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Reaching  
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*This story discusses suicide and related mental health issues. If you're in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or reach out to the Crisis Text Line by texting HOME to 741741 for help.*

When she enrolled at Western Kentucky University, Olivia Eiler already had years of experience managing her depression and anxiety disorder with the help of family and friends in New Albany, Indiana.

“But when I got to college, all that support kind of fell away,” she said. “It just really kind of got off the rails.”

Being separated from her support system was harder than she expected, and making friends at WKU was difficult.

“We have a Subway (restaurant) at school, and for a couple of weeks it just made me anxious to be in line,” she explained. “If it’s hard to stand in line at Subway, just imagine how hard it is to go up to a stranger or talk to the person sitting next to you in class.”

Anxiety and depression gradually overwhelmed her.

She kept thinking things like: "My family doesn't love me." She knows that's not true, but she couldn't see that when her symptoms were out of control.

She thought she'd feel better when she went back to New Albany for winter break, but she didn't. While she was home, she tried to kill herself.

As Eiler and other students speak up about their struggles with suicide, their colleges, professors and peers are banding together to support them.

Schools are doing more suicide prevention training on campus and are encouraging people to speak up if someone they know may be in distress. They're also forming committees to figure out how to better help their students.

Meanwhile, faculty and staff are checking in more often with students not just about how they're faring in class, but about how they're feeling. And the students themselves are reaching out to one another for support and spreading the word about mental health resources.

Suicidal thoughts aren't rare. At the University of Kentucky's counseling center, data shows more than 30% of clients in each of the past five fiscal years reported they had previously experienced suicidal thoughts.

That tracks with national trends. About 36% of students seen by various college counseling centers during the 2017-18 academic year said they'd seriously considered attempting suicide at some point of their lives, according to data collected by the [Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Penn State](https://ccmh.psu.edu/publications/) (<https://ccmh.psu.edu/publications/>).

**More on this project:** [As more students deal with mental health issues, colleges stretched thin in offering help](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/10/07/mental-health-students-rely-on-colleges-with-limited-resources/1878332001/) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/10/07/mental-health-students-rely-on-colleges-with-limited-resources/1878332001/>).

Thankfully, Eiler lived — and got the help she needed.

She received inpatient treatment in Indiana and began going to therapy at WKU's counseling center when she returned to school. She's a senior now and said she's doing much better. She even spent her summer interning at a television station in Alabama.

"The biggest thing that has helped me is support groups," she said. "Probably my biggest symptom is isolation and just thinking that it's up to me and I need to do everything by myself."

When UK lost two 19-year-old students — Taylor Nolan and Sean Culley — to suicide in January, University President Eli Capilouto called for the school's students, faculty and staff to rely on one another.

"We will get through these trying times as a UK family," he wrote soon after Taylor and Sean died. He also launched a task force to evaluate UK's approach to mental health and recommend improvements.



**Olivia Eiler, a senior at Western Kentucky University, survived her suicide attempt her freshman year. She copes with her mental health challenges by getting professional help and receiving support from her friends and family.**

*(Photo: Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal)*

“Such losses of people so absurdly young and so remarkably full of promise makes dimmer our community spirit and makes heavy our individual hearts,” Capilouto wrote. “My hope is that everyone on our campus — no matter who you are, where you are from, what you look like, or what you believe — can know you are not alone.”

Nine months later, Taylor and Sean’s families are working through their grief.

“Things can be going well for a couple hours, a couple days, and then you get blindsided with something as simple as a song, a picture, a T-shirt,” Sean’s dad, Stephen Culley of Brick, New Jersey, told *The Courier Journal*.

Sean — an outgoing, competitive guy who loved playing basketball — was living with depression, and Taylor — a friendly young woman with a talent for art — was living with anxiety, according to their parents.

They each told their family they were having a harder time than usual the semester before they died, but their parents didn’t know they were thinking about suicide.

When Sean was home for Christmas break, he talked about how difficult things had been lately and made plans to get professional help, Culley said.

Sometimes, though, he masked how he felt to make it seem like he was OK.

“I don’t know how many times he was struggling to basically get out of bed and function,” Culley said. “We’ll be spending the rest of our lives asking what we should’ve done.”

Colleges are trying to protect students, in part, by providing prevention training that teaches people to recognize when someone might be at risk for suicide and how to help.

Eastern Kentucky University has trained more than 3,000 members of its community since fall 2016, said Melissa Bartsch, its counseling center director. ECU also made the training a staple of its freshman orientation classes.

And from early August through mid-September alone, about 420 students and employees at UK received suicide prevention training, according to Mary Bolin, the director of the university’s counseling center.

Personal connection helps keep people alive, Bolin said. Whether you’re someone’s friend, parent, professor or coworker, it’s important to reach out to them if you’re worried.

“There’s a myth that if we talk about suicide, we’ll give somebody the idea,” she said. “If deep down in your gut you feel like something is not right, something is probably not right ... and you don’t know unless you ask.”



**Sean Culley, a University of Kentucky student who loved playing basketball, died by suicide in January. His father, Stephen Culley, says this is one of his favorite photos of his son.**

*(Photo: Courtesy of Stephen Culley)*

**More on this project:** [Here's where college students and parents can get help with mental health \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/10/07/mental-health-how-college-students-and-parents-can-get-help/2344204001/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/10/07/mental-health-how-college-students-and-parents-can-get-help/2344204001/)

## Losing Taylor

Taylor Schlosser of Springfield, Kentucky, never wants another mother to get the same knock on the door she did late one night, when the coroner came to say her daughter had died by suicide.

She let her youngest son, David Clay Brown, 15, sleep until Taylor's two other brothers made it home — giving him just a little more time before his life changed, too.

"I'm never not going to have this grief," Schlosser told The Courier Journal. "My boys are never not going to have it."

David Clay and his sister were close. She'd make him food, and he'd make her chocolate milk. She'd give him a ride to practice, and he'd go shopping with her.

"She was my buddy," he said. "I'd bug her all the time."

Taylor cared a lot, about everything, he said. "She'd talk about anything with you."

Taylor was excited to go to college, especially a Southeastern Conference school, her mom said. She joined a sorority and even got elected to UK's student government.

"It took a lot of courage to step out in such a big university," Schlosser said. "She wanted to be a leader."

Taylor dealt with anxiety in high school, Schlosser said, and it increased again during sophomore year. Sometimes she felt like she was having a panic attack.

Taylor realized she was doing too much, so she stepped back from student government.

She spent her winter break painting Christmas gifts for her family. Just before she went back to school, she gave her mom a 45 record painted with a scene of Colorado, where their family vacationed the prior summer.

She died by suicide less than a week later.

The hardest part is wondering what her daughter was thinking the day she died, Schlosser said.

They had a good relationship and talked about difficult issues, but this time, Taylor didn't tell her how she was feeling.



**Taylor Schlosser holds a family photo of herself and daughter, Taylor Rae Nolan. Taylor died by suicide at age of 19 while she was a student at UK.**

*(Photo: Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal)*

"Was she trying to be a super student and trying to do more than she could do?" she wonders. "Was this a rash decision, or had she been thinking about this forever?"

**Read this:** [When kids say 'I want to kill myself': The alarming rise of youth suicides \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/03/20/suicides-among-children-rising-kentucky-nationally/3065115002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/03/20/suicides-among-children-rising-kentucky-nationally/3065115002/)

## Pressure to be perfect and to perform

Risk factors for suicide include anxiety and depression — and colleges in Kentucky and other states are seeing more students seek professional help for those conditions.

"There's no single cause for suicide," according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's website. "Suicide most often occurs when stressors and health issues converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair."

In a 2019 research survey, the American College Health Association found about 45% of the students surveyed had felt so depressed it was difficult to function within the last 12 months, and around 66% felt overwhelming anxiety within that time span.

About 56% of the students surveyed felt things were hopeless at least once that year.

The frequency and intensity of suicidal thoughts varies by person, according to Bolin, who leads UK's counseling center. "It's easy for our brains, sometimes, to lie to us about things and send us down a dark path," she said.

It isn't uncommon, particularly in periods of overwhelming stress, for someone to have brief, isolated thoughts about suicide — which may subside and never return, she said.

However, some people might experience an intense, one-time suicidal situation that includes an intention to act.

People also may have repeated thoughts of suicide, which may be fleeting for some folks or more intense and specific for others.

Whether a student has one-time or recurrent thoughts of suicide, help is available through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and other sources of support, such as their college's counseling center.

"When you work with somebody and they get to a point where the light comes on and it's really clear that their commitment is to staying alive and doing everything they can do to have the best quality of life they can ... it's really pretty amazing," Bolin said.

Various stressors — including current events, financial problems and family issues — can weigh on students and hurt their mental health, especially if they're already struggling with suicidal thoughts, according to professors and counseling center directors at several



**Taylor Rae Nolan painted this scene on a record for her mother, Taylor Schlosser. Taylor died by suicide at the age of 19 while she was a student at UK.**

*(Photo: Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal)*

universities in Kentucky.

Spalding University's director of Counseling and Psychological Services, Allison From-Tapp, said she's seeing more students — especially people of color and LGBTQ individuals — dealing with trauma that's rooted in what they've experienced as members of a marginalized community.

They may routinely see police brutality and hear politicians make bigoted comments, for example, and students with family members who are undocumented are terrified their loved ones will be taken away.

"A lot of those folks are really scared," she said. "It's a normal fear. That's not a mental illness, but it's definitely a mental health problem."

Kaila Story, an associate professor at U of L who teaches courses on race, gender and sexuality studies, said she thinks people are collectively starting to unpack the psychological impacts of racism, sexism and homophobia.

"How do you deal with folks getting your pronouns wrong?" she asked, as an example of the challenges transgender people face. "We have to think about these things as things that affect the psyche. These aren't just emotional bruises or an emotional affront."

**Earlier:** [UK launches mental health task force after students' hunger strike \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/04/12/uk-opens-1-cafe-launches-mental-health-task-force-help-students/3440896002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/04/12/uk-opens-1-cafe-launches-mental-health-task-force-help-students/3440896002/)

Therapists need to be well-versed in how those forms of discrimination affect students' mental health, she pointed out.

The transition to college can be tough on students, too, Story said, especially if they've moved from a rural town to a city like Louisville.

"You know, this is the first time many students are away from their families and the people they grew up with," she noted.

Financial issues also stress students out as college gets more expensive.

"I think our students are dealing with more financial pressure than they were a generation ago," said Bartsch, the director of ECU's counseling center. "And I've also seen students demonstrate resiliency in ways that, a generation ago, we didn't have to."

# Average tuition and fees for public universities in Kentucky

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For example, Bartsch said it never even occurred to her to worry about mass shootings when she was in college in the mid-1990s.

Students today face that fear every day.

Bartsch and Bolin also pointed to the impact social media can have on students' mental health as a relatively new development.

"There's more pressure to be perfect and to perform," Bartsch said. "How many of us have taken 25 pictures to get that perfect spontaneous selfie before we post it? I think our social media lives and our actual lives continue to diverge, and there's a lot of pressure to make reality look like social media."

Students face a constant barrage of information online and limitless opportunities to compare themselves to others, Bolin said, which feeds into their fear of falling behind.

Social isolation is also a big issue, she said. Many students make friends online but have a hard time forging connections beyond the confines of a screen.

However, Story said the internet can positively impact students, too. Connecting with people online who get what they're going through can empower them.

For her part, the main thing Story can do for her students is hear them out.

"I think that for a lot of my students, just being a listening ear is help enough, in some ways," she said.

**See also:** [JCPS suicides leave students, parents and staff struggling](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/06/06/louisville-student-suicides-leave-jcps-youth-staff-struggling-cope/1205176001/)  
(<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/06/06/louisville-student-suicides-leave-jcps-youth-staff-struggling-cope/1205176001/>)

## 'It has to be a group effort'

College officials in Kentucky see suicide prevention as a campuswide initiative that requires an "all hands on deck" attitude.

Universities' faculty and staff are expected to watch for signs a student may be in crisis and connect them with resources like the school counseling center, but it can be hard to tell when someone is struggling.

"They cover really well. They show up to class, they seem to be OK," said Melissa Merry, a political science professor at U of L. "They're sort of white-knuckling it."

She remembers one student who told her, long after the semester ended, that he was having thoughts of suicide back then. "I had no idea," she said.

College athletics departments are paying closer attention to students' mental health, too, said Pat Ivey, U of L's associate athletics director for student-athlete health and performance.

For example, Louisville has a sports psychologist, psychiatrist and licensed counselor who work solely with student-athletes.

"They're human beings just like the rest of us," he said. And it's everyone's responsibility — athletes' coaches, professors, friends and family — to be there for them.

"It has to be a group effort," he explained. "Not every athlete is going to be comfortable approaching the same person to share what's going on, so they have to know there are people that are here they can reach out to."

When a student faces a crisis, such as suicidal thoughts or sexual assault, U of L has a "student care team" that reaches out to help, Assistant Provost for Student Affairs Angela Taylor said. Other colleges have similar initiatives.

"We've created a culture where we want you to speak up," she said.

U of L also employs a student advocate, Samantha MacKenzie, who helps students navigate a wide array of problems, including mental health issues.

Sometimes, she tells students about her experiences to show them they're not alone.

When she was a senior studying at U of L, MacKenzie said the idea of graduating terrified her. She had thoughts of suicide and sought treatment.

It took time and a lot of work, but she's still here.

"I know for me what made a difference was talking to people who have been through it," she said.

That's why she opens up to the students she sees today — to reassure them their world isn't ending, even if it feels like it is, and there are people here, ready to help.



**Opinion:** [Mental illness and suicide affect all demographics, but there's hope](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/2019/05/23/mental-health-awareness-month-these-issues-affect-everyone/3749645002/)  
(<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/2019/05/23/mental-health-awareness-month-these-issues-affect-everyone/3749645002/>)

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## **About this story**

Courier Journal reporter Morgan Watkins spent four months delving into college students' struggles with mental health in Kentucky and around the country. She collected data from various universities and interviewed college officials to learn more about how they're trying to meet students' rising demand for therapy despite limited resources. She also interviewed parents who've lost their children to suicide as well as several students who opened up about what it's like to deal with depression and anxiety.

Mental health impacts college students' lives in myriad ways, and ensuring students reach out for and receive the support they need can save lives. The Courier Journal is committed to covering this issue over the long term.

This is one of a series of stories The Courier Journal will be publishing on mental health in the coming months. We welcome you to follow our coverage and share your own experiences with and concerns about mental health issues, especially those affecting college students in Kentucky.

Feel free to contact reporter Morgan Watkins by calling her at 502-582-4502 or emailing her at [mwatkins@gannett.com](mailto:mwatkins@gannett.com).



- [Waterfront Botanical Gardens celebrates grand opening with huge donations \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/10/04/waterfront-botanical-gardens-louisville-opening-ceremony/3863796002/?utm\\_source=oembed&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_campaign=storylines&utm\\_content=news&utm\\_term=](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/10/04/waterfront-botanical-gardens-louisville-opening-ceremony/3863796002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=)
- [Kentucky jury returns \\$32M verdict against company whose truck driver killed nurse \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/10/04/kentucky-news-company-must-pay-32-m-dui-crash-killed-nurse/3863744002/?utm\\_source=oembed&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_campaign=storylines&utm\\_content=news&utm\\_term=](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/10/04/kentucky-news-company-must-pay-32-m-dui-crash-killed-nurse/3863744002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=)
- 📷 [The St. James Court Art Show is back in Louisville with beautiful sights \(https://www.courier-journal.com/gallery/news/local/2019/10/04/2019-st-james-court-art-fair-louisville-kentucky-photos/3865331002/?utm\\_source=oembed&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_campaign=storylines&utm\\_content=news&utm\\_term=](https://www.courier-journal.com/gallery/news/local/2019/10/04/2019-st-james-court-art-fair-louisville-kentucky-photos/3865331002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=)
- [Louisville Catholic church says it will declare 'sanctuary' status \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/religion/2019/10/04/st-william-catholic-church-louisville-declares-itself-sanctuary/3853151002/?utm\\_source=oembed&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_campaign=storylines&utm\\_content=news&utm\\_term=](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/religion/2019/10/04/st-william-catholic-church-louisville-declares-itself-sanctuary/3853151002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=)
- [Matt Bevin tells Louisville Tea Party why he dropped Jenean Hampton \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/ky-governor/2019/10/04/matt-bevin-dropped-jenean-hampton-dui-disagreements/3857766002/?utm\\_source=oembed&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_campaign=storylines&utm\\_content=news&utm\\_term=](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/ky-governor/2019/10/04/matt-bevin-dropped-jenean-hampton-dui-disagreements/3857766002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=)

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