# Understanding the challenges in higher education and how to support students and staff



The challenges facing students and staff in higher education are often subtle yet significant, manifesting in various ways that can impede personal and academic growth. Yasmin Mogahed, an academic and motivational speaker, discusses these struggles in her book, *Healing the Emptiness: A Guide to Emotional and Spiritual Well-being*. Mogahed posits that challenges should not be perceived as punishments but rather as opportunities for growth and resilience. She emphasises the importance of recognising vulnerability as a critical component of this journey, fostering a sense of empathy within academic communities.

Students frequently transition from the familiar, structured environment of secondary education into the more independent and often overwhelming world of university life. This shift can provoke a range of emotions, contributing to feelings of isolation as individuals navigate their new surroundings. Similarly, faculty members face their own set of challenges, including personal, social, and financial pressures inherent in the demanding landscape of academia.

There are various ways in which individuals may attempt to manage their struggles. Some may disguise their emotional pain by immersing themselves in work; however, such external solutions often fail to address underlying issues. The result can lead to heightened stress levels and a cycle of overexertion without the expected outcomes. Institutional efforts aimed at fostering positivity often neglect the importance of acknowledging setbacks as a natural part of the academic journey.

Identifying signs of distress in students and staff is essential for timely intervention. A noticeable change in engagement, such as reluctance to participate in group activities or difficulty forming social connections, may indicate a lack of belonging. Those who feel unwelcome or judged may isolate themselves, thereby compounding feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, individuals who appear excessively frantic or disorganised, or who spend disproportionate amounts of time on work without results, may be signalling deeper anxieties about their academic performance.

Changes in personal presentation can also serve as indicators of emotional health. A decline in grooming or a heightened focus on appearance may reflect internal struggles. Such subtle clues, when observed alongside other behaviours, can help educators ascertain who might need additional support.

To address these prevailing issues and provide support for struggling individuals, several approaches can be implemented. Initiating supportive conversations is one key step. Faculty and staff are encouraged to observe any changes in behaviour or engagement and to approach concerned individuals with empathy and understanding. By asking open-ended questions, they can create a space for individuals to share their feelings without judgement.

Institutional support structures are also vital. Providing academic assistance, such as study tips and deadline extensions, can ease the pressures that students face. Regular check-ins and promoting wellness activities, like journalling or meditation, could contribute favourably to their emotional health.

Collaboration with mental health organisations can enhance accessibility to support services. Institutions may benefit from establishing user-friendly online portals that connect individuals to mental health resources and provide information on mental health leaves, thereby reducing stigma associated with such absences.

It is equally important for institutions to reflect on their policies. Training for faculty to identify stress indicators and establishing anonymous feedback channels can help institutions understand and address potential systemic issues contributing to student and staff distress.

Group therapy sessions, led by trained facilitators, can provide safe spaces for sharing experiences and fostering solidarity among peers. Topics such as imposter syndrome and stress management are crucial for building a supportive community. Additionally, inviting motivational speakers to share their own experiences of overcoming adversity can further inspire resilience.

Lastly, institutions that can offer flexible working and learning arrangements could alleviate some of the pressures faced by students and faculty alike. Implementing options for hybrid or remote work where possible may enhance overall well-being and performance.

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in identifying and supporting individuals facing these challenges. By promoting empathy and addressing the systemic sources of stress, they can cultivate an academic environment that values the health and humanity of all its members. This holistic approach not only enhances academic achievement but also fosters a supportive and thriving educational community.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/three-ways-spot-someone-struggling-and-six-ways-support-them> - This article discusses ways to spot and support individuals struggling in higher education, aligning with the need to identify signs of distress and implement supportive measures.
* <https://www.yasminmogahed.com/2013/06/18/about-a-personal-struggle-i-had-as-a-teen/> - Yasmin Mogahed shares personal struggles with depression and anxiety, highlighting the importance of vulnerability in personal growth and resilience.
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDfzKEhTl34> - Ustadha Yasmin Mogahed discusses why difficulties can become unbearable, emphasizing the need for emotional understanding and support.
* <https://thetsundokuchronicles.wordpress.com/2019/04/17/meeting-yasmin-mogahed/> - This post covers Yasmin Mogahed's teachings on dealing with hardships and the importance of patience and emotional processing, reflecting her broader work on resilience and emotional well-being.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Wisconsin%E2%80%93Madison> - Yasmin Mogahed completed her B.S. in psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, providing background on her academic foundation.