



Here Is What We Need to Know about Digital Mental Health

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Much research is available focusing on the influence of technology on mental health. Historically, academic studies related to mental health and technology have mostly focused on how faculty and institutional leaders might better support students; however, this is changing due in part to the pandemic. During the pandemic, a growing body of national research emerged focusing on faculty mental health and wellness. To have a fully actualized and robust campus community, a healthy body of faculty, staff, and academic leaders is crucial.



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College campuses are a microcosm of the greater society, and the pandemic has revealed that some members of the academic community are struggling emotionally. Some colleagues are experiencing persistent and pervasive conditions that could directly impact (digital) mental health and the overall functioning of the institution.

I define digital mental health as the influence of technology and virtual tools, such as the Internet and social media, on our social and emotional wellbeing. The sudden transition to online teaching and learning in March 2020 followed by prolonged exposure to stress will likely have a long-term impact on the mental health and wellness of faculty, staff, and academic leaders for years to come. To illustrate this point, **the following are examples of ongoing challenges that could potentially impact digital mental health:**

1. During the pandemic, many faculty and staff roles changed and/or were expanded.

Added responsibilities, along with working from home, frequently resulted in longer hours worked, excessive exposure to digital devices/blue light, and more stress. Individuals exposed to these chronic issues may be especially vulnerable to digital mental health concerns, especially if they are receiving little or no emotional and psychological support.

2. Some members of the academic community are actively contending with undiagnosed depression, impacting their academic productivity and other responsibilities. These faculty may experience difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and completing basic work tasks.
3. Other members of the academy experiencing prolonged stress could develop physical health challenges that could unintentionally impact student learning and the stability of the institution.
4. Institutional leaders may also be susceptible to digital mental health challenges, struggling under the weight of emails, online meetings, and other virtual responsibilities. Additionally, academic leaders have had to quickly adapt to changing dynamics associated with COVID-19 variants and the struggle to contain rates of infection within the campus community. Leaders have worked to establish flexible policies to protect the health and safety of the campus community, while also facing criticisms associated with personal rights and freedom of choice.
5. During the pandemic, some departments faced critically low course enrollment rates, impacting the survival of some academic programs. This could impact the mental health of deans, chairs, and faculty as they work to adapt to changing conditions with limited financial resources.
6. Students and some faculty are fatigued by engaging in online instruction; however, some faculty are fearful of returning to face-to-face instruction due to health risks. Faculty mental health is a concern given societal pressure to return to traditional methods of instruction.
7. Some faculty and staff are managing work obligations while competing for physical spaces at home. Unanticipated Internet service interruptions could result in anxiety, loss of productivity, and an extension of the workday.
8. Faculty (and others) must maintain obligations to deliver professional research presentations during COVID. At times, travel is required and cannot be avoided due to the nature of the research. Traveling restrictions during the pandemic due to lack of available virtual/digital conferences could also impact faculty mental health and wellness.
9. Some faculty and staff grapple with unhealthy departmental relationships that are further strained by virtual/online meetings. The anxiety associated with unhealthy relationships could also impact emotional wellbeing.
10. Some individuals working from home have experienced increased social isolation due to lack of quality interaction with colleagues and others.

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What can we do now as a community to address challenges related to digital mental health during the pandemic and beyond?

1. Acknowledge that life challenges can sometimes impact our ability to maintain quality mental health, especially during times of uncertainty, like the pandemic.
2. Academic leaders can talk about the importance of quality mental health to help reduce stigma associated with help seeking. Encourage individuals who may be experiencing emotional stress and anxiety inherent in their work roles to share with supervisors and decision makers when they are feeling overwhelmed, without fear of penalty.
3. Encourage members of the campus community to engage in proper nutrition, health and wellness activities, with incentives (such as gift cards to healthy restaurants, etc.)
4. Establish a weekly guided meditation hour or group exercise hour on campus (socially distanced). Encourage participants to log their daily activities and meals. Provide an incentive, such as winning real scheduled time off.
5. Address (do not ignore) dysfunctional faculty and staff. Their undesirable behavior could contaminate others. Their behavior might also be an unaddressed cry for help that has been ignored for too long.
6. Establish a formal structure for tenure-track faculty support, with senior faculty mentors who are committed to ensuring junior faculty success and mental health.
7. Build a vibrant campus community by modeling certain behaviors, such as encouraging the community to de-stress by attending campus events, such as socially distanced theater performances and student-athlete sporting events.
8. Take time for yourself, learn a new skill or activity (Pickleball, Tai Chi, Yoga, Chess, etc.) to stimulate the mind and body. Enroll in a fitness and/or wellness course in your home community or on campus.
9. Encourage members of the campus community (faculty/staff/administrators) to schedule a monthly digital detox day. At times it can be difficult to unplug or disconnect from work. A digital detox is a day when individuals abstain from using forms of technology, while reconnecting with their external environment. Digital detox activities, such as taking a walk outside can help enhance overall digital mental health and wellness.
10. As a helpful reminder, academic leaders can share information related to current



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insurance provider benefits and personal mental health counseling with faculty and staff.