Colleges can’t keep up with students’ mental health needs

College students are being diagnosed with depression and other mental illnesses at an alarming rate. While more students are seeking help, universities can’t keep up, and it’s becoming a global mental health problem.

Palmer Holmes, 20, was diagnosed with depression during her first semester of college as a freshman at Texas State.

“I was never depressed before I was in college,” Holmes said. “I was always very happy and positive and outgoing. I had a good relationship with my parents and good friends.”

The transition from high school to a university can be unstable and especially difficult for students without support from friends and family, healthy coping mechanisms, exposure to a new environment, adjusting to a new schedule and meeting new people.

“Everything changed,” Holmes said. “I moved away from my friends and parents and met new people who didn’t have my best interest in mind. I wasn’t making the best decisions and wasn’t focusing on school.”

Depending on the severity, depression can affect students’ ability to work, study, interact with others, or take care of themselves, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

More than one-third of first-year university students in industrialized countries including the United States, Mexico, Spain, Belgium, Australia, Northern Ireland and South Africa, report symptoms of some type of mental health disorder, according to the American Psychological Association.

The World Health Organization’s World Mental Health International College Student Initiative surveyed almost 14,000 students from 19 countries in those eight countries to evaluate common mental health disorders, including major depression, generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Thirty-five percent of the respondents reported symptoms consistent with at least one of those disorders, with major depressive disorder being the most common, followed by generalized anxiety disorder.

Depression is the leading cause of bad health and disability worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, and more than 300 million people are currently living with it.

Holmes shared her story dealing with depression as a freshman in college and warns others to get help and take care before it gets too late.

“I had to drop out of school my freshman year because my depression got so bad, it got to the point where I didn’t get out of bed for weeks, I wasn’t doing my schoolwork, and I wasn’t taking care of myself,” she said. “I tried to take my life by overdosing on prescription pills, and thankfully I was unsuccessful, but at the time it seemed like the only option.”

As more and more students seek help from their college mental health and counseling centers, it’s becoming apparent these departments are severely understaffed and not able to get to everyone who needs help.

At the University of Texas at Arlington, there are only five licensed psychologists and one psychiatrist in the Counseling and Psychological Services department for almost 40,000 students. It usually takes at least two weeks to get in for an appointment with a psychologist and a month to meet with the psychiatrist.

The current counseling and therapy services available at most universities is not enough to meet the needs of students struggling with mental health, and figuring out how to increase services to keep students in school while keeping them healthy should be a top priority for colleges worldwide.