

Mental Health And University Music Students

By E. L. Lancaster, NCTM

Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part column.

During the summer of 2021, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles suddenly withdrew from events in which she had been heavily favored to win. Biles had acknowledged her struggles with ADHD and anxiety in the past, but her withdrawal from competition took courage for someone with world-wide expectations for a flawless performance on the Olympic stage. She set an example for others suffering from mental health issues by putting her mental health first. Mental health issues increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it took Biles's admission of her struggles to really help others focus on their mental health needs. She illustrated that such struggles also are problems for the strongest individuals and that everyone needs support to deal with them. Many colleges and universities increased their focus on mental health for students, prompting me to really explore mental health in America for both the general population as well as music students.

Mental Health America (www.mhanational.org) is a community-based nonprofit dedicated to helping people achieve wellness by living mentally healthier lives. According to their website, they provide prevention services, identification and intervention services, and support for those with mental health issues. Each year, the organization issues a report that collects data from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This data includes information on the status of mental health among adults and youth, changes in the prevalence of mental health issues and access to mental health care. In their 2021 report, they cited that 19% of American adults experienced a mental illness, an increase of 1.5 million over the 2020 report. Severe major



depression was cited among 9.75% of youth and was highest among youth who identify as more than one race. Of these youth, only 27% receive consistent treatment and care (Reinert, Nguyen and Fritze 2021).

While the data for this report was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, the report also suggested that the greater morbidity and mortality had disastrous effects on the mental health of the entire nation. Due to the changes in physical and social environments, there are greater rates of isolation and loneliness, financial hardships, housing and food insecurity, and interpersonal violence. In addition, the pandemic has highlighted inequities faced by Black, indigenous and people of color in the United States (Reinert, Nguyen and Fritze 2021).

Another organization, the Healthy Minds Network for Research on Adolescent and Young Adult Mental Health (healthymindsnetwork.org) is based at the University of Michigan and Boston University. This group conducts research on the mental health of young people. The most recent study, The Healthy Minds Study, was released based on data from winter/spring 2021. This study gathered information from randomly selected students over the age of 18 who were enrolled in colleges and universities. Of the students who responded to the study, 41% reported either major or moderate depression, 34% reported an anxiety disorder and 12% reported an eating disorder. Many (70%) of these students were aware of mental health services offered by their university, while 30% had received counseling or





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therapy for mental or emotional health from a health professional during the past year (Eisenberg, Lipson, Heinze, and Zhou, 2021).

The Healthy Minds Network also published a report on “The Impact of COVID-19 on College Student Well-Being.” This survey focused on students’ attitudes, concerns, preventive behaviors and their perceived supportiveness of colleges and universities related to COVID-19 during the period between March and May 2020. Two-thirds of those who responded to the survey reported that their financial situation had become more stressful due to the pandemic. An additional one-third said that their living situation had changed. Among the expressed concerns were issues related to personal safety and security both for themselves and the people they care about contracting the virus, as well as about how long the pandem-

ic will last. Students tended to follow public health guidelines and reported that campuses (especially professors) had generally been supportive. Approximately 60% of the students indicated that it was more difficult to access mental health care during the pandemic (The Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association, 2020).

Part 2 of this column will appear in the June/July issue of *American Music Teacher*. It will examine four studies related to research on mental health of university students, the impact of COVID upon the mental health of college students and mental health among university music students. Key results of each study will be highlighted with the hope that readers who are interested in further information will read the complete studies.

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