



# Post-secondary distress

**GOT A KID AT UNIVERSITY?  
HOW TO TELL IF YOUR “GROWN-UP”  
CHILD IS CALLING FOR HELP**

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hen 20-year-old Kevin Dixon\* failed his second year at an Ontario university in the spring of 2008, he didn't tell anyone — not his mother, not his friends, not his roommates. Instead, the engineering student returned in September and pretended he was still enrolled — he went to classes and took notes, talked about exams he said he'd written and mentioned marks he hadn't received. But after a few months of living this lie, he no longer was able to maintain the deception and simply walked away from campus. He left his cellphone and laptop in his room, made a \$400 withdrawal and, after hopping a bus and crossing the U.S. border, didn't make another

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move that would leave a record of his whereabouts. He headed to the southern U.S. and disappeared for six months, living alone in a hidden campsite, surviving on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, buying food with money he made as a day labourer.

In the meantime, his mother, frantic with worry, devoted herself to finding her missing son. She was constantly in touch with the police as they followed up on leads. A Facebook group was set up and a story about Dixon was posted on the website of *America's Most Wanted*. Eventually Dixon called home, confessed everything to his mother and moved back to his hometown. "I decided it was easier to leave than it was to deal with things and confront it," he told a local reporter. Contacted by *More*, Dixon says he doesn't want to talk any further about what happened, but does reveal he's "doing fine now."

His mother didn't return our calls. And who can blame her? She lived every parent's nightmare — not knowing if her child was alive or dead — all because he flunked out of university and couldn't face telling her the truth.

**THE COMBINATION** of social isolation, academic pressure, easy access to drugs and alcohol, and a fear of letting down their parents (many of whom are paying tens of thousands of dollars in university costs) can make even the most dedicated, high-achieving student feel unable to cope. Studies show about 25 per cent of post-secondary students suffer from mental health issues. Michael Ungar, a professor of social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax who specializes in youth issues, says a minority of this group — maybe two to three per cent — are extreme cases requiring intensive help, while the rest are simply anxious or not coping well.



“One of the biggest challenges for parents is to allow their kids to have manageable amounts of risk and accept that they might fail at something.”

At Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., there were three suicides over a 14-month period between 2010 and 2011, according to Mike Condra, director of health counselling and disability services at Queen's. While this number may seem high, Condra points out that suicides among young people between the ages of 15 and 24 occur at a yearly rate of about 10 per 100,000 (Queen's has a student population of 21,000). He notes that there were no suicides at the university between the fall of 2004 and early 2010. He also says there is no indication that suicide rates are increasing at universities across the country.

Of course, students aren't the only ones suffering — so are their parents. Worried sick if they sense their kids are struggling at school, they text

daily, offer to help write term papers and are tempted to swoop onto campus to scoop them up and bring them back to the protective bubble of home. "It makes us feel better as parents when we try to exercise control over the lives of our children," says Ungar, author of *We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids* and *Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*.

Ungar suggests kids can run into trouble in university if they haven't had enough opportunity at home to hone their coping skills. "One of the biggest challenges for parents is to allow their kids to have manageable amounts of risk and responsibilities and accept that they might fail at something," he explains. "How can we expect our kids to wake up and get to



classes on time if they've never had to get up without someone else waking them? How can we expect them to cook for themselves when they never had to do it at home? Or manage their own money if we've paid for everything for them? Or be prepared when they go to a party where there's alcohol and drugs, when we've never coached them on how to handle these kinds of situations, other than saying no, no, no?"

If kids are floundering, Ungar advises parents to act as coaches. "The best thing we can do is to be there to support them, offer stories about how we coped in similar circumstances, hear them out." He adds, "They need to learn to advocate for themselves — whether that means arranging for a tutor, talking to a professor about a failing grade or getting an assessment for drug and alcohol abuse. It's much better to motivate them to take action than to show up at their school and drag them home."

"Sometimes a student just needs the reassurance of hearing your voice," points out Condra. And sometimes it's the parent who needs the reassurance. "We get calls from anxious parents who have a son or daughter who went through high school with straight A's and now they're worried about low grades after just six weeks into first year," he says. "In those cases, we reassure the parents a drop in grades in the first few months is normal and it's not going to affect the student's chances of getting into law school."

Parents also need to understand their child might be doing poorly at school because he feels trapped in the wrong program. "Some parents want their kids to decide early on what they'll study and what they'll be, and they don't want them to waver from that," says Ungar.

Mary Walsh, a resident outreach counsellor at Queen's, has seen the effect that kind of parental inflexibility can have on students. "These are kids used to succeeding, and when they realize they aren't happy with what they're doing, often they internalize it and think there's something wrong with them, that they aren't smart enough," she says. "They don't want to disappoint their parents and waste their money, but if they can get into a program where they're more engaged, they become more successful." Walsh recalls one young man who made the switch from engineering to drama. He was afraid to tell his parents but eventually made the transition with their support. "Parents need to understand their child is going to be more successful if he's engaged in something that makes him happy."

At Queen's, where 90 per cent of the students live away from home, a three-year-old program called Mental Health First Aid has trained some 300 people — faculty, staff and residence dons — to identify and respond to signs of distress in students. This fall, the school announced a commission to further study the issue of students' mental health.

Walsh remembers one student who "was sleeping all the time, not coming out of her room or socializing on the weekends the way she used to. Turns out she was from out of province, was missing her family and was not getting the straight A's she achieved in high school. Because she'd always seen herself as a strong student, she went on a downslope when things weren't going well." Walsh explained to her there is often a drop in marks during first year. She also gave her small tasks to accomplish, such as ensuring she got out of her room every day and socialized with friends on weekends. Soon the student's mood began to improve.

Sometimes the solution is time away. Claudia Badali watched her daughter, Daniella, become increasingly withdrawn during her first year in psychology at the University of Toronto in 2009. Daniella, who lived at home, was spending more time in her room with the door closed. When Badali asked to see her daughter's marks, they weren't forthcoming. "She was embarrassed," recalls Badali. "She was experiencing what a lot of first years experience — a tough program, large classrooms of hundreds of students where she didn't know anyone, and going from an environment in which she'd been closely monitored to an adult model of learning. She just wasn't ready."

Badali hired Julie Newton, co-owner of mygapyear.ca, a Toronto-based gap year planning company, to help her daughter figure out how best to spend a year away from school. Newton learned Daniella's true passions were French and dance, and she wanted to pursue teaching in both those areas. The company arranged for her to spend three months in France to upgrade her French. The excursion cost Badali about \$7,000 plus travel, but she believes it was money well spent. "Instead of paying for tuition, this was a different kind of learning experience for her," she says. "It let her grow up and try new things." Daniella returned to U of T in September.

The best advice Mike Condra has for parents is to "trust your gut. You know your son or daughter best of all and if you are concerned about them, trust your judgment and follow up." The good news, he says, is that students today are closer and more open with their parents than were those of other generations and "a surprising number of them will reach out to their parents when they are in distress." **M**

*\*Name changed by request*