Optum

Student Behavioral Health Report



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Executive summary

Youth mental and behavioral health remains a major public health priority for families, communities and educators across lower and higher education. But what can parents and educators do to help bridge the gap between students' mental health challenges and finding solutions?

This year's **Student Behavioral Health Report** shares survey results conducted with college students, parents of college students, high school students and parents of high school students in partnership with YouGov.* This report includes new data that reveals important trends in the experiences, actions and influencing factors for students' mental or behavioral health across high school and college years. It also highlights key differences in the way parents understand challenges facing high school vs. college students.

Armed with this information, parents and colleges may be better equipped to support students as they transition from high school to college, and help ensure that students can access the resources they need to stay healthy.



* Fielded among 501 high school students, 502 parents of high school students, 526 college students and 529 parents of college students who are currently enrolled in a U.S. institution of higher education. YouGov is an international Internet-based market research and data analytics firm. See the Methodology section of this report for further detail.

Key findings



Parents of high school students have perceptions closely aligned with high schoolers' self-reported experiences. When it comes to mental or behavioral health challenges, parents of high school students may be more attuned to the student's reality than parents of college students.



The gap between college students' experiences and parents' perceptions remains significant. Consistent with previous data, parents of college students say their children encounter mental or behavioral health challenges at far lower rates than students report.



Parent perceptions seem to remain static from high school to college, despite student experiences changing dramatically. Compared with high schoolers, college students self-report notable increases in depression, anxiety/stress, and suicidal ideation and intent, but parent perceptions may not change.



More frequent conversations about a student's mental health are correlated with positive effects. The more frequently a child's mental or behavioral health comes up in conversation, the more likely the child may be to interpret their parents' tone and behavior in a positive light and to take action on their mental health.

Status check:

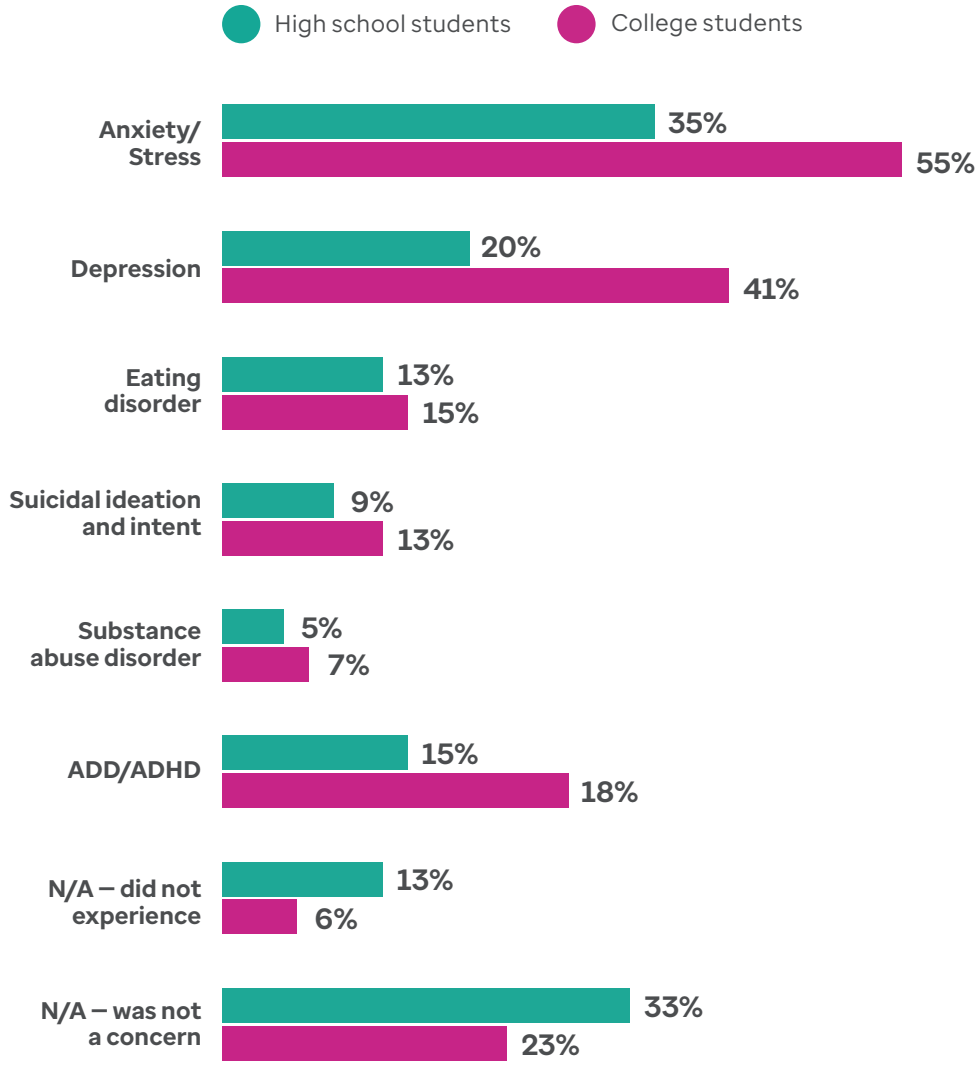
Student experiences with mental or behavioral health



High school and college students report similar concerns but at different rates

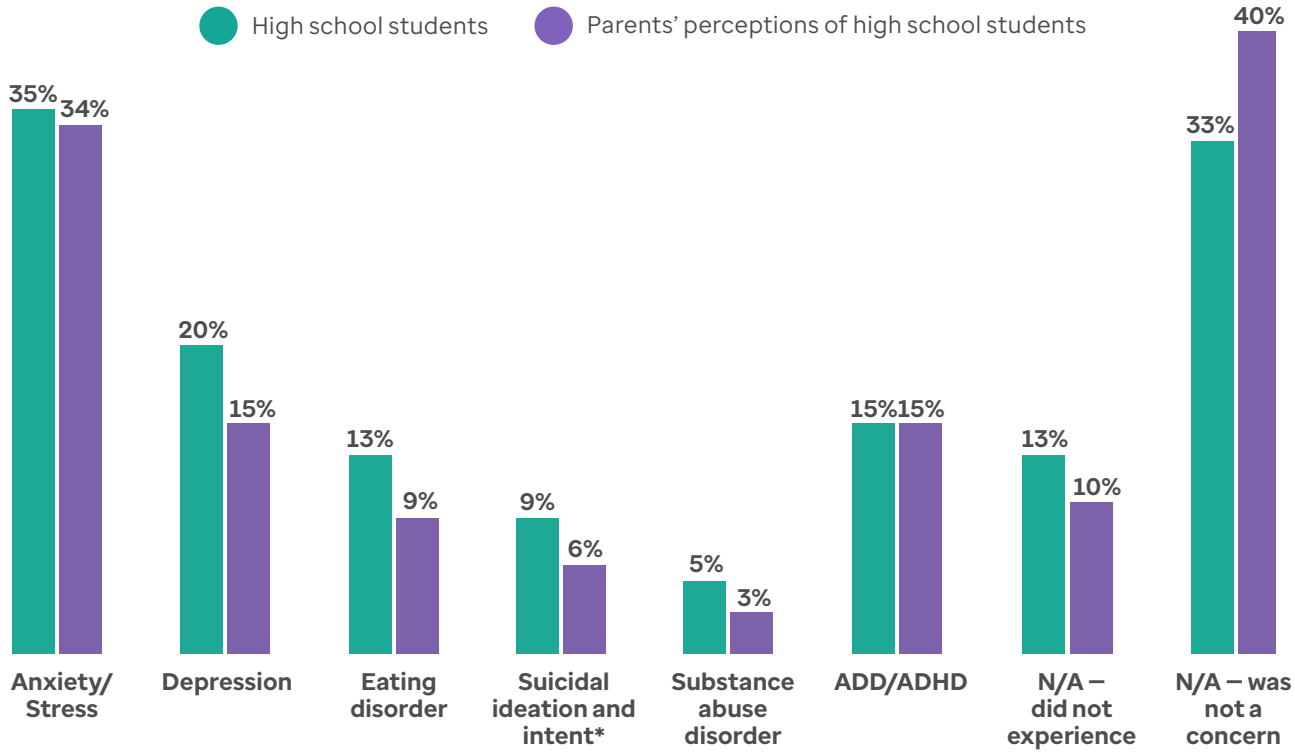
High school students encounter or manage mental or behavioral health conditions/concerns in the same pattern as college students but at **notably lower rates.**





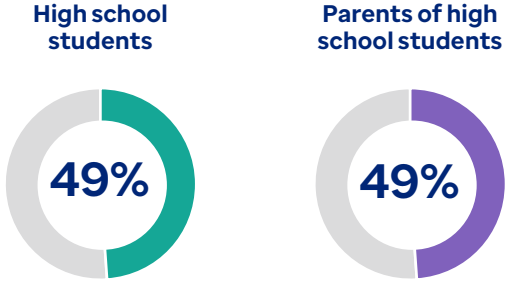
High school parents are in tune with their students' experiences

Compared with high school students' self-reported mental or behavioral health experiences, parent perceptions track within **3–7 percentage points.**



*The term "thoughts of self-harm" was used for high school students

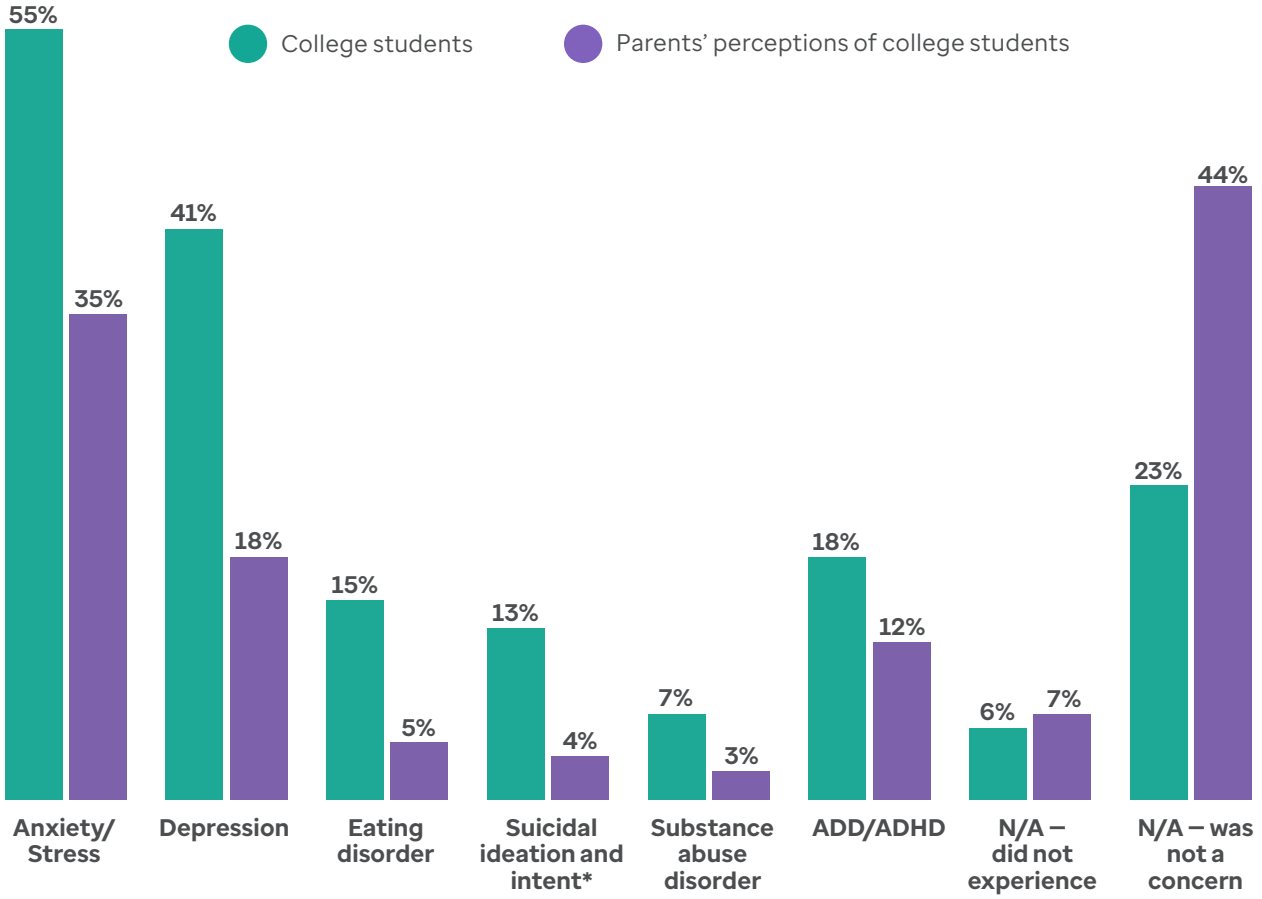
Spotlight on trusted adults



Both high school students and parents of high school students stated that talking to a trusted adult is a top factor influencing high schoolers' decisions to seek help for mental or behavioral health concerns among those who have sought help or know somebody who has.

But significant gaps emerge between college students and parents

Consistent with previous data, college students continue to self-report experiencing mental or behavioral health concerns at higher levels than parents of college students might recognize.



Seeking support?



42%
of college students

51%
of high school students

Say they (or a roommate/classmate/friend) **sought help for mental or behavioral health concerns in the past year.**

Top 3 reasons for *not* seeking help*

High school students

College students

15%
Concerned about friends/classmates finding out

25%
Too expensive

11%
Concerned about parents finding out

18%
Takes too long to get an appointment

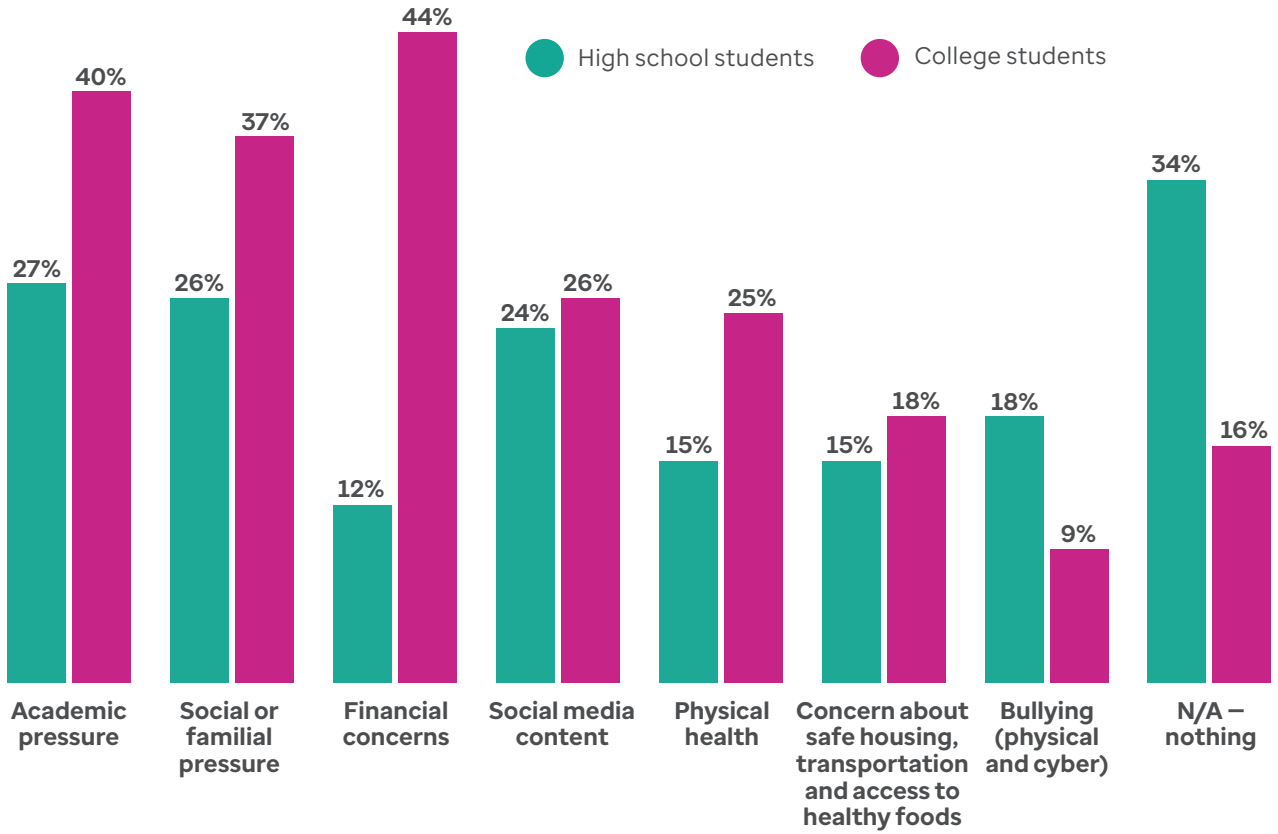
11%
Don't know where to find mental or behavioral health resources

14%
Concerned about parents finding out

*Among student respondents who reported they or people they knew did not seek help for mental/behavioral health concerns in the past year

The majority of all students surveyed report negative influence on their mental health

High school students are more likely to cite **bullying**, whereas college students point to **financial concerns or academic pressure**, as the top factors negatively impacting their mental health during the past 2 years.

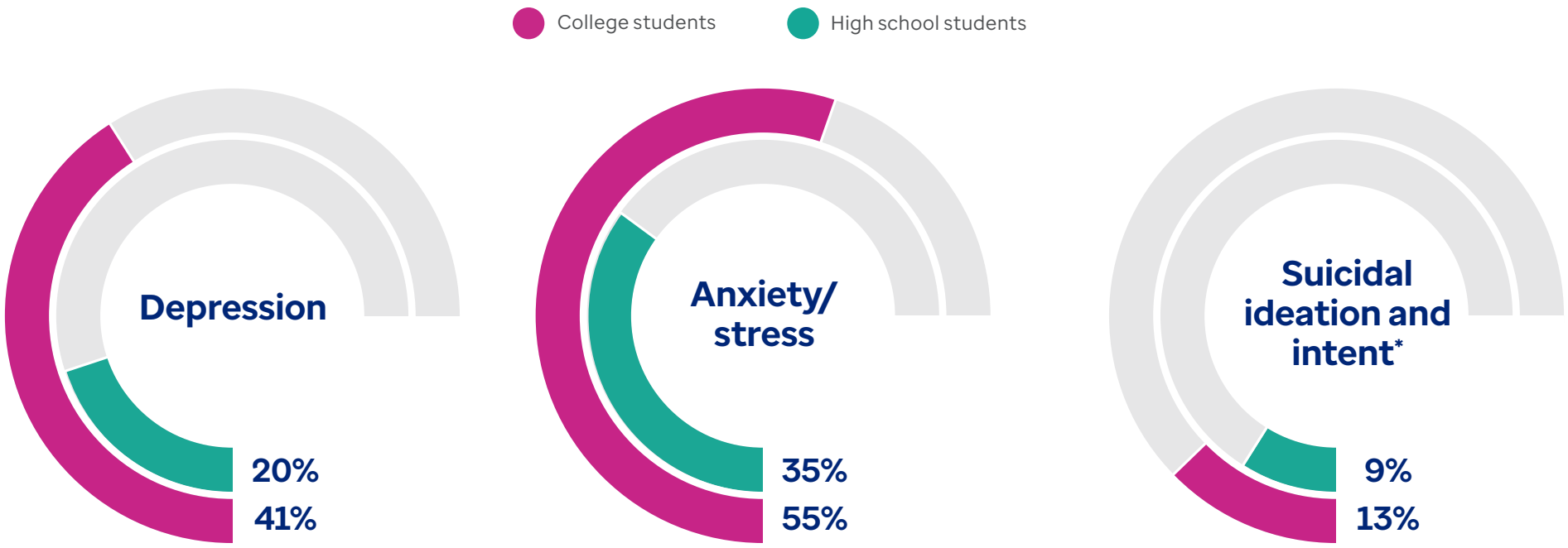


Trends in the transition from high school to college



Mental or behavioral health concerns skyrocket in college

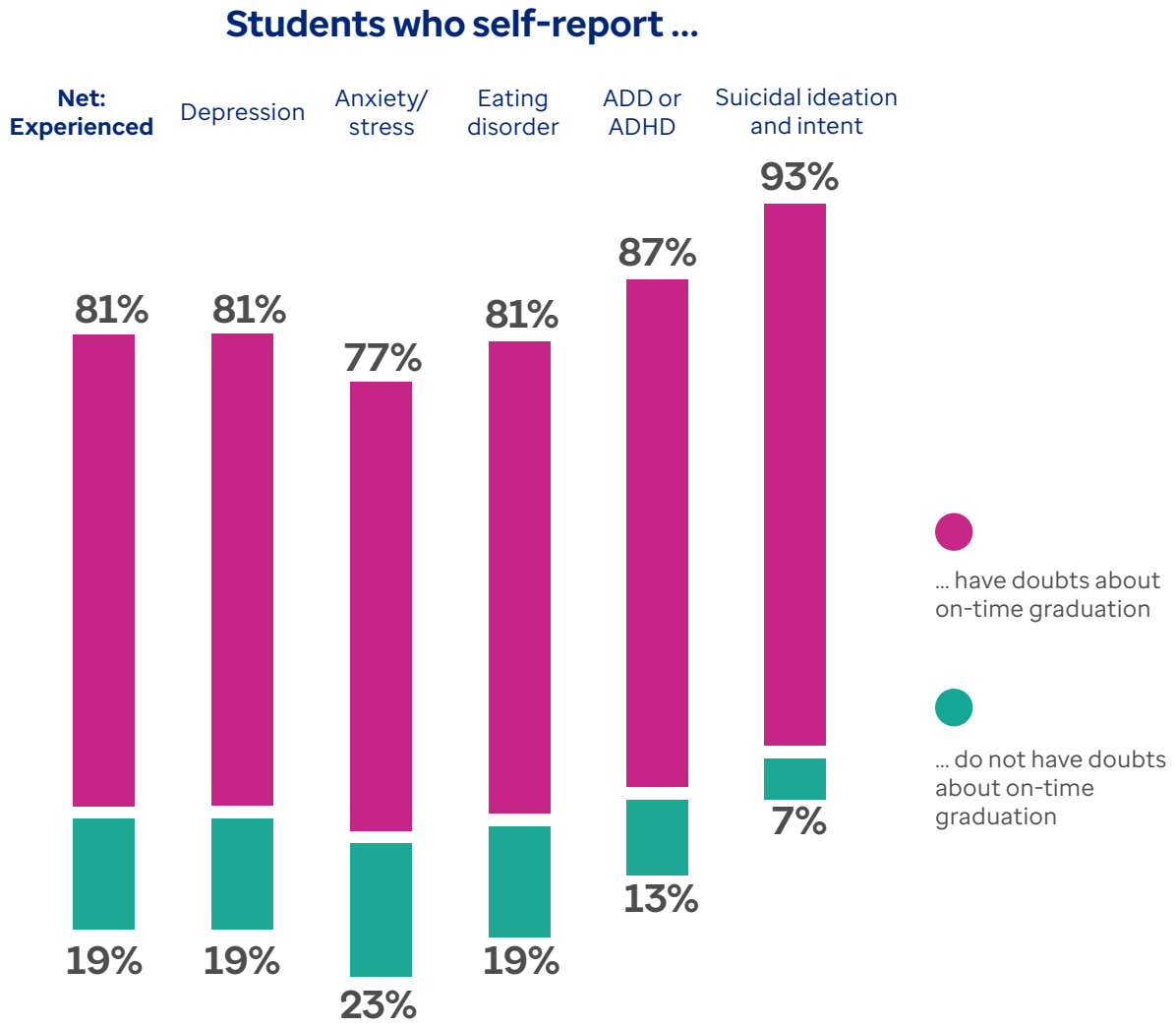
Self-reported concerns increase dramatically among college students, jumping by nearly 50% versus high school students, particularly for serious concerns such as depression, anxiety/stress, and suicidal ideation and intent.



*The term "thoughts of self-harm" was used for high school students

These concerns may impact students' ability to graduate on time

Among college students who self-report encountering mental or behavioral health challenges (or say that someone they know has) during the past year, **4 in 5 say they doubt their ability to graduate on time.**



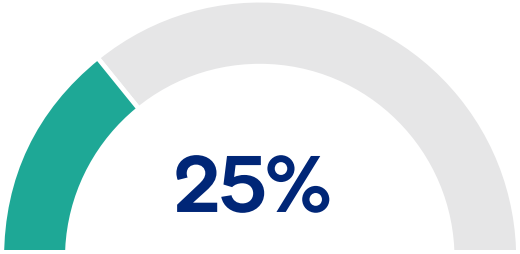
* 2022 data included data on students who reported encountering substance abuse disorder (n=56). In the 2023 survey, the number of students who reported substance abuse disorder (n=37) was not reliable and was not included.

Spotlight on:

Financial stress for college students

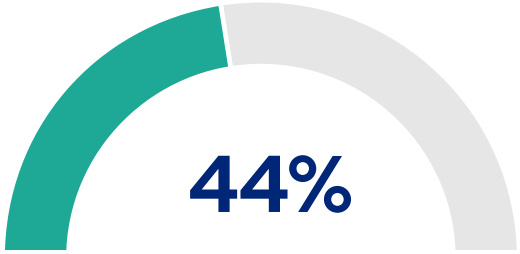
When college students were asked about reasons for not seeking mental or behavioral health support,* factors negatively impacting their mental health and reasons for doubting their ability to graduate on time, a common theme emerged: **financial stress.**

Why didn't you seek mental/behavioral health support in the last year?*



1. **Too expensive**
2. Too long to get an appointment (18%)
3. Concerned about parents finding out (14%)

What has negatively impacted your mental health in the past 2 years?



1. **Financial concerns**
2. Academic pressure (40%)
3. Social or family pressures (37%)

What makes you doubt your ability to graduate on time?



1. Stress (42%)
2. Mental health challenges (32%)
3. **Financial concerns**

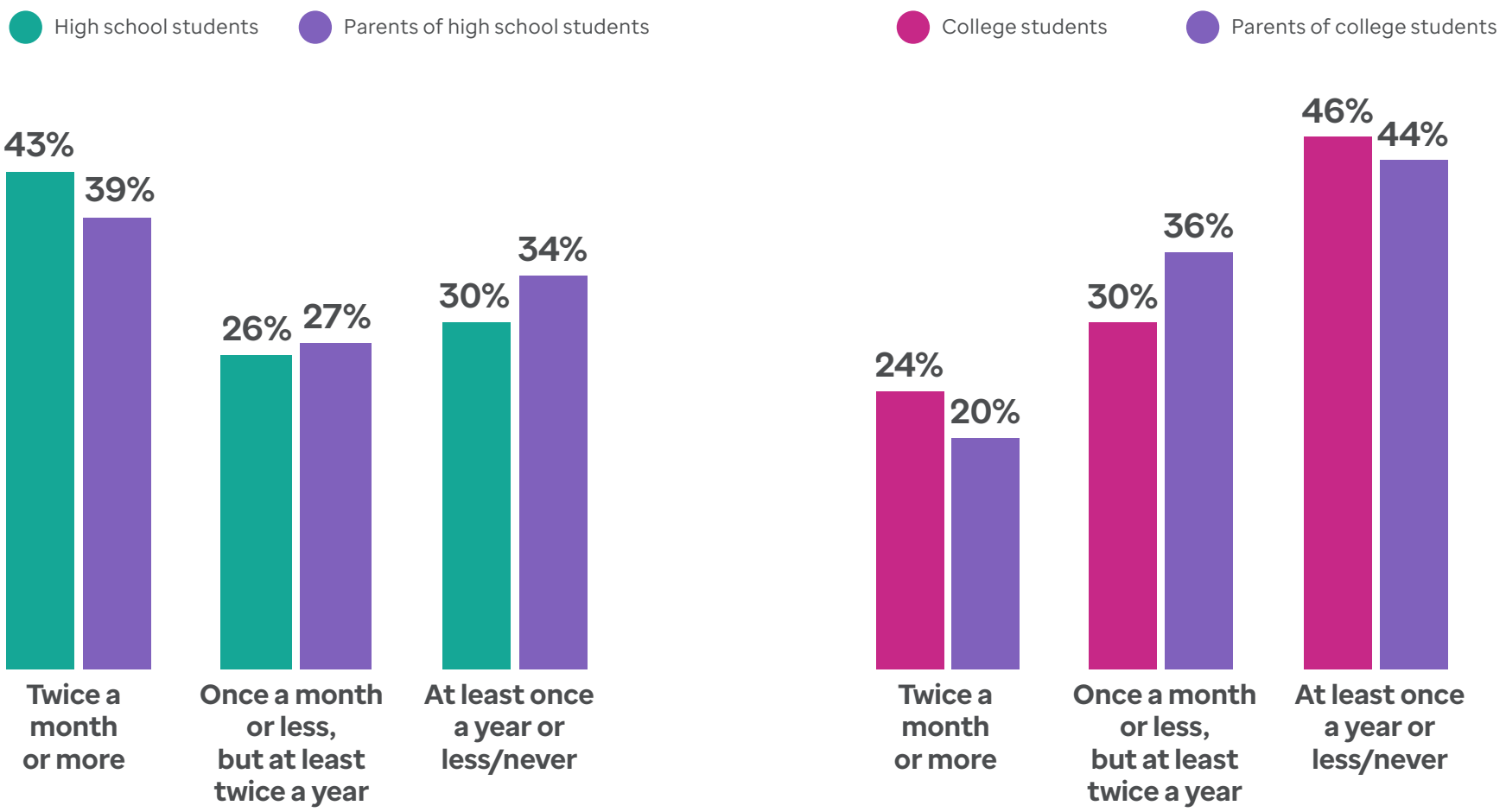
*Among those who did not seek help

Conversations matter: Talking about mental or behavioral health



Students and parents agree on how often they discuss mental health

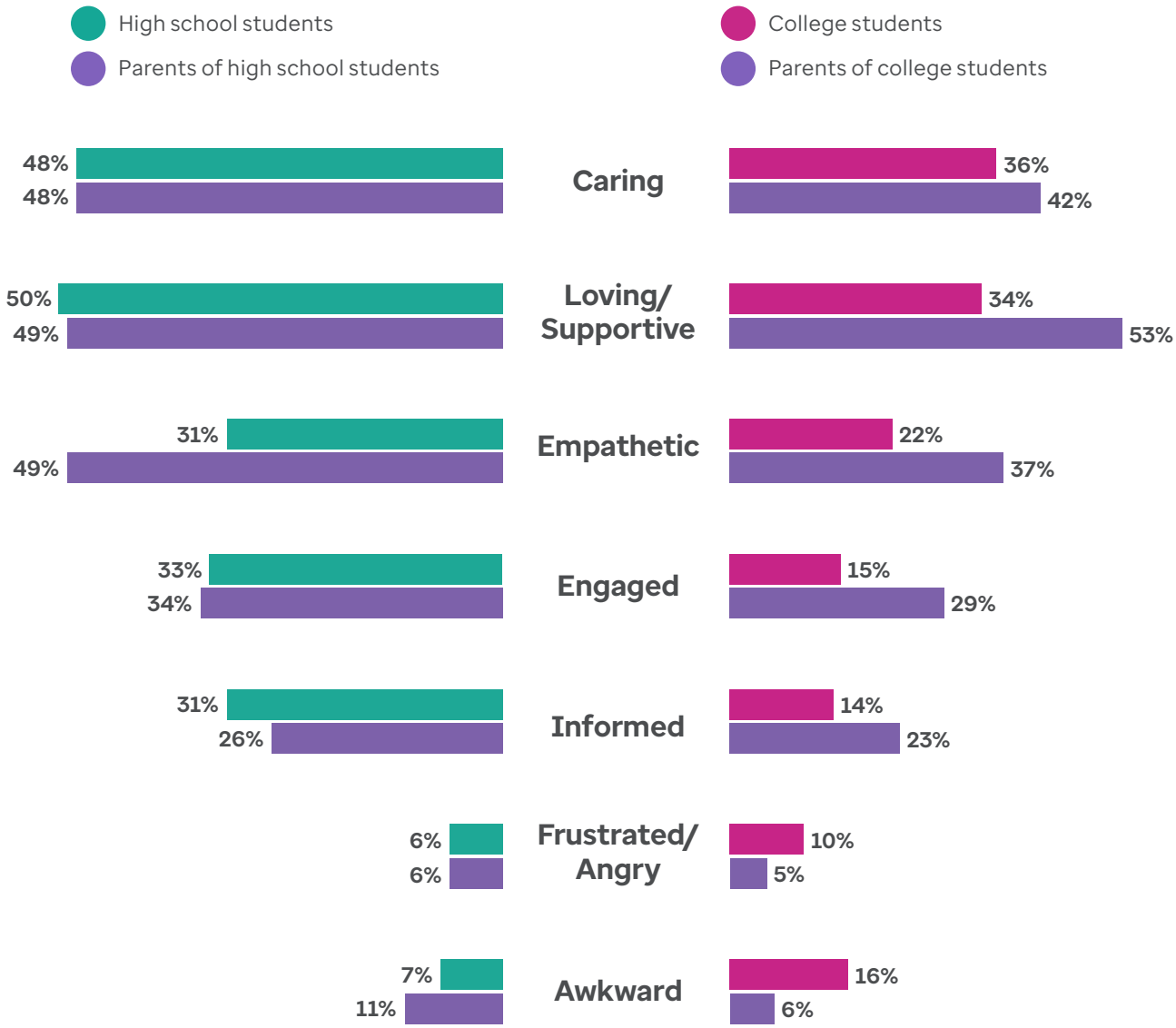
While parents and students are not often aligned on their experiences, especially in college, they are largely in agreement on one thing: **how often the child's mental health comes up in conversation.**



But do parents know how their kids perceive these conversations?

We asked students how they perceived their parents' tone and behavior during conversations about mental or behavioral health, then asked parents how they thought their kids would describe their tone and behavior.

High school students and parents remain closely aligned while college students and parents diverge significantly.

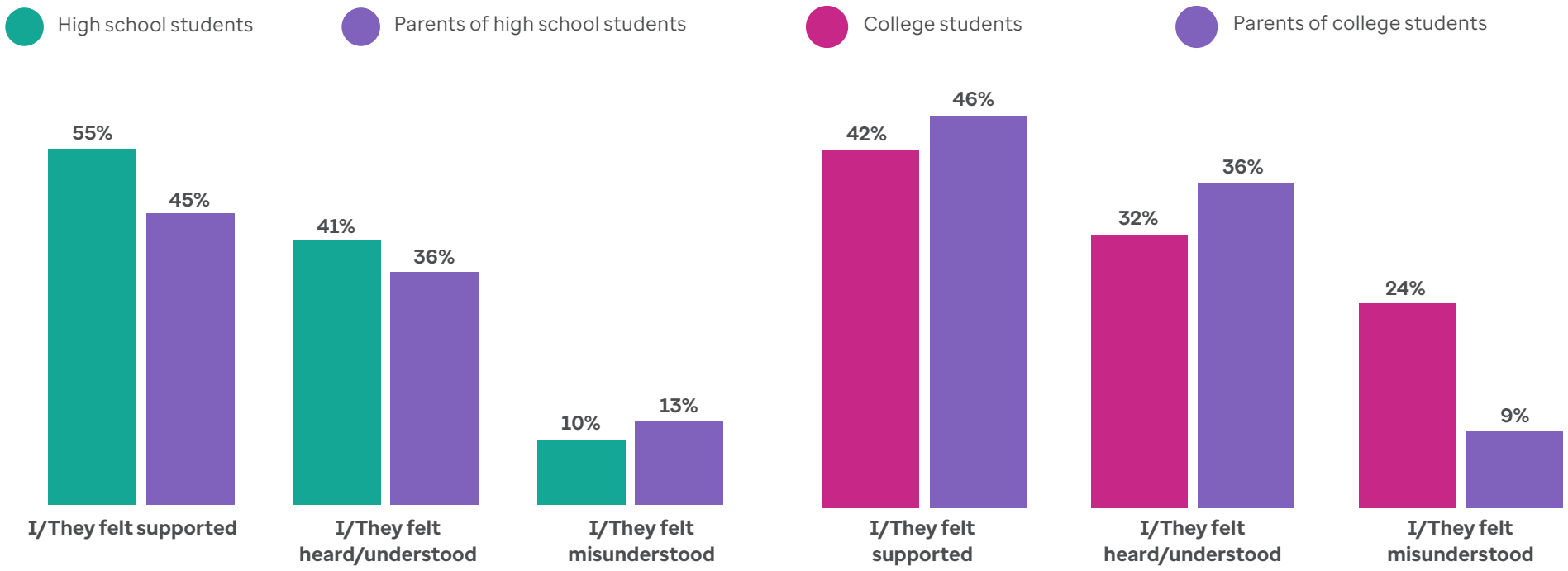


The frequency of conversations about mental or behavioral health parallel perceptions and feelings

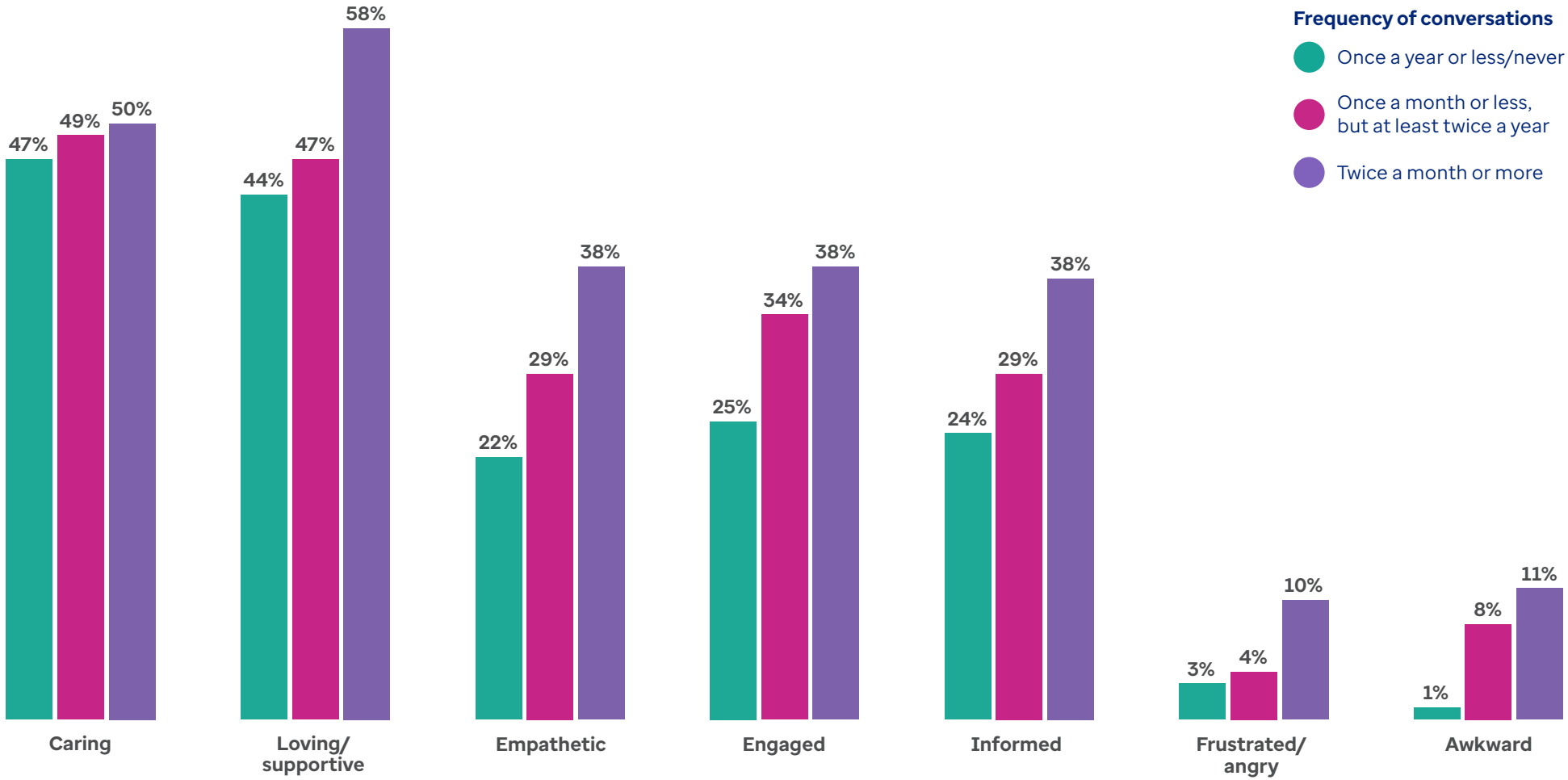


The college perception gap persists for conversation outcomes, too

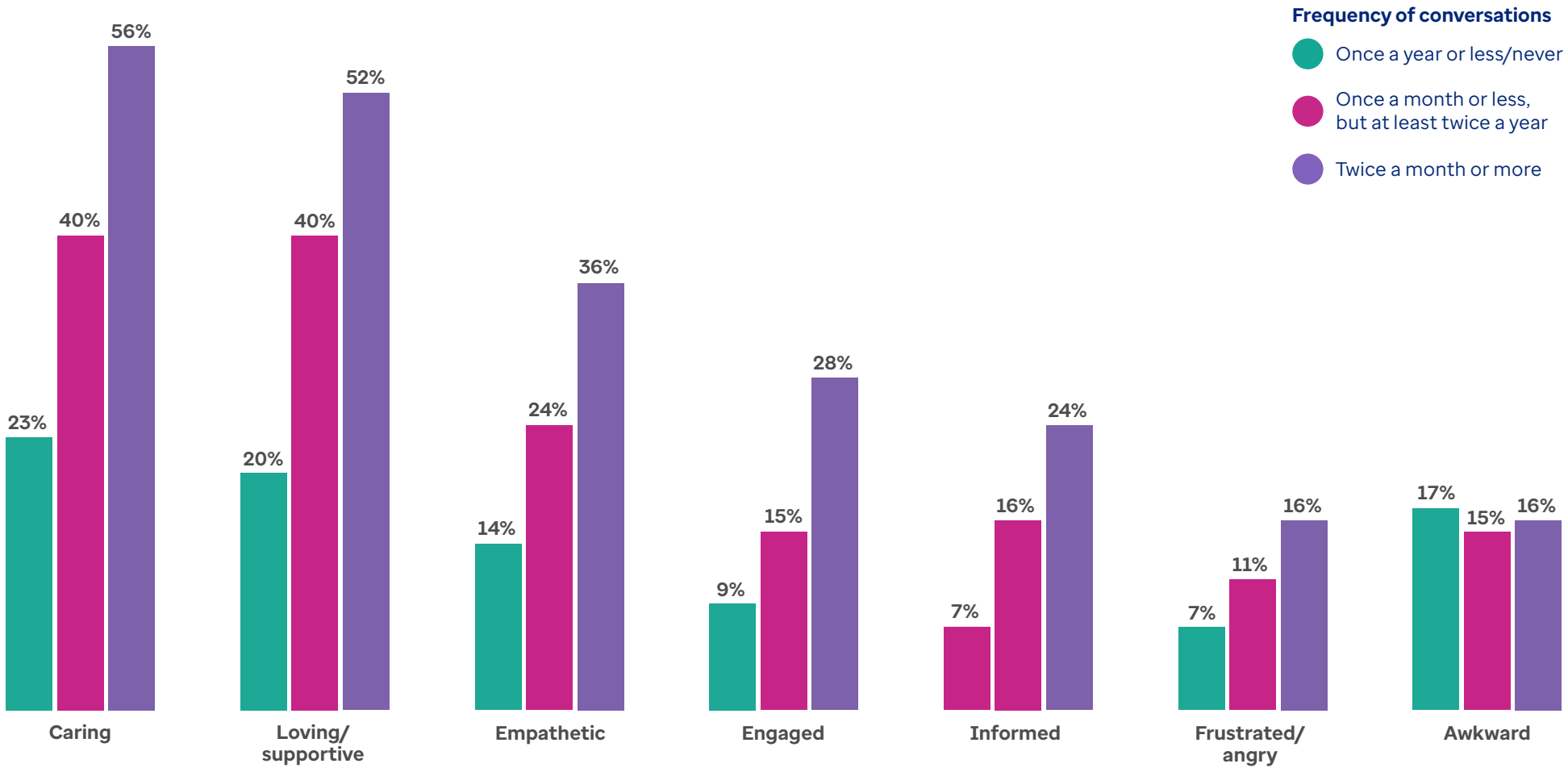
Among those who have discussed mental health, parents of college students seem to perceive a more positive result than college students say they experience. In contrast, parents of high school students seem to expect a more negative experience for their students than what students self-report.



High school students perceive their parents' tone or behavior during conversations about mental or behavioral health in a largely positive light, with an upward trend related to frequency

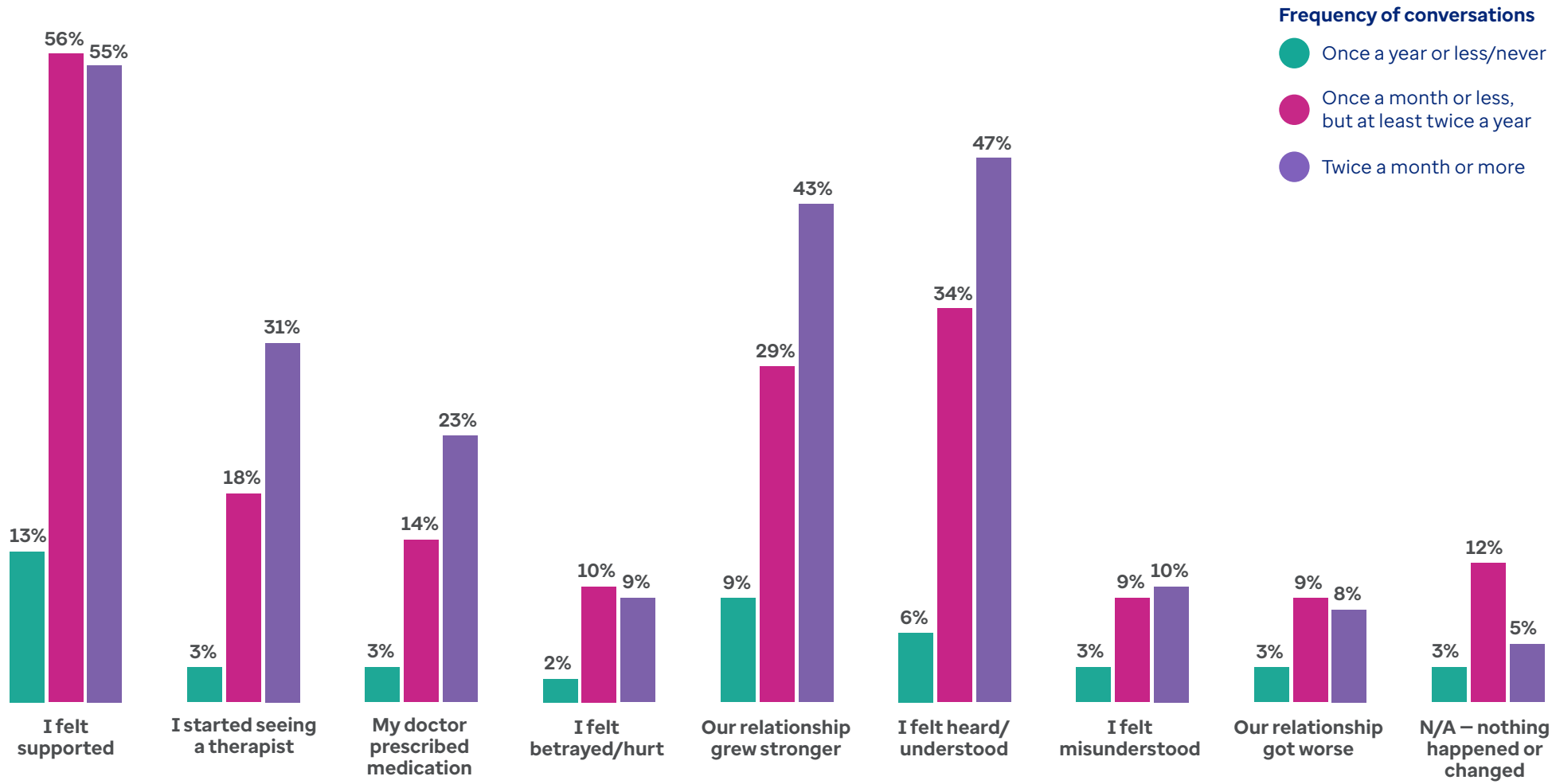


Among college students, more frequent talks about their mental or behavioral health correspond to increased reports of positive perceptions



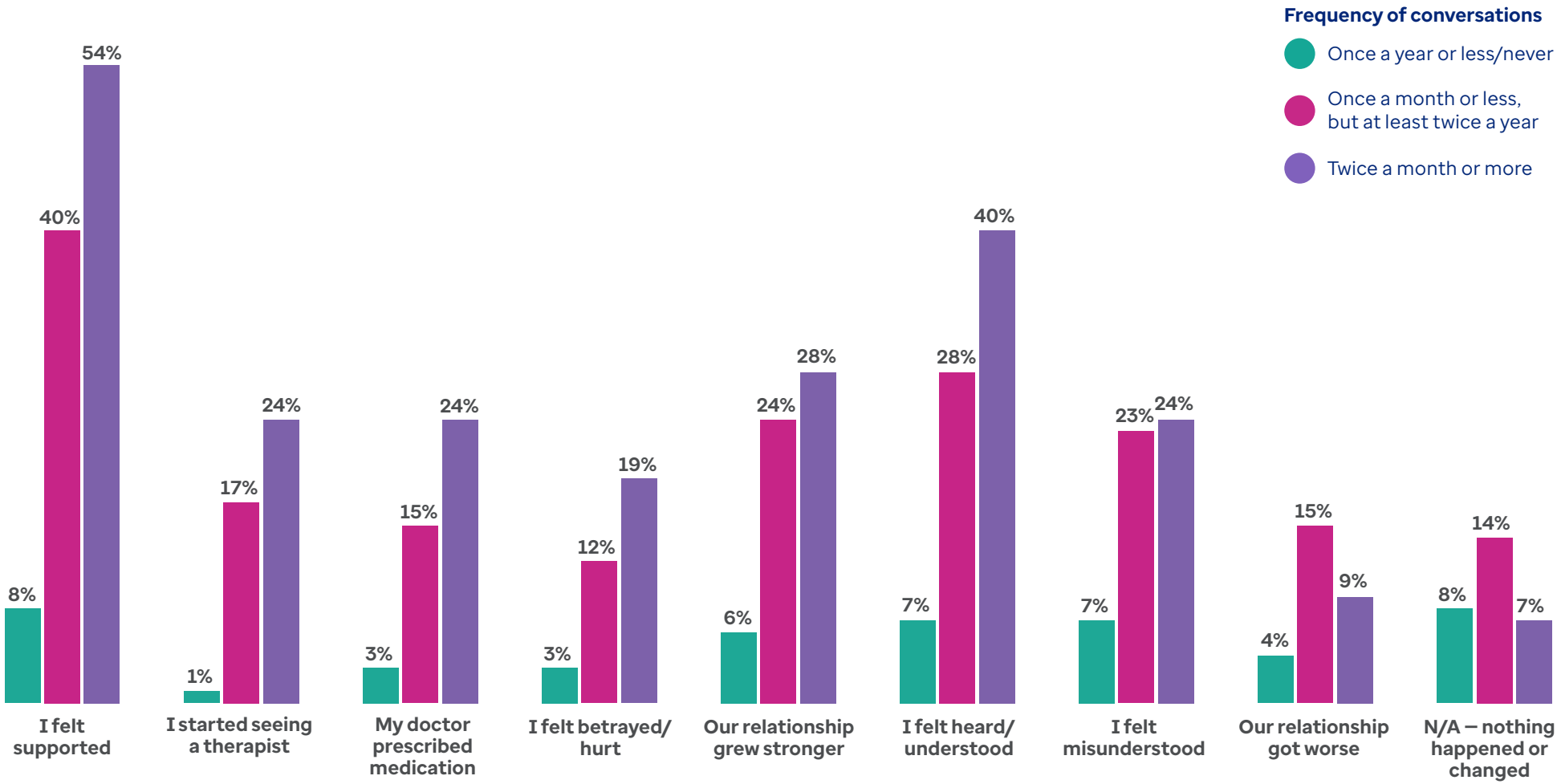
High school students report feeling understood with more frequent conversations about mental health

Q: After mental or behavioral health discussion(s), what happened or changed?



For college students, more frequent conversations align with higher increases in feeling supported and understood

Q: After mental or behavioral health discussion(s), what happened or changed?



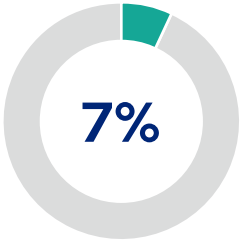
Spotlight on:

Embracing the awkward

Despite stereotypes, **fewer than 1 in 5 college students** and **fewer than 1 in 10 high school students report their parents' behavior or tone was awkward** during conversations about their mental or behavioral health. And for college students, that rate holds steady, regardless of how often those conversations took place.

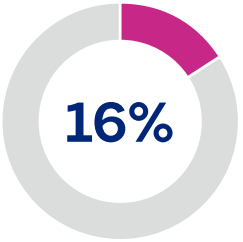
Concerns about being awkward may be largely unfounded – and shouldn't deter parents from having important conversations about mental or behavioral health with their children.

High school students

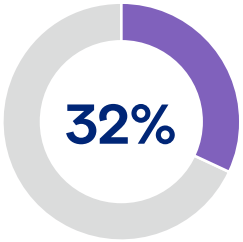


Percent of students who report that their parents' tone was awkward

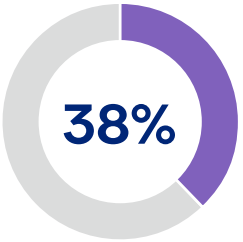
College students



And, **among all students who stated that their parents' tone was awkward** during conversations about their mental or behavioral health …



also reported their parents' tone was **loving/supportive**



also reported their parents' tone was **caring**

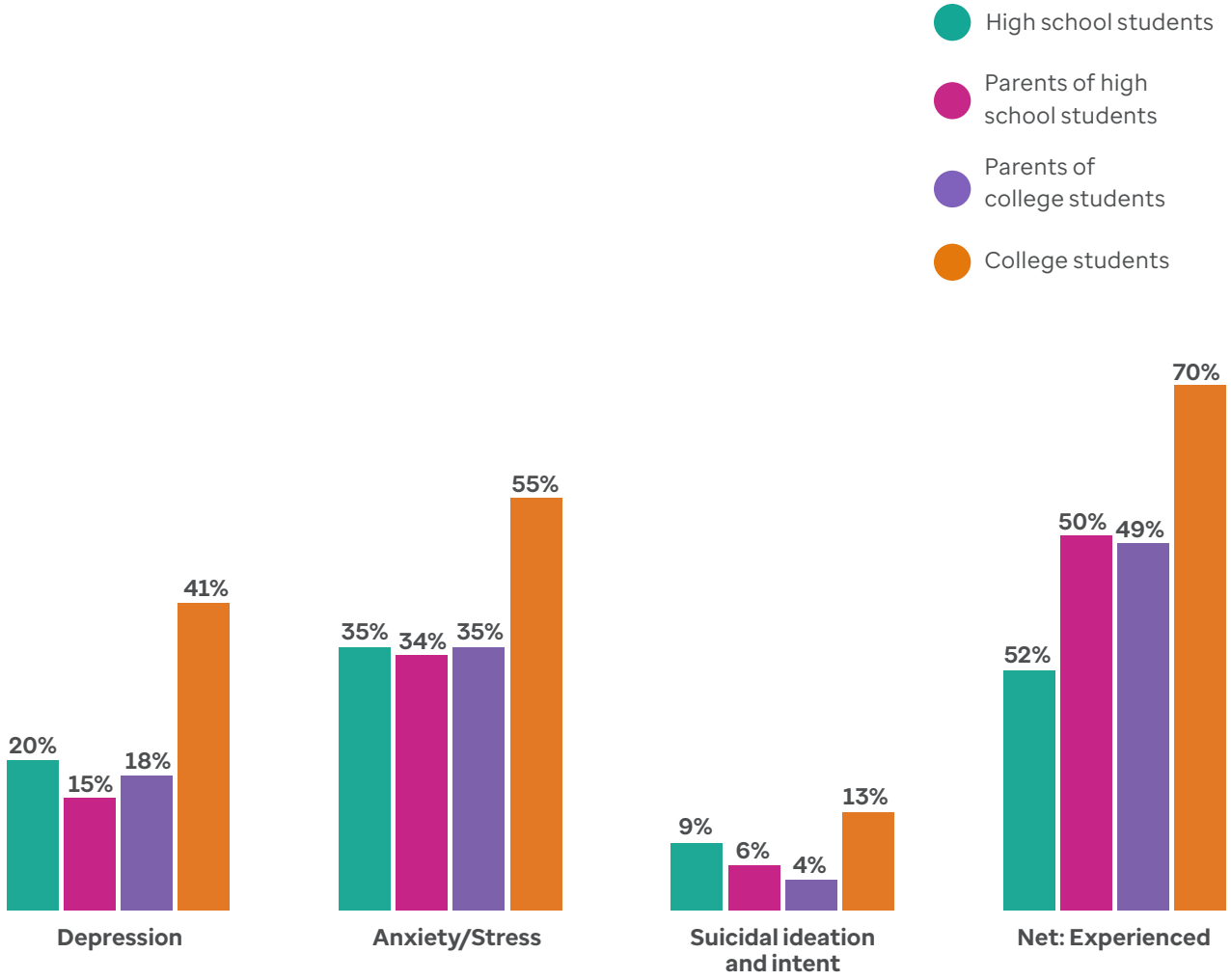
While student experiences may change dramatically from high school to college, **parent perceptions stay largely the same**



Parent perceptions may lag behind students' reality

Perceptions are notably similar across parents of high school and college students while self-reported student experiences diverge at college.

Data show this pattern repeats itself across perceptions of on-time graduation as well as reasons students do not seek mental or behavioral health resources.



Key takeaways and call to action



Moving forward: Next steps

As mental health concerns persist for many students, it's encouraging to note that conversations with parents about their mental or behavioral health are correlated with greater feelings of support and a greater likelihood of taking action.

Still, when children transition from high school to college, it's important for parents to remain engaged and connected. The self-reported findings demonstrate that the student experience changes dramatically from high school to college. However, parents may not realize that this change is taking place. Once a child leaves for college, parents might consider increasing how often they talk with their child, have the courage to raise hard topics and seek to be more in-tune with the new stressors their child might encounter on campus.

By talking about mental health matters with students in high school and continuing through college, parents can establish open lines of communication to help their student get help if and when they need it.

Visit optumconversation.com for resources to help start the conversation about mental health.

Tips to help get the conversation started



Have conversations early and often with your high school student: Talking to a trusted adult may influence their willingness to seek help.



Don't stick with the status quo: Increase the frequency of your check-ins once students are in college.



Understand new challenges on campus: Take note of what might be concerning your college student. These factors are likely to change from high school to college.



Don't be afraid to be awkward: Welcome uncomfortable conversations or tough topics when it comes to your child's mental health.



Ensure your student knows their resources: Make note and help your student learn about where they can access care through on-campus, student services and insurance.

Methodology

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,058, of whom 526 were U.S. college students, 529 were parents of college students, 501 were high school students and 502 were parents of high school students. Fieldwork was undertaken between Sept. 1, and Oct. 12, 2023. The survey was carried out online.

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