

High ANXIETY

With academic stress and mental health disorders on the rise, Macalester is boosting resources to help students build more balanced lives.

BY LAURA BILLINGS COLEMAN → ILLUSTRATIONS BY JON KRAUSE / JOANIEBREP.COM

It takes a few months for most first years to start feeling at home at Macalester, but from the moment he stepped onto campus this fall, one newcomer was on a first-name basis with nearly everyone he met.

“Kevin’s like a celebrity. When you walk with him, everyone’s calling his name and rushing over to him— ‘Kevin is here! Kevin is here!’” says **Emma Swanson ’16** (Ypsilanti, Mich.) “During move-in weekend he must have met 200 people. Everyone just loves him.”

All of that squealing, shouting, and selfie-snapping could easily go to a guy’s head, but Kevin’s closest companions report that in spite of his BMOC status, he’s still managing to keep his feet firmly on the ground. All four of them.

Kevin’s clear head and approving swagger are all part of the training this three-year-old Golden Retriever has received at the hands of his owner and trainer, Stephanie Walters, Macalester’s medical director. Her 85-pound purebred is a certified therapy dog, originally trained to work as a reading dog in elementary schools, offering tail-wagging encouragement to young learners sounding out new literacy skills.

But as Walters and her colleagues at Mac’s Health and Wellness Center (HWC) have been faced with a steadily rising demand for counseling services, off-campus therapy referrals, and other stress-reduction resources, they began to wonder whether Kevin might be cut out for work in higher education.

“I’d leave the house in the morning knowing that this wonderful therapy dog would be spending the day looking out the window, while every day I’m talking to students who are dealing with real stress, sadness, homesickness, and anxiety,” says Walters. Studies show that simply petting a beloved animal can trigger a wave of positive brain and bodily responses, boosting calming compounds like oxytocin, and lowering the stress hormone cortisol, a chemical actor in anxiety—now the top mental health complaint of college students nationwide.

As an experiment, the HWC team has put Kevin to work this year, pairing him with four trained student handlers who accompany him on his twice-weekly “rounds.” Modeling his role on a larger such initiative at the University of Minnesota called “Petting Away Worry and Stress,” Kevin has been appearing at orientation sessions and wellness-training groups, greeting students in his stride, and submitting to all manner of belly rubs, paw shakes, and ear scratches. He even has his own Instagram account (@pawsatmac), and, like other campus therapists, maintains regular office hours at the Leonard Center, offering his soulful brown eyes to slumping sophomores, and comic relief to lab-weary chemistry majors.

While Kevin’s campus gig is still a pet project, Walters believes he’s already filling a necessary niche in the growing menu of mental health services Macalester provides for its students. “He’s a dog, of course, but he really is a fantastic listener.”



Anxiety 101

Good listeners are in high demand at college counseling centers these days, which have seen an 8 percent surge in student use nationwide, according to research from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) at Pennsylvania State University. More than half of students visiting campus clinics cite anxiety symptoms as the reason for their visit—a trend Ted Rueff, HWC associate director, says is mirrored at Macalester.

“Last year was the first year that stress and anxiety superseded depression as the number one presenting concern,” he says, noting that counseling slots to assist struggling students are fully booked by October each year. Although most students his counseling staff sees may need only a handful of the 10 counseling sessions Mac students are entitled to each year, even a short waiting list for mental health care can be a cause for concern. According to CCHM research, more than 30 percent of college students who have sought mental health care at campus clinics report that they’ve seriously considered attempting suicide at

some point—up from a quarter of students in 2010.

“It’s not an epidemic, but we’re seeing a real increase in demand for a variety of reasons,” says Dean of Students Jim Hoppe. One major reason is the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has opened doors to students who a generation ago might not have had the support to succeed in college. In fact, each year nearly three-quarters of Macalester students who request academic accommodations plans for a disability do so because of a mental health diagnosis. Nationwide, nearly half of college students receiving campus mental health services had already had counseling in the past, while nearly a third had been prescribed medication for mental health concerns.

“We know more than we did 30 years ago, and the positive part of that is that many more students can succeed in high school and go on to college,” Hoppe says. Making a healthy transition to early adulthood, he says, “means going from having their parents manage their lives to becoming more independent, and part of the adjustment colleges have had to make is in helping students figure out how to navigate that on their own.”

To meet the need, Macalester now has four full-time counselors and two graduate counseling interns, as well as a new staffer who helps students in crisis or those coping with chronic mental health conditions find long-term care providers. “We’re really lucky to be in a resource-rich area,” says mental health care coordinator Beryl Wingate. “I help students review their insurance, look at the providers available to them—even those in specialty areas—to provide students with the best resources available.”

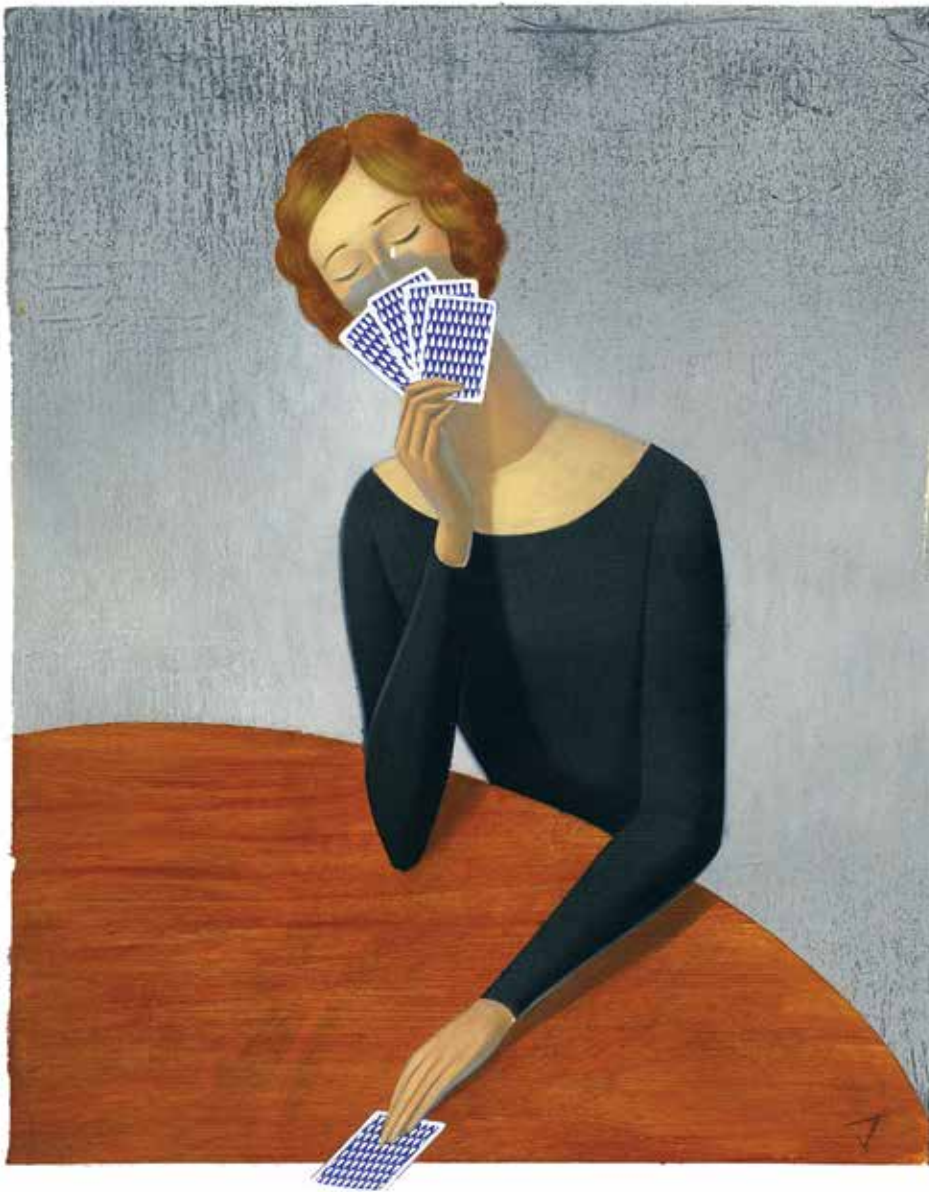
While there’s an active debate in higher education circles about how much mental health care colleges are obligated to provide students, research suggests that investing in more comprehensive care provides a return for colleges through higher student retention and graduation rates. “The argument is that if a student had cancer, you’d never expect to get chemotherapy from a college, so trying to define that boundary is a challenge,” Hoppe says. “But it’s a new skill set that colleges are trying to foster.”

Trigger Points

The most common complaints that push stressed-out students to seek help would be familiar to Macalester graduates from nearly any era—roommate conflicts and romantic break-ups, “sophomore slump” and “senioritis,” the culture shock common to international and study abroad students, not to mention the first time a straight-A high school student confronts a college-level C.

While those trigger points are easy to predict, says mental health counselor Mia Nosanow, the stakes can feel higher for many of today’s students, who’ve amassed top GPAs, test scores, and extracurriculars just to get accepted at Macalester and other selective schools.





“One of the big changes we see is that academically, the bar is so much higher,” she says. “These kids are sometimes writing 60- to 80-page papers, producing nearly master’s degree level work, while they’re also running multiple social media platforms” that have spawned a whole new subset of stressors, like “FOMO”—the fear of missing out. “I have students who will fight with me about taking 20 minutes at the end of the day to read for pleasure, because they think it’s impossible to take time for themselves.” The high cost of a college education only adds to their anxiety. “A generation ago, you could work two summer jobs and pay for college, but these kids are making \$8 an hour and looking at tuition costs of \$60,000 a year,” Nosanow says. “That’s not a mental health problem—it’s an economic reality.”

Psychology professor Jaine Strauss, co-director of the program in Community and Global Health, says the uptick in anxiety is a trend she talks about with colleagues and in classroom discussions. “One rudimentary way to think about it is that anxiety has to do with looking forward, it’s often about *what will happen if?* while depression is more about looking backward,” she says. “When I think about the phenomena we’re talking about—*Am I going to get a job? Am I going to have crush-*

ing debt? Am I going to be worthy in my peers’ eyes?—those are all future looking.”

Coming of age during an era beset by terrorism, climate change, and a growing economic divide, she says, “this is a generation that just may have more worry about what’s coming next.” One strain of stress that seems more common among Mac students, she adds, is a strong sense of social justice “and a deep desire to get the most of your education and make a difference”—even if it means burning out in the process. “If the way you demonstrate your worth is by having more to do than everybody else, that’s not sustainable.”

Misery Poker

One telltale symptom of increasing anxiety levels is a game observers call “misery poker,” in which players raise the stakes on how overwhelmed they are. “You hear people say, ‘I’ve got a 10-page paper due tomorrow that I haven’t even started,’ and then the next person says, ‘Oh yeah? Well, I’ve got a 12-page paper, and a lab due...’” explains **Lucas Myers ’17** (St. Michael, Minn.), a political science and Chinese major. “It’s a drive to the bottom. The academic pressure is self-imposed, but it’s also part of the culture.”

Misery poker and its counterparts are major topics of discussion at weekly gathering of Voices of Mental Health, a student-run advocacy group, says Myers, who is co-chair of the organization. The relentlessly sunny filter of social media is another common complaint, “where you have to remind yourself not to compare yourself to others

and that people are only posting their peak moments. Someone who’s posting ‘Hey, look at me, I got this great internship,’ is probably not going to mention being turned down for 10 others.”

Voices hosts a series of campus events that call attention to the fact that one in four young adults between age ages of 18 and 24 has a diagnosable mental illness, which can put them at high risk for dropping out of college. In fact, the National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that 64 percent of young adults who leave college do so because of mental health-related concerns. That’s one reason Voices co-chair **Jessie Miller ’16** (Chicago) makes a point of encouraging struggling students to get help “before it gets so bad that you can’t do anything about it.”

Last year, Miller fell into a depression so profound “that I couldn’t get out of bed” for days and was “definitely at risk of dropping out.” Working with Assistant Dean of Students Robin Hart Ruthenbeck, she requested an accommodations plan that gave her time to finish her schoolwork and start feeling better with the help of regular therapy. “It helped me so much,” Miller says. “I would not have been able to finish the semester without that accommodations plans. It was a life-saver.”



Teaching Resilience

WHEN IT COMES to understanding the uptick in college mental health concerns, headlines often focus on the rise of the so-called helicopter parent, hovering near their child at the first sign of trouble. But Dean of Students Jim Hoppe says that scenario oversimplifies a more complex connection between today's college students and their parents.

"This generation of students is often very close to and trusting of their parents, which is a good thing," he says. "When it becomes debilitating to students is when parents step in to make decisions for their students," sweeping away obstacles before students have a chance to solve the problem on their own, a trend some college observers call "Snowplow Parenting."

While most college parents can expect a tearful phone call or a freaked-out text message from their kids, counseling services director Ted Rueff urges those on the receiving end to relax. "At any given moment your child may be flipping out, but remember, it's a state, not a trait. Many times students will call their parents in distress, hang up in tears, and then go out for dinner with a roommate and feel much better. But the parent is at home assuming they've got a real problem on their hands."

If your child is struggling, Rueff recommends this line of questioning to help college students seek help in a way that builds self-reliance. "Start with *How are you feeling?* It's a question that can help students articulate what they're experiencing, and make them feel better understood. Next, try *What can you do about it?* which is more empowering than *How can I help?* And finally, ask them *What resources can you turn to on your campus?* which encourages resourcefulness and resilience."



WEB CONNECT: To learn more about how parents can encourage a healthy transition to college, visit macalester.edu/healthandwellness/parents.

Building a Sustainable Student

Last fall, 74 Macalester students sought accommodations plans for such issues as anxiety, depression, PTSD, OCD, bipolar disorder, and Autism spectrum disorders—yet studies suggest those numbers don't represent all the students who may need help. NAMI reports that each year, nearly 73 percent of students living with a mental health condition experienced a crisis, yet fewer than half of those students reported their concerns to the college.

That's why Macalester's counseling services are aimed at anticipating some challenges, providing a weekly grief and loss support group, keeping open drop-in counseling hours to meet emergent needs, and offering popular programs like Cultivating Calm that teach students yoga, meditation, and mindfulness training. Upstream solutions like these can help students manage stressful times, says counselor Rueff, and help keep a problem from becoming a full-blown crisis. "Macalester has really embraced the idea of wellness as a college-wide concern, where we task ourselves with building a more resilient student, one who is living a more sustainable lifestyle, and who is invested in their own self-care," he says.

One of the earliest lessons first-year students learn is the value of healthy sleep—still a tough sell in dorms where all-nighters are common. For the last three years, Lisa Broek, associate director of health promotions, has led a campus campaign for better sleep, visiting more than 20 first-year seminars this fall to share research and health tips about the value of rest. Poor sleep can negatively impact mental health, Broek says, "and new research shows that sleep is increasingly important when it comes to academic success." That's why she encourages students to check out the HWC's online "nap map" charting cozy places around campus to curl up for 20 minutes, and urges them to turn off computers, smartphones, and other devices for at least 30 minutes of "digital detox" before bedtime. "Exercise, good nutrition, and sleep—it's not glamorous, but it's what works," she says.

Another stress-busting initiative is "Embody the Change," a confidential peer community program now in its second year on campus. Last year more than 100 Mac students took part in a training session, then broke up into smaller groups of five or six students that met for weekly "ETC Circles" to discuss the tension between what they want to accomplish in life and how they want to live. In a campus community as hard-charging as Macalester's, says medical director Walters, "For many students, the answer is not always to involve yourself more, but to step back. You have to learn to take care of yourself first, before you can take care of everything else."

That's a message for good mental health that Rueff hopes Macalester students are encountering on multiple fronts. "If you want to be an effective agent of social change, you need to keep the instrument sharp—and that instrument is you." **M**

LAURA BILLINGS COLEMAN, a Macalester neighbor, is a regular contributor to the magazine.