

MENTAL HEALTH UPDATE

Current trends and concerns for international students

The Presenter



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International Student
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- M.Ed. in Higher Education
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Data compiled by **Justin Chen, MD, MPH**, Co-Founder, MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Weill Cornell Medicine/New York-Presbyterian; adapted from “Navigating Mental Health Crises” presentation from NAFSA Annual Conference 2025

What Are You Seeing?

What are the current mental health challenges on your campus?



What Are We Seeing?

Multiple federal policy changes affecting international students:



Trade Wars



Detentions and
Deportations



Cancellation of
Federal Funding



Revoking of Visas

"The advice we've been given is to fill out a form and give it to a citizen so if anything happens, they can contact lawyers on your behalf. We have red cards that we walk around with, which have a script for what to do if you meet an ICE agent. We've also been carrying our visa papers around, because we heard that in the next town, someone was pulled over at a traffic stop and the cops told them to show their papers or they would call ICE."

Bhavya

PhD international student from India

“I'm scared to be out. I'm scared to come to school. I'm scared to go grocery shopping... I'm afraid that if I'm walking, I will be approached by agents in incognito clothes and plain disguise.”

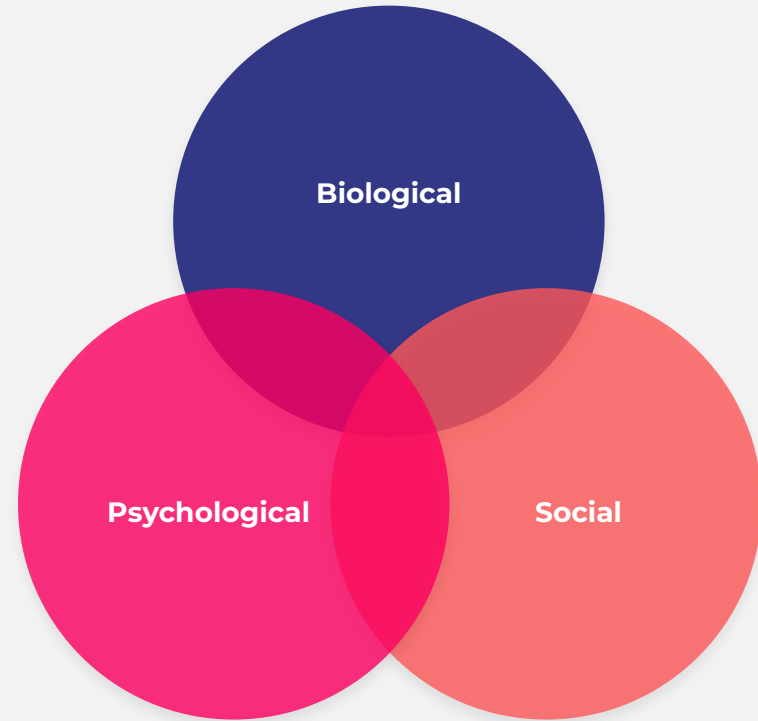
Anonymous international Master's Student
University of Texas

Mental Health is Multifactorial

The **biopsychosocial model** teaches that different factors contribute to mental health.

These factors likely exert their influence through a common pathway of **stress** (and one's ability to **cope with stress**.)

A major modifiable contributor to resilience vs. stress is a **sense of belonging/community**.



Lost in Translation

Communication & Culture

Qualitative study of self-segregation motivation and frequency among 17 Chinese international graduate students at George Mason University.

I want to talk to Americans, but I have no confidence in my English. When I speak with native-English speakers, sometimes I can't understand them and it's very embarrassing. **I never talk to them, just the Chinese in my classes.** But when I do talk to Americans, I cannot answer deeply, just ask simple questions, answers and so on. **(Yuhan, 1st year graduate student)**

Americans don't really want to talk to me. I figured it must be the language barrier but it's cultural too. It's like they don't know what to talk about. I used to try but kind of gave up. This makes being friendly very hard to do for both of us. When they just see me, they don't know I am not from here but when I start to talk, **they can hear that I am real Chinese and suddenly, they stop making eye contact with me and give up.** The first year, I tried to become, you know, one of them. Then I realized that's impossible. **(Jian Hong, 3rd year graduate student)**

Communication and Cultural Challenges

- Fundamental issue: Who “owns” the responsibility for effective communication?
- Written/conceptual language differs from spoken/idiomatic language

The teacher begins class with instructions, "Okay, kiddos. It's time to put your **thinking caps** on, we have a lot of **ground to cover** today! Instead of using our devices, you're going to be **left to your own devices**. Yes, we're going **old school** and getting **back to the basics** with some paper and pencil activities. Remember those? Or are you all **drawing a blank**? I want you to work on some math problems so you can learn the multiplication tables **by heart**. If you practice long enough, I know you'll find that multiplication can be as **easy as ABC**."

- Cultural references, jokes, figures of speech, etc.

Difference in Values

In Eastern culture, we need to be humble and polite, but in America, people speak up, like stand up for themselves. So, **if you are humble, that means you are weak here.** So, **sometimes [Americans] will take advantage of that.** For a long time, I didn't feel I belonged here because of this but then I learned to do things their way. Now, I have friends, like from everywhere and my life is easier
Leming, 2nd year graduate student



Self-Segregation and Sense of Belonging

It's just easier to live with Chinese. We eat the same food and understand each other better. I have so many [sic] to deal with here in America in my studies, in my life. When I come home, I don't want that pressure.
(Benxi, 2nd year graduate student)

I feel like I'm still in China, kind of. All of my friends are Chinese, I speak Chinese all day except in class. Really, class is the only time I need to speak English. We help each other a lot and share a lot of information about, everything really. Maybe I could have done this on my own, maybe not. I'm very happy to have my Chinese friends and roommates (Chexin, 2nd year graduate student)

I can say I belong at MAU but I don't belong in America. We don't have any relationships [in America] except with our professors. (Xi, 3rd year graduate student)

Sometimes the way I am treated by Americans makes me think **it was a mistake to come.**
(Mao, 1st year graduate student)

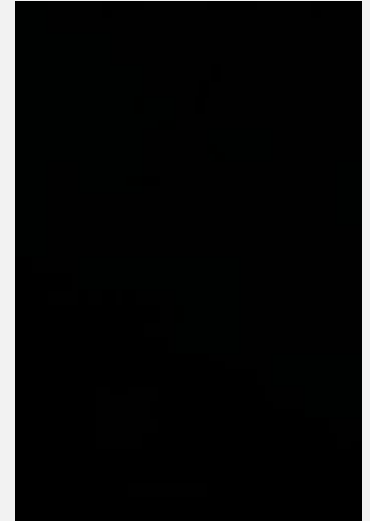
Intercultural Impasses

In this study, participants opted for self-segregation in their living arrangements, social circles and endeavors to create social support. The support gained from self-segregation remains mixed. This is regarding the differing, although predominantly positive responses, regarding international students' sense of belongingness in their academic lives, campus community, and their life in the United States.

Previous studies have contended that interaction with host nationals is beneficial to international students' well-being and academic success while studying abroad (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Pham & Tran, 2015; Rose-Redwood, 2013). It is the conclusion of this study that while there may be multi-faceted benefits to such interactions, it is by no means vital to the procurement of a sense of belonging. **Considering the difficulty and frustration expressed by some of the participants in initiating and sustaining relationships with host nationals and international students of different nationalities, encouraging these relationships may be counterproductive to the development of social support and academic success.** Thus, rethinking our perceptions of social support as being something only developed with host nationals, or the international community solely, may be warranted.

Transitions, attachment, grief, and loss

- “From an evolutionary point of view we are biologically... not designed to deal with making and breaking deep connections over the course of a single academic year, only to repeat the process again the next year, and then again the following year, ad infinitum.”
- “Humans need safe attachments to community. People in transition are looking for a community to attach to.”
- “If attachment alarm bells are ringing, students will not be able to hear the teacher.”

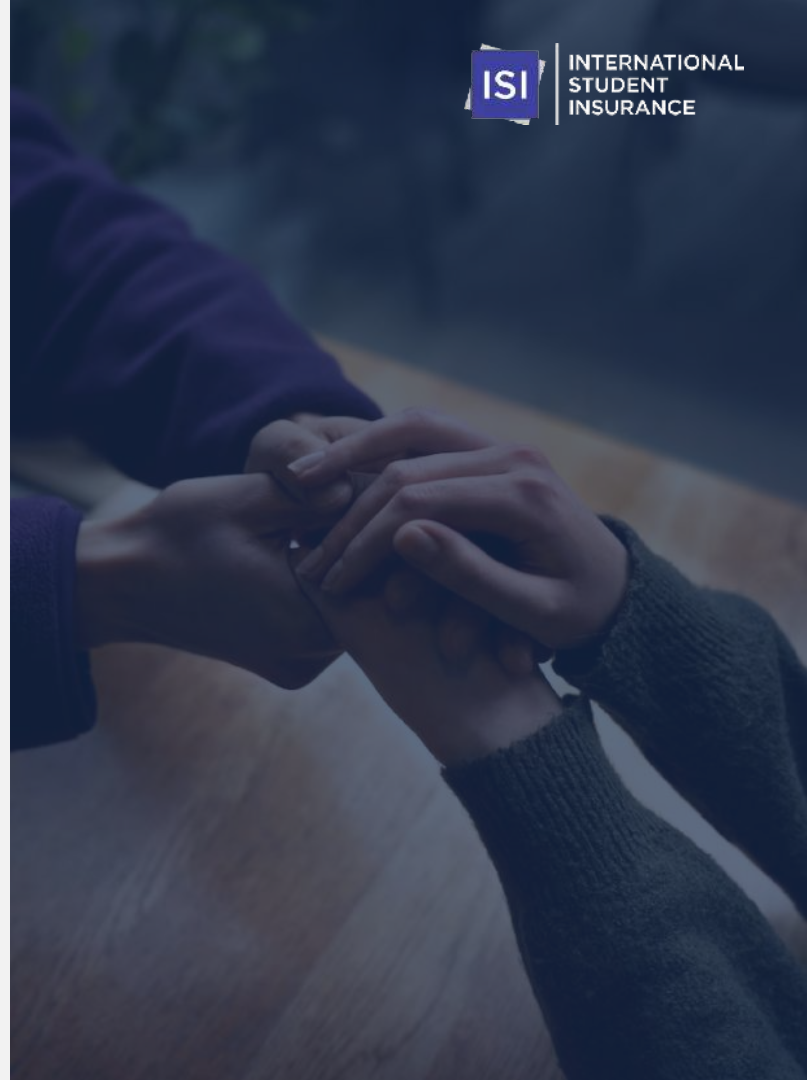


Ways to Support Mental Health



Early Intervention for Prevention

- Check in, listen, and build a trusting relationship
- Provide understanding and emotional support
- Encourage to connect with community of her choice (e.g., connecting to the Chinese Student Scholar Association, Cultural Centers, professional associations, student clubs)
- Encourage engagement and interactions
- Share resources (e.g., tutoring office, language corner, mentoring program, workshops on cultural adjustment)





Key Concepts in Prevention

- Connections matters
- Help to destigmatize mental health issues
- Encourage help seeking behaviors
- Initiate or join efforts to help building a sense of belonging
- Collaborate with mental health professionals to promote resilience

Timely Intervention:

Support for Help Seeking



**Express
Concerns
and Care**

**Knowing
when to
Refer**

Consult

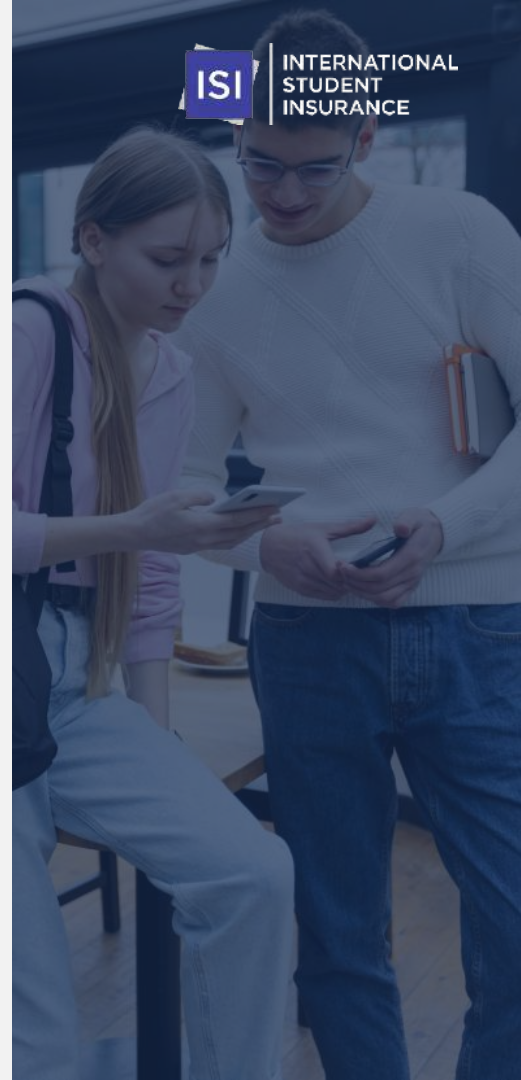
**Make
Appropriate
Referral**

Follow Up

When to Refer for Further Assessment

Observation on non-verbal clues & verbal reports from self and others

- Deterioration in personal hygiene or dress
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Noticeable change in mood or cognition (e.g., being disoriented)
- Appeared to be in distress
- Prolonged impairment in daily function
- Excessive absence
- Academic problems
- Social isolation and unusual behaviors
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Threats of harm to themselves or others



What May Help the Student to Feel Safer to Seek Help?

Acknowledging myths of mental health and help seeking, then providing alternative perspectives

Confirming confidentiality

Emphasizing no record on transcript



Making no assumptions, simply asking the student about preference for providers

Following up after referral is made



Know protocol to handle emergency



Consult with Mental Health Services on or off campus



Communicate concerns to appropriate offices/teams



Be resources for students, family, and colleagues on campus

Urgent Intervention: Consult and Refer

Services & Resources

Health Insurance

What does your plan cover?

- Inpatient and outpatient mental health care
- Substance abuse coverage included
- Pre-existing conditions

How to use their plan?

- Where can they go (in-network v. out-of-network)?
- How much will they pay?
- What does the claim process look like?

Telecounseling

- Some insurance plans include integrated telecounseling
- How do you use it? What type of communication goes out
- Is there language support available?

Hotlines & Services



Emergency Line 911



Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

<https://988lifeline.org>

Call 988



National Domestic Violence Hotline

<http://www.thehotline.org>

1-800-799-SAFE



It Gets Better Project (LGBTQ)

www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/get-help

1-866-4-U-TREVOR



Crisis Text Line

<http://www.crisistextline.org>

Text HOME or HOLA to 741741 to reach a live volunteer Crisis Counselor

Relaunch:

Mental Health Training Program

- **Powerpoint Presentation**

Professionally designed presentation to walk your students through the training

- **Video Content**

Two videos on mental health awareness and student perceptions on culture shock and stress from around the world

- **Student Handout**

A downloadable student guide take-away, or we can supply hard copies, to distribute to students

- **Interactive Activities**

Activities that encourage dialogue on many of the larger issues such as myths surround seeking help

- **Proctor Guide**

Complete guide to walk you or your staff through the training, including a full script and talking points



Key Resources for Supporting International Students

“Addressing Mental Health Issues Affecting International Students” NAFSA Booklet

[Mental Health Crisis of an International Student or Scholar](#) - NAFSA checklist

THANK YOU!