Failure to Launch: How to prepare your teen to fly solo...and what to do if they’re struggling

Dr. Maggie Wray interviews Christine Triano

Christine Triano MSW, LCSW is a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of adolescents, young adults, parents, and creative professionals. Her practice at The Center for Connection focuses on issues related to anxiety, trauma, depression, mood disorders, parenting and relationships, and life transitions. An avid learner, she loves bringing the newest research in neuroscience into the therapy room as she works with clients to change old patterns and cultivate new ways of being and thriving. Using a variety of modalities, Christine takes a holistic approach to treatment, often blending somatic techniques with mindfulness training and cognitive therapy. A native New Yorker, Christine holds an MSW from California State University, Los Angeles and a BA from Tufts University. In addition to her therapy practice, she serves a Director of Mental Health at the CFC.

Dr. Maggie Wray is the founder of Creating Positive Futures, an academic life coaching company that helps students develop the mindset, executive skills, and study skills they need to thrive.

Maggie earned her bachelor’s degree in Astrophysics from Princeton and her Ph.D. in Neurobiology and Behavior from Cornell. She is an ICF-certified Life Coach with specialized training in both Academic Life Coaching and ADHD coaching for teens and college students. Her coaches provide personalized private and small-group coaching services for high school and college students who want to learn how to earn better grades with less stress by developing more positive habits and beliefs.

Email: maggie@creatingpositivefutures.com
Website: http://CreatingPositiveFutures.com
Dr. Wray: Hi, everyone. Welcome. I’m Dr. Maggie Wray here, from Creating Positive Futures coaching, where we are on a mission to help high school and college students develop the organization, time management, and study skills that they need to earn better grades with less stress. One of the biggest sources of stress, as you know if you’ve got a high schooler, is this whole college process. It’s so overwhelming, and so stressful for so many students.

That’s why I’m really excited to be back here with you again this year, hosting our annual Your Teen Ready for College Conference, where we get to bring together people from across the mental health field, the college admissions field, parenting coaches—people who are involved with students and their parents at all phases of this college process—to help you understand how to set your teen up for success and help them transition gracefully, and also help manage your own stress through the process.

I’m really excited to be here today with Christine Triano, who’s going to be talking with us about how to help prepare your teen to fly solo, and be successful, and also what to do in they’re struggling once they get to college, and how to help them.

Christine is actually an adolescent and adult psychotherapist. She’s also a therapist and Director of Mental Health at The Center for Connection. She frequently speaks about the teen brain, so she knows a lot about this topic. She also works a lot with teens, and with college students, with managing anxiety, with depression—with a lot of different challenges that they might run into along the way. I’m really grateful to have her here with us today. Thank you, Christine, for joining us.

Christine: Thanks, Maggie. It’s great to be here. I love talking about this topic.

Dr. Wray: Wow, I am excited that we get to, because I think it is becoming more and more of an important topic to talk about. I knew were briefly discussing before you jumped on today about the statistics, and what’s going on with teens’ mental health.

I wondered if you could share a little bit with us about the reality, because it feels like kids are getting more stressed out every year. I’m curious what the reality is, in terms of the statistics. Is that really true?

Christine: It’s really true. We have seen some headlines, like “The Age of Anxiety.” The increasing number of anxiety has crept ahead of depression in what’s really affecting young people, in what are really record numbers.

The other headlines are things like, “College Mental Health Centers Overwhelmed in Demand for Services,” all across the nation—having to increase staff, having to figure out other ways to adjust for the needs of their students. We’re seeing this start from high school all the way through college. It’s pretty overwhelming.

The number that really strikes me – this is very recent; I think 2018 – is that 80% of college students say they feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do, by just the life they’re living. Almost 40%—39% -- would meet clinical criteria for a mental health issue. About half of those kids do not get help.

When we’re looking at these numbers, what’s really important is to think, about half of mental health issues show up by age 14. A lot of kids are getting to college already having experienced anxiety or depression, or any other kinds of challenges.
Then, it just becomes overwhelming. Things become too much to handle, and a crisis may happen in the worst case. This is really affecting our generation. We could have a whole other discussion about the many theories of why.

**Dr. Wray:** Yes, oh gosh. I wish we had two discussions. Maybe we’ll have to have you back, because there’s a part of my brain that just wants to dive into the why. I’m going to put that aside for a moment, and let us keep focused on our topic today, which is what are we going to do about it?

Let’s take that as a given. It sounds like, from what you’re describing, since this age of onset is around 14, that this is not something that we’re encountering for the first time when kids get to college. If we can, maybe let’s rewind the clock a little bit.

Before we even get to making sure that they’re launching successfully, making sure they’re successful in college, what about before that, where those seeds of anxiety, and stress, and overwhelm, and depression are getting planted? I see a lot of kids caught in this fear of college, and this worry about are they doing enough? Are they being enough? The whole topic of this conference is getting ready for college.

It brings this topic up really strong, but I feel like a lot of kids are so stressed out, because they feel like they’re comparing themselves to everybody else around them, who seems to have it together, and know what they’re doing, and know where they’re going. They know what everybody else’s grades are, especially at these really competitive schools where there’s a lot of competition.

I’m curious what you’ve seen, in terms of the students that you’ve worked with. How can they handle the increasingly insane level of stress that’s being put on these kids at high school age?

**Christine:** I didn’t include it for you with my bio, but I’m also the mom of two teenagers.

**Dr. Wray:** Mm-hmm, so you see this firsthand?

**Christine:** My incoming high school junior … We all know junior year is the year. [inaudible] get help. When I have a 10th grader coming here, or a family have been coming now, the summer before 11th grade, I’m like, “Good job. This is the time to try to build up those skills—to scaffold up the resilience and the tolerance for stress and distress.” That 11th grade year is really the big year, right?

My incoming junior himself has really internalized. I’m not putting this pressure on him, but he has a sense—from his peers, from his school, from whatever he’s in the world around him—that it is a shark tank out there. It’s so competitive, and a lot of worry about will he get into any school, or what kind of school, or just being good enough.

If he has a 4.0, well someone else has a 4.3. It’s just the relentlessness that being good enough is almost an unattainable idea. I like to start to scale back from that, because this is being really swallowed hook, line, and sinker by our kids—that there’s one way to do it, and it’s super competitive, and they’re just on this little treadmill running, running, running.

Really start to slow down and question those assumptions, and use some of what the teen brain is really good at, which is questioning authority, which is being rebellious, which is thinking about what my way—developing those critical thinking skills, to start to look at that whole big picture and go, “Okay, that’s one version of the story, but is it the only one? Is it really true?”
A lot kids are getting into college every year, and there are a lot of schools. Just try to reframe the narrative that it isn’t all so catastrophic, that there is a right school for you, for your kid, out there. I know when we talked, there are other folks in the conference who will talk about shopping and the rightness of fit of school. That’s something we talk about, even in the therapy room.

I’ve had clients who want to go to a top school—a top 10 school, a top 20 school, an Ivy League school. We’ll work on, “What does that mean for you and why? Is that the best approach for you? What’s best for you, for you to be happy? Where do you want to live for four years?”

This is the first time in your life you’re really getting a choice. Kids don’t choose where they grow up. They don’t choose what high school they go to, usually. They have very limited choices in what courses they take until they finish high school. This time, this is a big deal. This is really worth thinking about who you are, and what’s going to be a match for you.

**Dr. Wray:** That’s a great point, because I think a lot of kids don’t really think about what’s going to be a match for them. They’re looking at what their friends are choosing. They’re looking at what society is telling them to choose.

They’re looking at the rankings from U.S. News & World Report, and they’re thinking, “Where should I go?” They’re not saying, “Where do I want to go?” which is a very different question, and it changes the conversation entirely, if you’re saying, “What do I want? What’s right for me?”

**Christine:** Yeah, [inaudible] important to you. It could be an urban campus, a traditional campus, a smaller college, a big university, Greek life, a more vibrant arts scene. Not having Greek life could be important. Having a theater program. Housing. Do they offer a chance to get a single, if that’s important to you? At some point, those things really affect quality of life.

When I was a college mental health counselor – I was a college mental health counselor at a performing arts college here in Hollywood – probably as much as my students would come in with stress around academics and grades. They were also performers. Maybe even as much as half would come in over living crises, around housing, and roommates, and the relationships that circulate around the focus of their academics.

**Dr. Wray:** That’s a great point. It really speaks to the point that it’s not just school that’s going to be a source of stress for students when they go off to college. It’s also going to be life, that whole life transition. It’s interesting, because I do notice with a lot of my students that they’re not really preparing for the life part nearly as much as they’re preparing for the school part.

Most of them are pretty academically-capable by the time that they go off to college, and they’re going to be able to handle the schoolwork. Now, the planning ahead and staying organized – we work with kids on that, so obviously we’re going to see more students who want help with that, but just in terms of the intellectual capacity, they’re there.

The life part, and how to handle your self-talk, or how to handle your day-to-day living responsibilities – More often, if we’re thinking about kids who have maybe failed to launch, or who aren’t successful with their college transition, it’s usually, I find, not because they are not smart enough to do it. It’s these other factors that are getting in their way.

I’m curious, what do you find? Having teenagers at home as well, you can speak to this a little bit, but what do you find is important for parents and students to be thinking about before they ever leave
home—just thinking about the fact that they’re going to leave home? How can they start to build some of those skills, so they have them when the time comes?

Christine: That’s a great question. I’m really glad you asked it. I like to think about that there’s three domains, or three areas. This is on us as parents. We want to think about life skills. We want to think about emotional regulation and capacity, and we want to think about self-advocacy and self-advocacy skills.

Going through that list, life skills are do I know how to do a little laundry? The school where I worked, because it was small, didn’t have a traditional dining hall program, and the kids had to shop, and meal plan, and budget. These things are a big deal, and these things really were the undoing of some students.

It just became so overwhelming, where their lifestyle became very unhealthy, because you cannot live on 7-Eleven pizza alone. I had one student whose idea of budgeting would be, “I got the Domino’s two-for-one pizzas, and I can eat those for three days.”

You have the [inaudible] part in there, which is great. Really, life skills, and I think it’s so hard as parents not to cut your kids some slack, when they’re studying or AP exams, when they’re doing these extracurriculars or they’re playing a sport, to go, “Okay, I got you. You don’t have to unload the dishwasher today,” or, “I’ll throw your laundry in for you,” or any of these things.

I say, “No.” We really have to check ourselves on that, and expect our teenagers – this can start even as young as elementary school children, or even younger – get a little part in maintaining your family’s life. A little five-year-old can set the table for dinner, and that kind of thing. A teenager can do a lot of things.

There are a few things I think are really important. A teenager should be doing their own laundry. They should know how to clean a bathroom. If they have a car, they should know how to get the basic maintenance done, and take care of their gas.

They should have a bank account in high school—a student bank account. Most banks do a very easy student bank account, connected to a parent, where they’re starting to budget. I know my older son, because he wasn’t as good at it, had to get one week of money at a time.

My younger son—he’s the one entering 11th grade— is already pretty good at it. He can get a whole month of allowance at a time, and he just has to budget that. He can check online. He can look on his phone. He can manage his money.

The money management, self-care, and even knowing how to shop for their necessities, their toiletries, how to fill a prescription. How do you fill a prescription? A lot of kids don’t even know how you do that—some really basic things. Tying to the self-advocacy part is something like making an appointment. A lot of kids have never made an appointment.

Dr. Wray: I know that sounds crazy, but you’re right. Most of them don’t know how to pick up the phone, or they don’t feel comfortable picking up the phone to make an appointment, because they’ve never had to do it before.

Christine: Talking on the phone, for this generation, has its own bloated, kind of ick factor, but sometimes you do have to make a phone call to make a hair appointment. That’s an easy one, for a haircut. Older kids can start to make their own doctor’s appointments. These are big things.
Once they’re getting into college, there’s learning how to book a plane ticket. These are some pretty simple things, but a lot of kids go away, and they don’t know how to do any of this stuff.

There’s a lot of easy ways, and so much can be done online. Kids can get set up on Amazon Prime, and get their toiletries delivered or whatever it is. You’ve got to hand them a plan, and you want to engage in it together, and figure out what it is.

Dr. Wray: How do you do that, Christine? That actually makes me wonder, because some parents maybe already have taught all of these things, and they’re thinking, “Oh, this is so easy. We’ve already got all of this down.”

Other parents may be watching right now, thinking, “Oh my goodness. My list is 50 things long. We haven’t been working on this at all. I’ve totally been picking up the slack, and now I’m feeling a little overwhelmed. I’m supposed to teach them all of this before they go away to school? How on earth are we going to fit this in on top of all their other commitments?”

Where do you recommend that parents start, if they’re more on that second list, where they’re feeling overwhelmed by adding in the life skills on top of what their teen is already handling, especially if their kid already feels overcommitted, they feel overwhelmed, they’ve already got a lot on their plate, and they’re thinking, “Oh, I don’t want to overburden them with making them make the doctor’s appointments and all of this on top of that”? What would you say to that parent?

Christine: I would have them start with one thing at a time, and do a family meeting, or sit down with their teen and have a discussion and come up with a list, like, “Hey, I realized here are some things that will be really important, I want you to feel prepared for.” Right now it’s summer, and there might be a little more room for experimenting, and see what they can do.

Do you they know how to boil an egg? Scramble an egg? There’s some of these things too. How to shop and keep some healthy snacks? That kind of stuff. Just start to involved them. Let them choose a couple of things, then we chat. “Hey, how about we do laundry together this week, and then next week you’re going to do your own.”

Pick one thing at a time, until you compile that list, and they feel confident. This is a big deal. When kids go to a dorm, they have to change their own sheets. My kids don’t ever do that.

Dr. Wray: It’s true. You don’t think about all these different things, so that’s a great point. The sooner that you start making that list and working through it, the more slowly and gradually they can start to build those skills, so it doesn’t feel like it all has to happen in a rush in the week before they leave, where you go, “Oh no! We haven’t taught you any of this!”

Christine: The reason these things are important—and I’m talking about it in the context of mental health—is that it leads to number two, which is this emotional regulation piece. It’s having a big window – we call it in my practice, a window of tolerance – where you’re feeling flexible and roll with change, with stress, with competing demands.

These are all little drops in the bucket. If a friend isn’t responding to my texts, and I’m wondering if she’s mad at me, and I have to study for a final, and I haven’t washed my sheets in a month, and I don’t really know what bedding to use. That’s just more drops in the bucket of overwhelm, that can lead to that overwhelm.
Going back, leading up to leaving for college—this junior year is a good time—looking at how do we increase our kids’ capacity to handle distress, to handle rejection or failure, which are big ones, because a lot of our kids who are high achievers are also self-described perfectionists.

Perfectionism is another way of saying, “Oh no! I can not tolerate my own vulnerability and human flaws. I don’t want to go there.” We all know we have to be vulnerable sometimes, meaning we might not know the answer. We might mess up. We might get a bad grade, or we might make a social faux pas.

Building up the capacity that no one of these things is catastrophic, and showing that by example, is a big thing with our teenagers. We can share our own stories, past or present, of failure, of struggle, of challenge—not so much giving a pep talk, but really being available to listen and show up in the present.

One of my main pieces of advice for parents of teens is often, “How about this week you just try saying less and listening more?” There is a lot of anxiety at this age and stage for parents, too, like, “Am I doing my job right?”

Parenting is a big job. Are we doing it right? Are we preparing our kids? Are they going to be successful? Are they going to get into college? Are they going to make all their benchmarks? This is part of my job. Are they staying on top of their grades? Are they handing in their work? A lot of that.

This is another way that parents can start to step back, and give a little bit more space. We can all now check online and see our kids’ grades. Have a discussion about that and say, “This semester I’m not going to check.” This can be almost intolerable for many parents.

Dr. Wray: Yeah, that might be impossible. I’m envisioning a couple families who could not stand that. They’re on there multiple times a day. Maybe cut back to once a week. It depends, right? It does depend on where your kid is. As coaches, we work with a lot of kids where we’re checking grades once a week, but the parents aren’t checking.

That’s kind of an intermediate, maybe. Somebody else is checking, or their tutor is checking. Somebody has a handle on it, but you’re not in the portal at all. Maybe that’s where the happy medium. You’re right, because what happens when they go off to college, and you have no grade access, and you’re used to checking every minute of every day?

Christine: Right, and it’s really not good for anybody when the parent’s checking every minute of every day, and is in that portal four or five times a day. It can be hard, so yeah, figuring out how to dial it back.

Are you going to check once a week? Are we going to check together? I can leave it you to check, and you’re going to come to me on Fridays and tell me where you’re at. Or if you’re working with a coach, what a great solution. Have a neutral party come in and help mediate how that works in the family.

There’s a couple of reasons for this. One is you want to build up that intrinsic sense of motivation and capacity for your kid, that they can roll with things that they can see, “Okay, I got a C on this quiz, but let me figure this out. Quizzes are only 10% of my grade, and there are 30 quizzes, so it’s probably not going to be the end of the world, and I know I can make it up on the midterm.”

Having them start to develop some of that capacity to prioritize, to look at the big picture, so every little thing isn’t as important as the next. When we get to college, it’s not sustainable. They have to learn how to look at their syllabus, see the big picture and go, “What are the big-ticket items here that are
worth a lot of grade? What are the other ones?” and, “Oh, but I get 20% just for showing up and participating? Great!”

Developing a plan that’s internally motivated—when we tell them, it doesn’t stick the same way—and as the parent, letting that happen, and seeing how they can develop that flexibility and capacity.

If they’re worried that, “Ugh, my mom’s going to check the portal and she’s going to see I didn’t turn that in,” or, “She’s going to see that I got a C, and she’s going to be mad,” that’s external motivation. It’s not building up their capacity for when they leave for school.

Dr. Wray: That’s a great point. The internal ability to tolerate frustration and deal with disappointment—that resilience that you mentioned—how do you handle that, especially for a student who is that perfectionist, and they want to do everything perfectly? They really struggle with vulnerability.

I’ve just seen some students who have a really difficult time tolerating frustration. They’re not a perfectionist, but it’s the opposite end almost. If they get frustrated, they’ll just say, “Oh, forget it. It’s not worth it,” and they won’t do it if it’s hard, if it’s difficult.

They really struggle with that ability to push through difficulty and persist long enough to reach their goal. How do you help a kid with that, because it strikes me that that’s really essential for them to have before they go off to college?

Christine: Yeah, that frustration tolerance. I would maybe suggest to you that the demands are outstripping that kid’s capacity at that moment. We have to figure out how to break down the demands into small pieces so they can experience success, and we have to make a big, big deal about it at each step of success.

That could be recognizing effort. It could be recognizing independent action—just even completing one part of a task, so that we start to build it up, that they can handle a big thing. Nobody sits down to write a 20-page research paper in one sitting.

What do we teach kids? Especially if you work with ADHD, you learn about how to chunk out the work, and that applies to everybody. “Okay, you wrote the introduction. Great! What are you going to do? Go outside. Take a walk.” I use a lot of mindfulness in practice, and there’s really great resources on there.

Something as simple as really learning breathwork. Even though our autonomic nervous system breathes for us, we don’t all breathe the right way, meaning the way that can down-regulate our central nervous system, and decrease our arousal.

There’s really great apps now. There are so many apps for mindfulness, for meditation. As a family, you can experiment with some of that. It doesn’t have to be we have to sit there and quietly meditate. It might be a walk where we practice mindfulness, or when we go out in the yard and notice what we see, and what we hear, and what we smell, and how we feel in our bodies. Right there, that’s a mindfulness exercise.

So giving our kids some little tools to get into the present. We talk about anxiety. In the past, a big source of anxiety is rumination. We’re worrying about something that’s already happened and we can’t change, or we worry about the future. I’m worrying about the grade I got, that I can’t change, or I’m worrying about the future. Am I going to get into the school that I want to get into?
Cannot control the past or the future. Our real window of control is in our present moment. As soon as you can, use any of these tools to get more present. Breath, our breath is in the moment. We can remember how we breathed in the past, or think about how we might in the future, but we’re only breathing right now. We’re only in our bodies, experiencing our surroundings right.

Just trying to be mindful, trying to model that with our kids, experimenting with some of these things with our kids, and give them some tools so that they can take breaks. If they have a very low frustration tolerance, they might need a lot of little breaks. That’s okay, because you’re going to scaffold them up over time.

**Dr. Wray:** That’s true, even in college. If they know, “Okay, I have a low frustration tolerance for this subject, so I’m going to break it up. I’m going to split it. I’m going to do a little bit between other elements of things that are more fun or easier for me. I’m going to not try to sit down and do it in a three-hour block, because I can’t. My brain can’t handle that.”

It strikes me that one thing that you’re encouraging them to do through this process is to learn about themselves, learn how to self-regulate. Learn how to notice when they’re getting out of sorts, or they’re getting upset, or they’re getting frustrated, and then be aware of that. Then, they’ve got the tools to handle it and cope with. That’s so valuable.

**Christine:** Absolutely. With any client, we’ll talk about, “What do you notice? What is the sign?” Usually our bodies will give us the sign before we know. It could be, “I get this tightness in my stomach,” or, “My throat feels dry,” or, “My heart starts to beat.” Okay, well that’s a sign.

We want to look for the very first sign that you’re creeping out of that window of tolerance, because once you leave it, you can’t learn anyway. We can’t really learn, and we can’t really use our cognitive brain to show what we know. Staying regulated is the key to being productive and successful in these ways that kids want to, trying to help getting them into their colleges, and launch, and do all these things.

Really starting to tune in, and make that a priority. It’s really important. It’s as important as studying, if not more. You won’t be as effective.

**Dr. Wray:** Absolutely true. You can’t learn. If you’re so out of sorts, or you’re frustrated or overwhelmed, then your brain’s shutting down on you. It can’t learn. It can’t be in a curious, open-minded state when it’s flooded with emotion, and overwhelm, and stress. There’s no way that those two states of mind are compatible. You’re right, it’s absolutely essential.

I want to make sure, too, that we don’t run out of time to talk about what happens if they go off and are struggling a little bit. Is there anything else, though, before we move on to that, that you wanted to share about setting them up to be successful in their launch to college?

**Christine:** The one last thing that I see with my college students is that third thing: self-advocacy. That’s really learning how to speak up for themselves, how to negotiate. If they don’t like their roommate, and they need help, or they need to talk to a professor because they don’t understand an assignment, or they need an extension, or they’re sick and they have to let the teacher know.

There’s so many different reasons that they have to advocate for themselves once they get to college. A lot of kids are uncomfortable, and a lot of parents are used to doing for our kids. I had no problem
calling the guidance counselor at my son’s high school. In college, they do not want to hear from the parent.

They really want and expect students to make those steps for themselves, and to advocate for what they need around their whatever it is, from financial aid, to their academics, to their living situation.

Again, helping your kids feel prepared might be, in high school, “Oh, you don’t understand how do the math this week. Why don’t you email the teacher?” Going to office hours. Just starting that process a little bit, to see that they have the capacity and they’re capable.

Dr. Wray: That does sound like something that would be really helpful for them to do before they leave, so there’s not such a stark transition between, “Oh, other people have just managed all this communication for me,” and then all of a sudden, “Wait, now I have to go talk to the Office of Student Services about getting my accommodations?” or, “Wait, what? I have to go talk to the professor about the fact that I don’t understand this, and it’s a 200-person class, and I don’t even know if they know me.”

That’s super intimidating, if you’re not used to approaching your teachers of your 30-person class. How on earth are you going to approach the professor of your 200-person lecture?

Christine: Yeah, and with accommodations, the college will really put the burden on the student a lot of times. The professors may not know the student has those accommodations, and it’s up to the student at the beginning of that semester to go up and go, “I don’t know if you know, but here are my accommodations.” That’s also a really hard conversation to have.

Dr. Wray: Oh, it’s so tough, especially if they’re not used to it. I love that you’re encouraging them to practice that before they go. I do want to see if we can explore a little bit about what do you do once they’re lodged, so to speak? They’re in college, but they’re not doing as well as you would like them to.

I think some parents worry about, “How would I even know? Would I be aware that they were struggling? What are the signs that I should look for? What on earth do I do if they seem like they’re having a really hard time?”

Christine: This is where another number is kind of striking. About 40% of college students have a mental health issue. About half rank their mental health as below average or poor, but only about 7% of parents report that their student has had any mental health problems in college. There is some disparity there with parents really knowing what’s going on.

I think part of this goes back to starting before they leave, to having that real open dialog, and being able to really listen with openness, and curiosity, and checking your own anxiety and worry, taking care of that need elsewhere so we can really figure out what our kids need, or what their capacities are. They may need extra support when they get to school.

Then, when they get to school, say there’s no reason to really worry. Everything seems great. They got into a school. They’re happy. You get them into the dorm, you go home, but things don’t seem right.

Regular communication … it’s normal to be homesick. Homesickness can be really scary and overwhelming, but homesickness should resolve once they start to engage in some enjoyable activities, once they make some friends, once they figure out a routine. “What dining hall am I going to eat at?
How am I getting my needs met, that are social and emotional, by new people I’m meeting here?”
There’s a process to that.

If it doesn’t get better, by the end of that first semester even, and it’s starting to look more like depression? Depression might show up like missing classes, missing assignments, poor hygiene, just not getting into the shower every day, just seeing the room piling up and getting really messy.

That kind of self-care piece really is the thing. Any statements of hopelessness—“What’s the point? Why bother?” – those are that negative self-talk. “I’m not as good as everyone else.” Those are real areas for concern.

The other things that we might see are the anxiety. That might look like, “I’m not getting any sleep,” and “My appetite has really decreased or increased.” There’s some physical symptoms. There could be a panic attack, and some students will say, “I had a panic attack.”

There’s a range of anxiety attacks, of being this bottom-up hijacking, where that thinking brain goes offline, and our reptile brain, or limbic system, takes over. It’s a big flood of emotion. It’s a big flood of adrenaline, cortisol. That toxic stress over time, if our kiddos are existing in toxic stress, they’re going to get sick, and you’re going to hear about it.

Those might be times when they need some extra support on campus. There might be a time when they also need a little extra support from a parent in figuring out how to get it. It could be something as simple as, “Why don’t I check on how you make an appointment at the campus mental health center? Would that be helpful? Can I do that for you?”

Trying to help them get into services, and not waiting too long, whether that’s on-campus or off-campus, figuring that out. Some kids go to school, and they do have a relationship with someone that they started to see back home. Then, I might do a Skype session. I know I do that with a number of my college students while they’re away at school. Then, when they come back on breaks and summers, I see them in the office again.

Having a plan in place, if you anticipate your kid will need support before they go, and also being really watchful for the signs. In some cases, it really is overwhelming, and there’s a real mental health crisis. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death of kids 10 to 24. It’s the second-leading cause of death of college students.

It’s the kind of thing none of us want to think about. Jit’s a parent’s worst fear, but it means we’ve got to take it seriously, and really look out for the signs, and really listen to our kids and what they’re expressing.

Sometimes, they need to take a leave, because there really is too much. Medical leave applies for mental health as well as physical health. It’s usually not such a complicated process to take medical leave, and maybe come home for a semester, or even a year.

It could be that the plan is to return to that school. It could be, “Oh, maybe that wasn’t the best match, and we’re going to figure out another plan.” But come home and get the help. Putting their kid’s safety first is the most important thing.
Dr. Wray: So glad you mentioned that, too, because I think a lot of parents don’t realize that medical
leave is an option for mental health concerns as well. I’ve seen so many students who’ve gone that
route, that needed to, and it’s okay. It’s not going to mess up their future.

Absolutely, the number one thing is they’ve got to be safe, and it’s got to be okay. If they’re not, then
there’s no point in keeping them on campus, just to keep them on campus.

Christine: Yeah, and as parents, we have to be okay with that too, and be really convincing when we
share it. “You know what, I want you to graduate” We have a lot on the line. There’s a financial
commitment, and there’s a lot going on.

As parents, as we have to arrange for our kid to actually be at the college of their choice, but really being
like, “You know what, none of that matters as much as your wellbeing, your safety, and your happiness.”

You can bring them home. You might want to go visit. Figuring out a plan together—what they need – so
that they know they have support, and that they have unconditional acceptance of whatever happens.
The most important thing is that they are safe and they are healthy.

Dr. Wray: Absolutely. Knowing that before they go is such a great thing too, because then they know no
matter what comes up, “My relationship with my parents? I know that they are going to be here for me
no matter what, and I can tell them anything no matter what.” If they know that going in, that’ll make a
really big difference. They’re more likely to share that with you then, if they feel like they can’t handle it,
because they know it’s safe to do that.

Christine: We have a beautiful thing, where we can do like you and I are doing right now. We can have a
Facetime call or a Skype call, and maybe setting up a plan for doing at least one of these a week, so you
can actually get a look at your kid. That tells us a lot as a parent. We can see if they look rested, or if they
look like their hygiene is good.

Dr. Wray: Mm-hmm. You can see their room behind them. How’s that staying organized or not?

Christine: It’s a deeper way to connect, to have the face and the conversation.

Dr. Wray: It’s such a great idea, too. I love that you bring that up, because you’re right. You’re not going
to see them face-to-face, but you can still see them in video chat format, and that’s really close to
face-to-face. That’s going to tell you a lot from their body language, more so than just a phone call, or a
text message conversation.

I know a lot of students are just texting, and not even picking up the phone, but you can’t read tone of
voice even over text, so getting that visual would be really great as well. Hopefully parents will set up a
lot of things that we’ve talked about today.

I want to make sure, too, they know where to find you if they need some extra support, or if they have
some follow-up questions. What’s the best way for them to find out more and to connect with you
further?

Christine: The best way would be the visit thecenterforconnection.org. That’s a big, multidisciplinary
practice here in Pasadena, where I work, and many wonderful colleagues of mine. That’d be the easiest
that way. I can be emailed or called. All the info is up there.
Dr. Wray: Perfect. Thank you so much for sharing this, Christine. I’m hoping this is going to put some parents’ anxiety down a few notches, hopefully, or at least let them know that if they are stressed out about it, they’re not alone, and that there are ways to approach this that are going to help their kids have a more successful transition.

If they do struggle a little bit in their first semester, they’re not the only one. That happens a lot, and there are things you can do. There are ways to handle it, and you will get through it as a family, as long as you’re putting their mental health and safety first. That’s the number one thing always. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been really helpful, and I so appreciate your time.

Christine: You too. Thank you.

Dr. Wray: Thanks, everyone, for joining. I hope you have a great day, and I’ll see you soon.