining this culture.
- ⚙️ Make sure everyone on campus has access to information about mental health resources.
- ⚙️ Develop systems—and train employees—to recognize and respond to students who may be experiencing anxiety and/or depression. For example, colleges can offer, encourage, or require employees to participate in Mental Health First Aid training.
- ⚙️ Provide professional development so all staff become more comfortable discussing mental health and referring students to support services.
- ⚙️ Place counselors in academic units so students are more aware of them.⁸

Faculty members can:

- ⚙️ Look for changes in a student's behavior, such as missing class, not turning in assignments, or looking unkempt, and recognize that these changes may be indicators that the student is struggling.⁹ Offer to connect the student to mental health supports.
- ⚙️ Include information about mental health supports in their syllabi, email signature blocks, and other regular communications with students.
- ⚙️ Invite staff from mental health support programs into their classrooms to briefly present information about resources available to students.

Advisors, counselors, and other staff who interact with students can:

- ⚙️ Create a needs assessment that students complete at the beginning of each academic term. Based on responses, route students to support resources. Send follow-up messages during the academic term to students whose responses indicated a need for mental health assistance.
- ⚙️ Share details about mental health supports as part of routine contacts with students, such as communications about registration, orientation, and billing.
- ⚙️ Coordinate with faculty members to make sure they are aware of mental health resources they can share with students.



“If you see somebody who feels very detached or looks like they’re distancing themselves... talk to them.”

—STUDENT

Trustees can:

- ⚙️ Allocate funds for mental health supports.
- ⚙️ Help the college build partnerships with community mental health providers.
- ⚙️ Raise awareness of students' mental health and well-being—including the high level of support students need—in community leadership circles.
- ⚙️ Position the college as a leader in supporting students' mental health and well-being.

Students Also Can Play an Essential Role

More than two-thirds of young adults tell a friend they are struggling before telling anyone else,¹⁰ so colleges also must bring students into this essential work.

When a college engages students in better understanding mental health and well-being, it signals that leadership places a priority on mental health, and it prepares students to better help themselves and one other. Colleges can:

- ⚙️ Teach students about self-care. The organization [Active Minds](#) offers helpful information about [self-care](#).
- ⚙️ Encourage students to look out for their friends and fellow students. Active Minds offers [warning signs and statements to pay attention to](#) that students can use to recognize that a friend needs help. Colleges should make it clear that the student's job is to alert a specific office at the college, a crisis hotline, or 911—and not to solve someone else's mental health problems.
- ⚙️ Encourage leaders of student government and student organizations to share information about available resources with other students.

Questions Used in the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2)

The PHQ-2 is a standardized initial screening tool for depressive disorders. The following two questions make up the PHQ-2:¹¹

- ⚙ Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things?
- ⚙ Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?

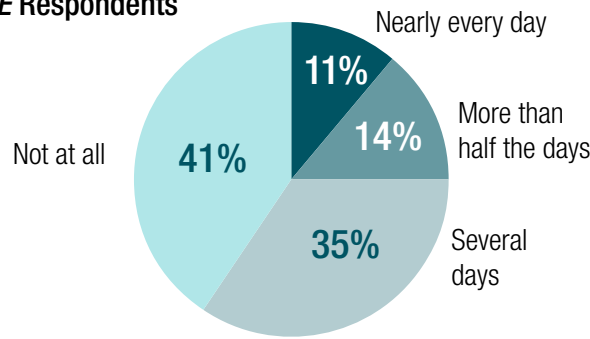
Responses are scored as follows:

Not at all: 0 | *Several days:* 1 | *More than half the days:* 2 | *Nearly every day:* 3

PHQ-2 results are calculated by adding the scores of the two questions, resulting in a score of 0–6. Respondents with a combined score of 3 or higher *likely have a depressive disorder* and should have further screening. Respondents with a score of 2 or lower *likely do not have a depressive disorder*. These phrases reflect the fact that results from the two questions are not definitive.

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things?

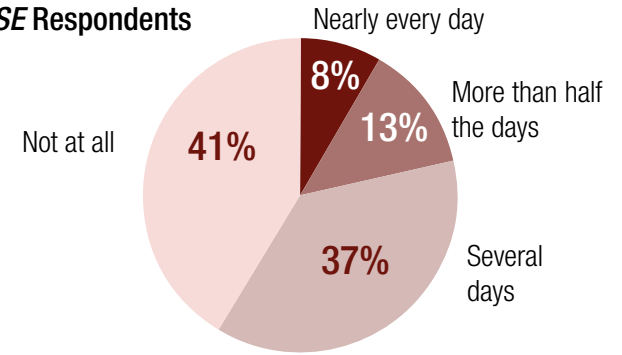
CCSSE Respondents



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data

SENSE Respondents

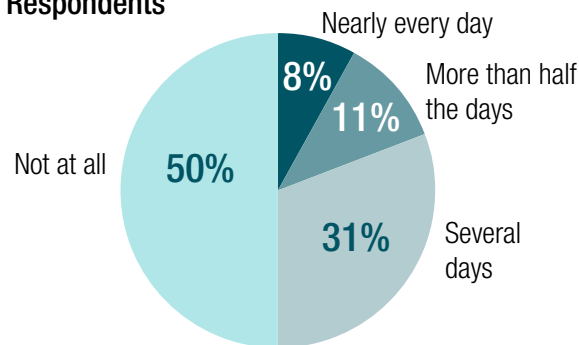


Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: SENSE 2023 data

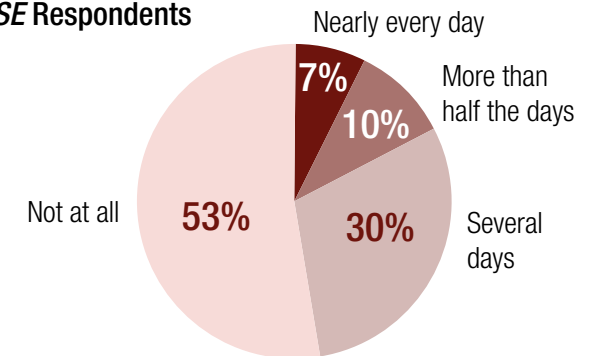
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2023 data

SENSE Respondents



Source: SENSE 2023 data

Questions Used in the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2)

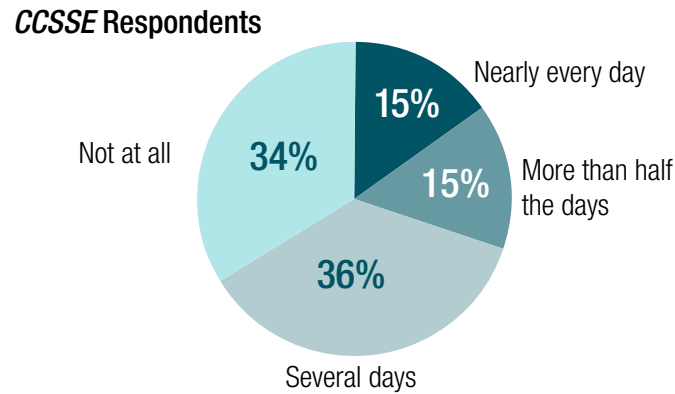
The GAD-2 is a standardized initial screening tool for generalized anxiety disorder. The following two questions make up the GAD-2:¹²

- ⚙ Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?
- ⚙ Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by not being able to stop or control worrying?

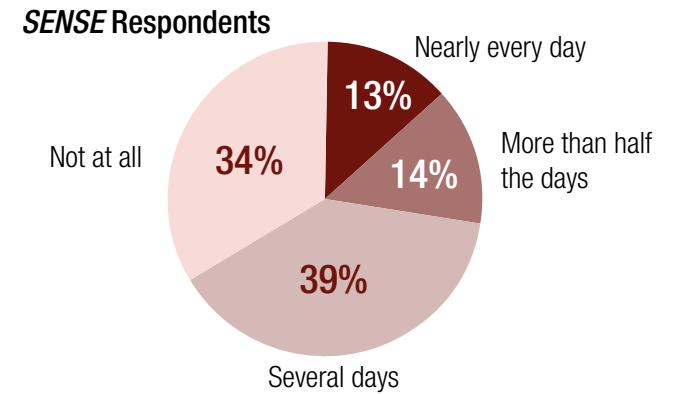
Not at all: 0 | Several days: 1 | More than half the days: 2 | Nearly every day: 3

GAD-2 results are calculated by adding the scores of the two questions, resulting in a score of 0–6. Respondents with a combined score of 3 or higher *likely have generalized anxiety disorder* and should have further screening. Respondents with a score of 2 or lower *likely do not have generalized anxiety disorder*. These phrases reflect the fact that results from the two questions are not definitive.

Responses are scored as follows:
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?

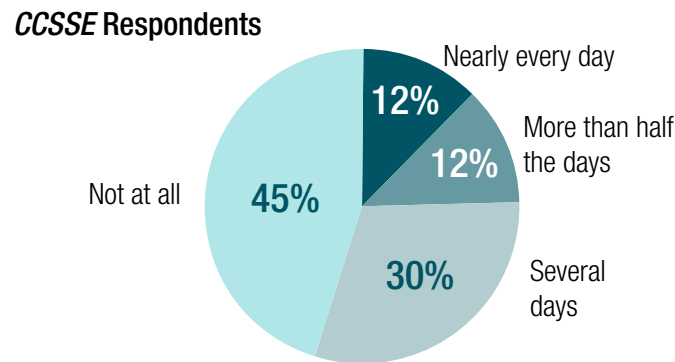


Source: CCSSE 2023 data



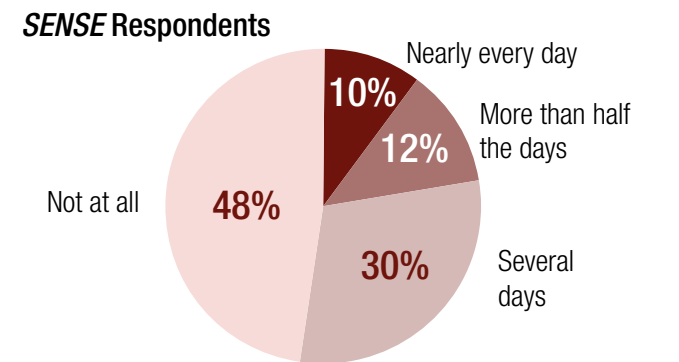
Source: SENSE 2023 data

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by not being able to stop or control worrying?



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: CCSSE 2023 data



Source: SENSE 2023 data

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CCCSE Member Colleges and CCCSE Staff

Visit the [CCCSE website](#) for more information about the surveys as well as CCCSE member colleges and CCCSE staff.

Endnotes

- 1 Prabhakar, A., & Rice, S. (2023, February 7). *White House report on mental health research priorities*. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/White-House-Report-on-Mental-Health-Research-Priorities.pdf>
- 2 Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national Healthy Minds Study, 2013–2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138–147. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165032722002774?via%3Dihub>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
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