

# 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 student’s mental health challenges and finding solutions?

In the **2023 Student Behavioral Health Report**, a survey commissioned by **UnitedHealthcare** and conducted by YouGov\* among college students, parents of college students, high school students and parents of high school students, new data reveal important trends in the experiences, actions and influencing factors for students’ mental or behavioral health across high school and college years -- and 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 to help ensure that they 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 to high schoolers' self-reported experiences.**

When it comes to mental or behavioral health challenges, parents of high school students may be more attuned to students' reality than parents of college students.



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



**The gap between college students' experiences and parents' perceptions remains significant.** Consistent with 2022 data, parents of college students say their children encounter mental or behavioral health challenges at far lower rates than students report.



**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.



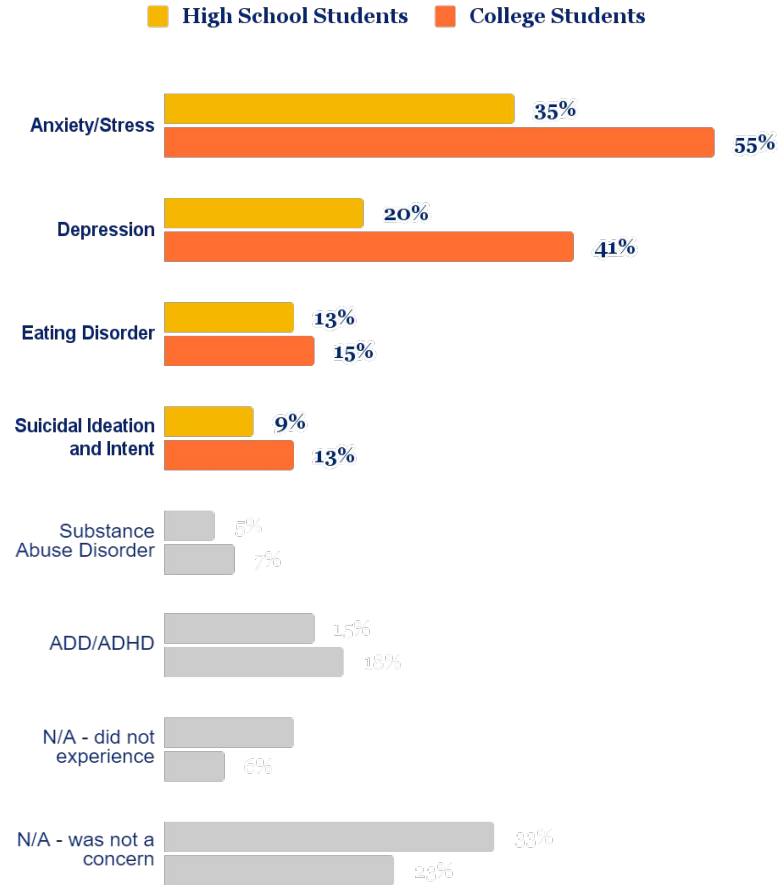
# Status check:

Student experiences  
with mental or  
behavioral health



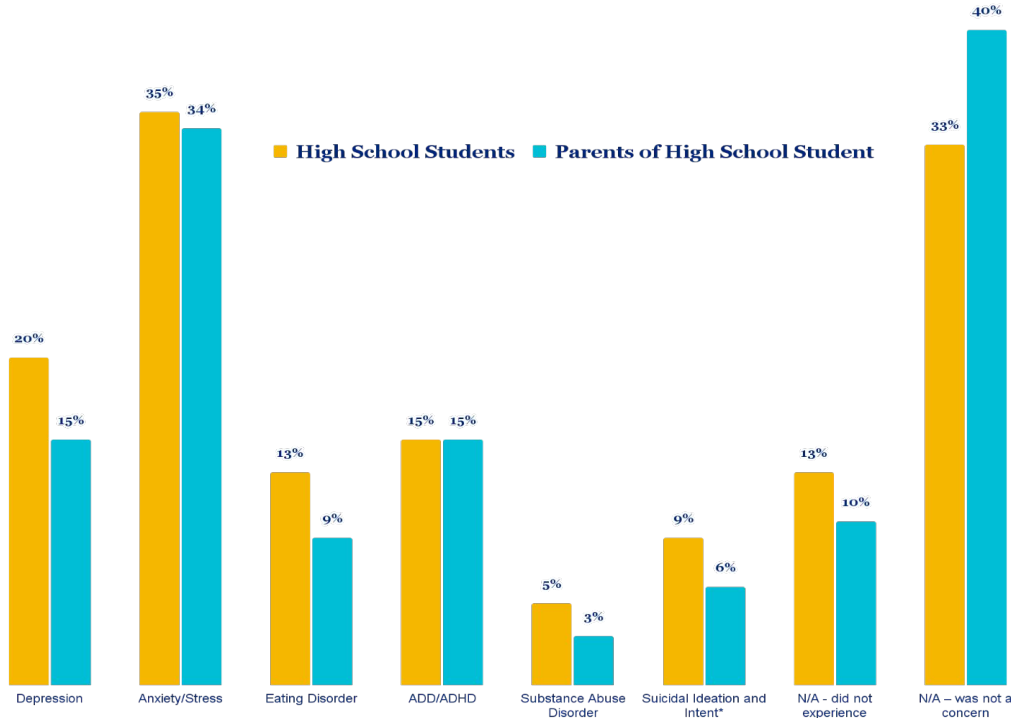
# High school and college students report similar concerns, but at different rates

High school students encounter and/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 to high school students' self-reported mental or behavioral health experiences, parent perceptions track within **3-7 percentage points**.

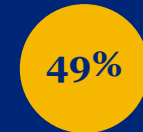


\*the term "thoughts of self-harm" was used for high school students



## Spotlight on: Trusted adults

High School Students



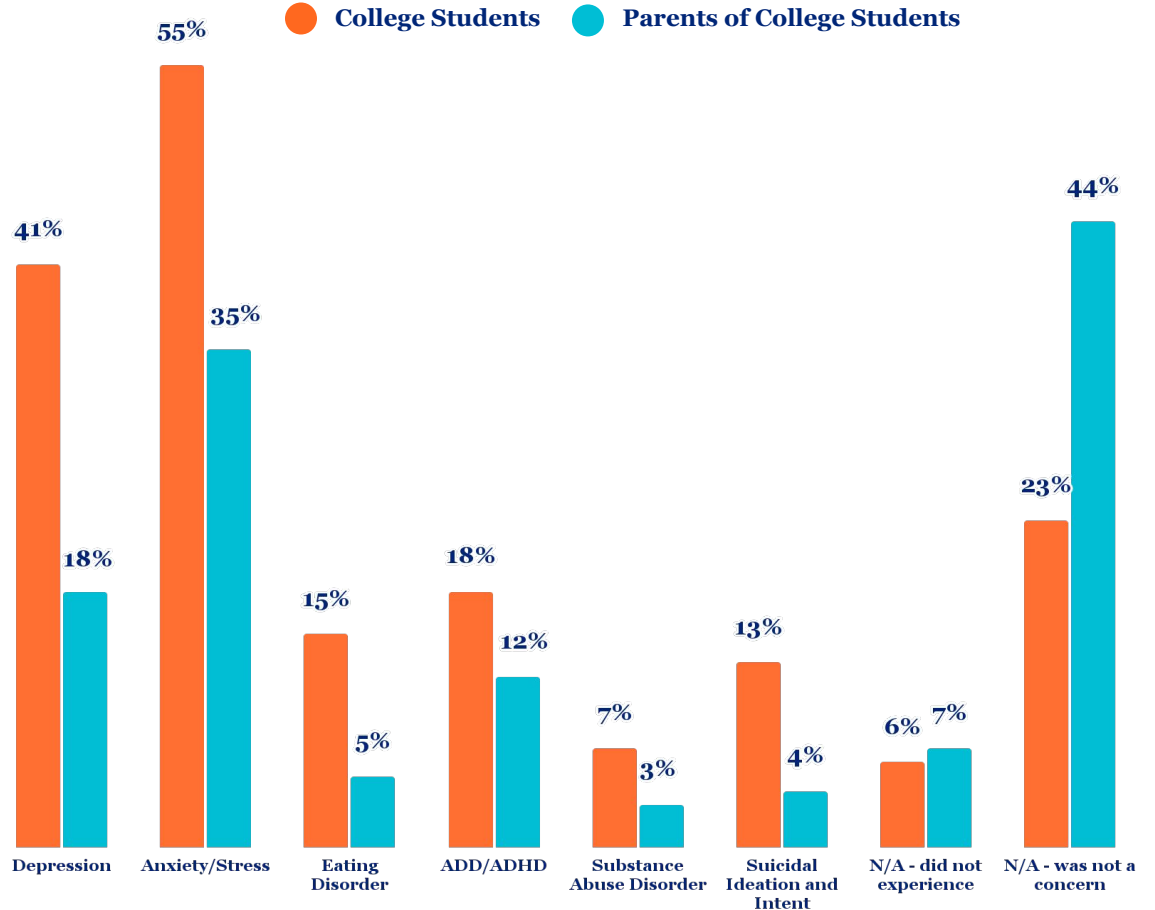
Parents of High School Students



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 [2022 survey 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 and

**51%** of high school students

say they\* **sought help for mental or behavioral health concerns in the past year.**

\*or a roommate/friend or classmate/ friend

## 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

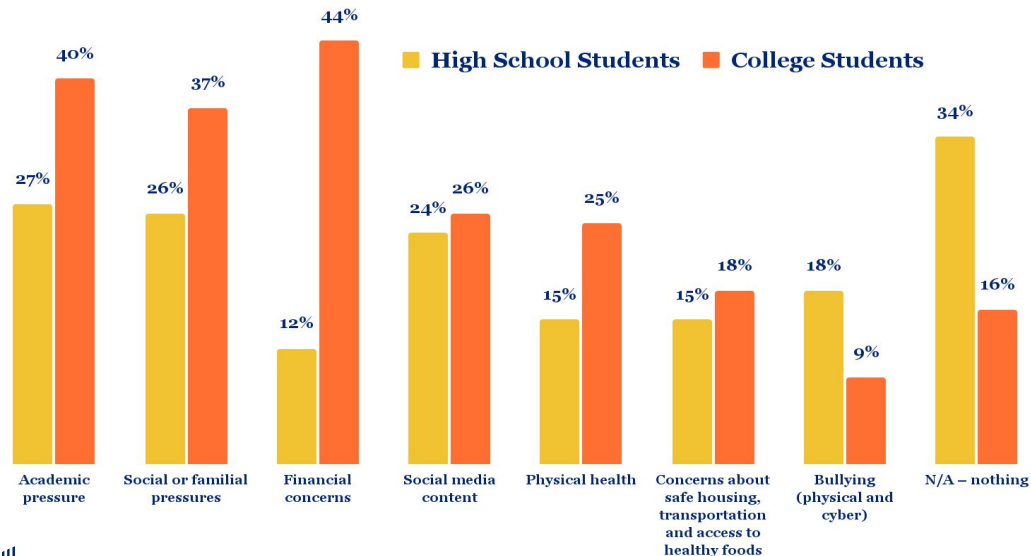
14%

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 last 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 two years.





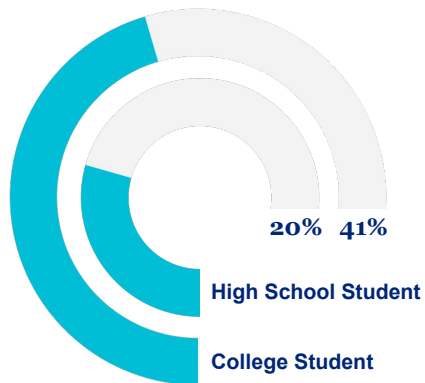
# Trends in the transition from high school to college



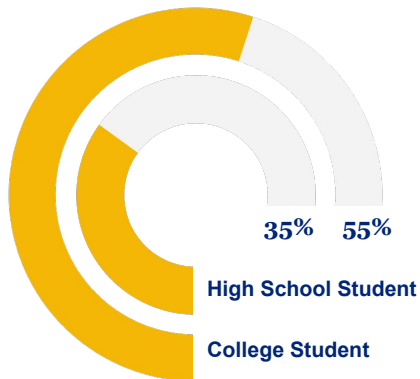
# Mental or behavioral health concerns skyrocket in college...

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.

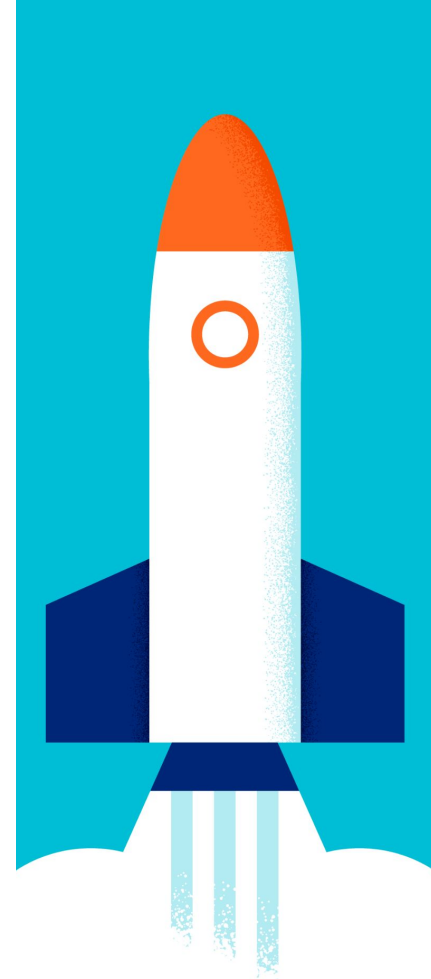
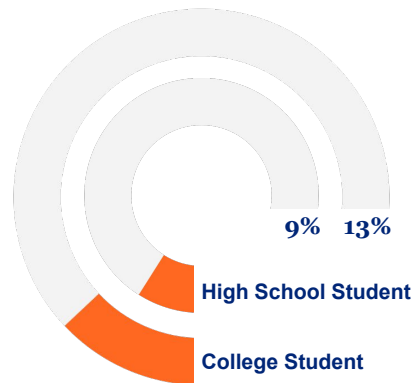
## Depression

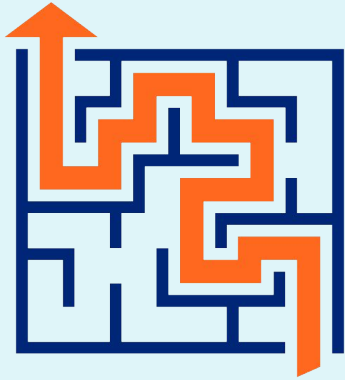


## Anxiety/ Stress



## Suicidal Ideation and Intent

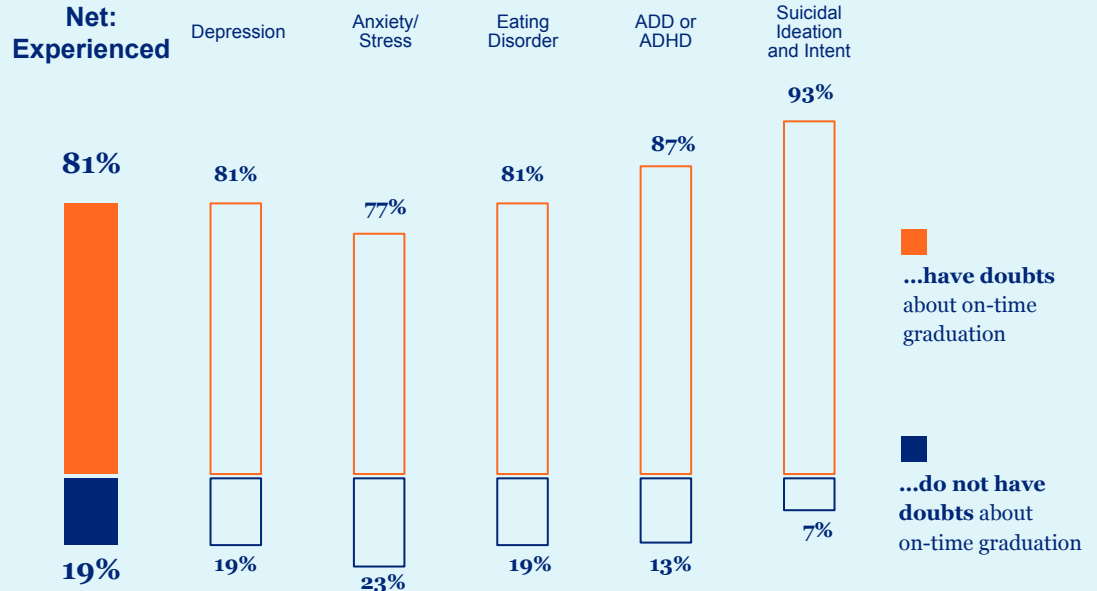




...and may impact students' ability to graduate on-time

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

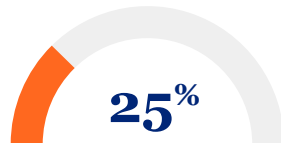
### Students who self report...



# Spotlight on: Financial stress for college students

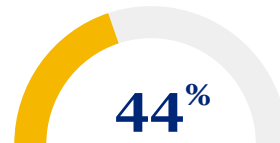
When college students were asked about reasons for not seeking mental or behavioral health support\*, factors negatively impacting their mental health, and reasons for doubting their ability to graduate on time, a common theme emerged: **financial stress**.

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



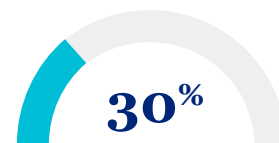
1. **Too expensive**
2. Too long to get an appointment (18%)
3. Concerned about parents finding out (14%)

What has negatively impacted your mental health in the past two 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 that did not seek help

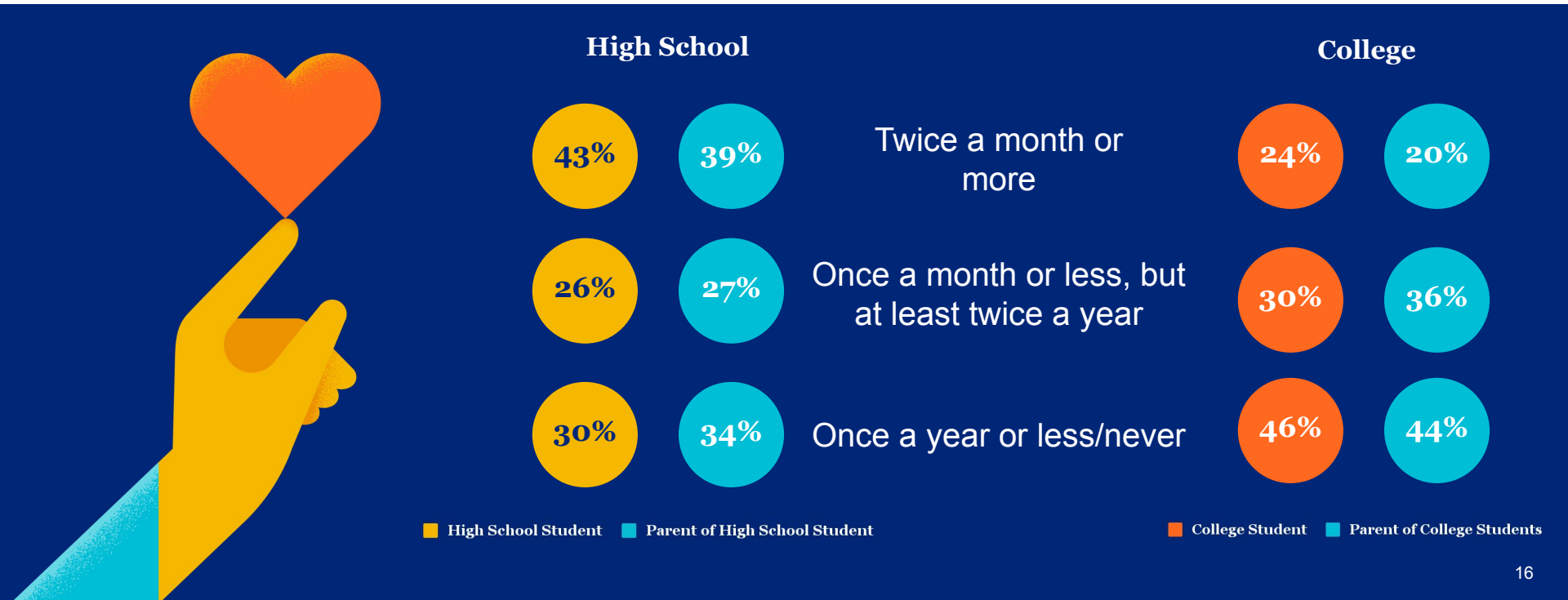


# Conversations matter: Talking about mental or behavioral health



# 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.**

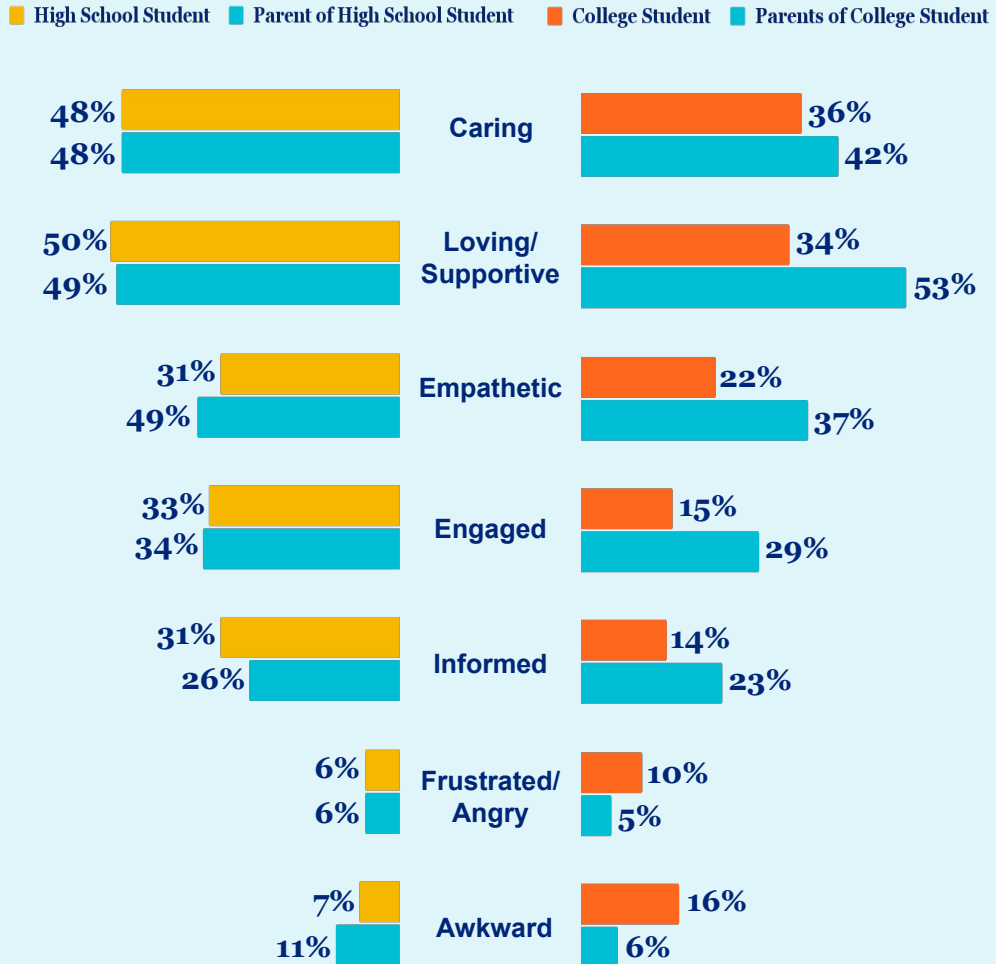




# But do parents know how their kids perceive these conversations?

We asked students how they perceived their parents' tone and behavior during conversations about mental or behavioral health – and we 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**.



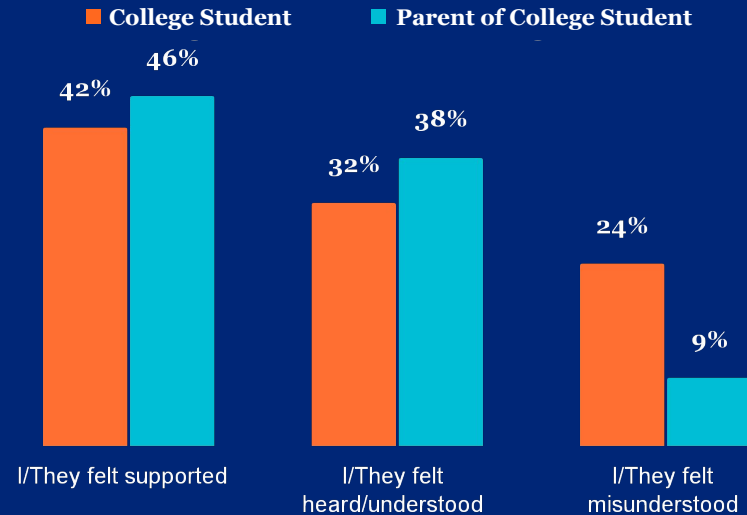
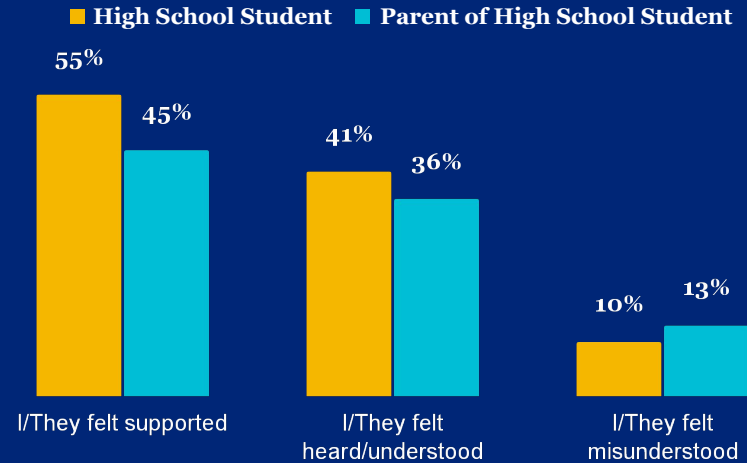


**The frequency of  
conversations about mental  
or behavioral health parallel  
perceptions and feelings**

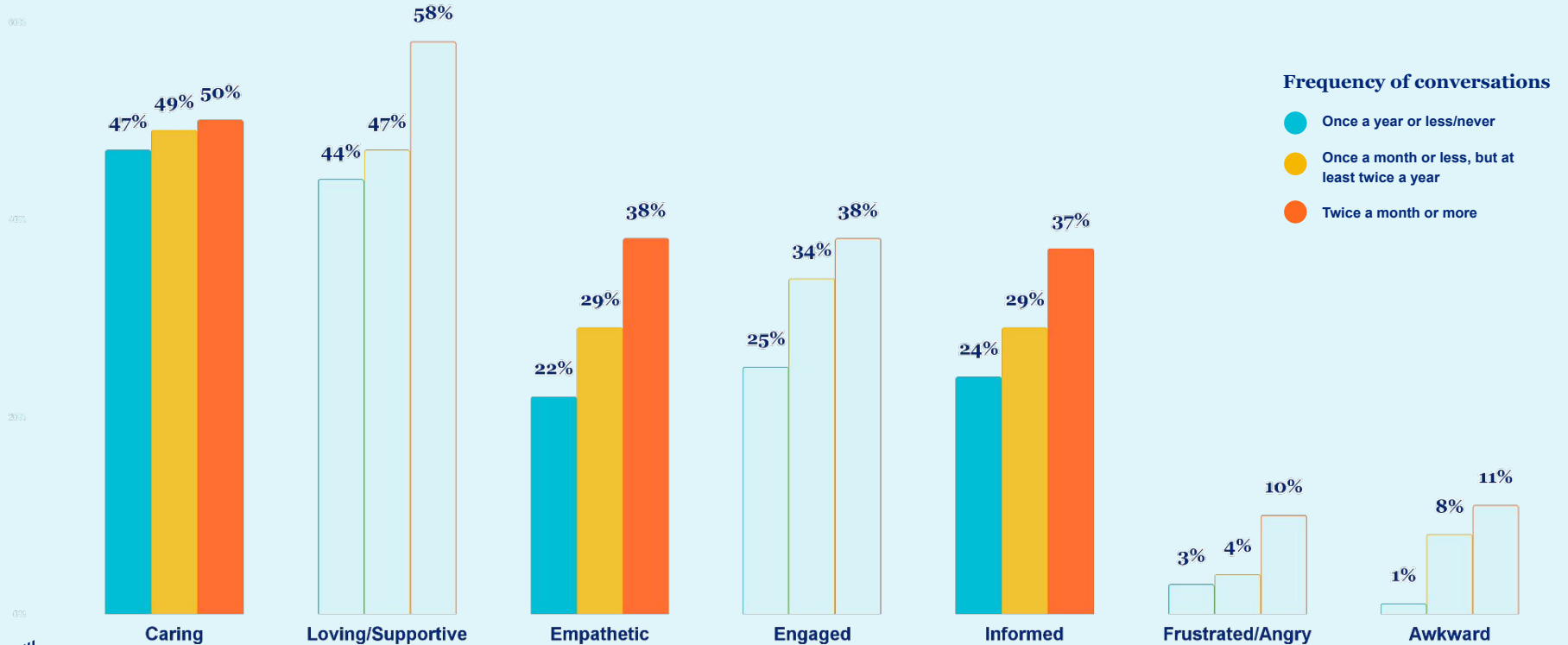


# The “college perception gap” persists for conversation outcomes, too

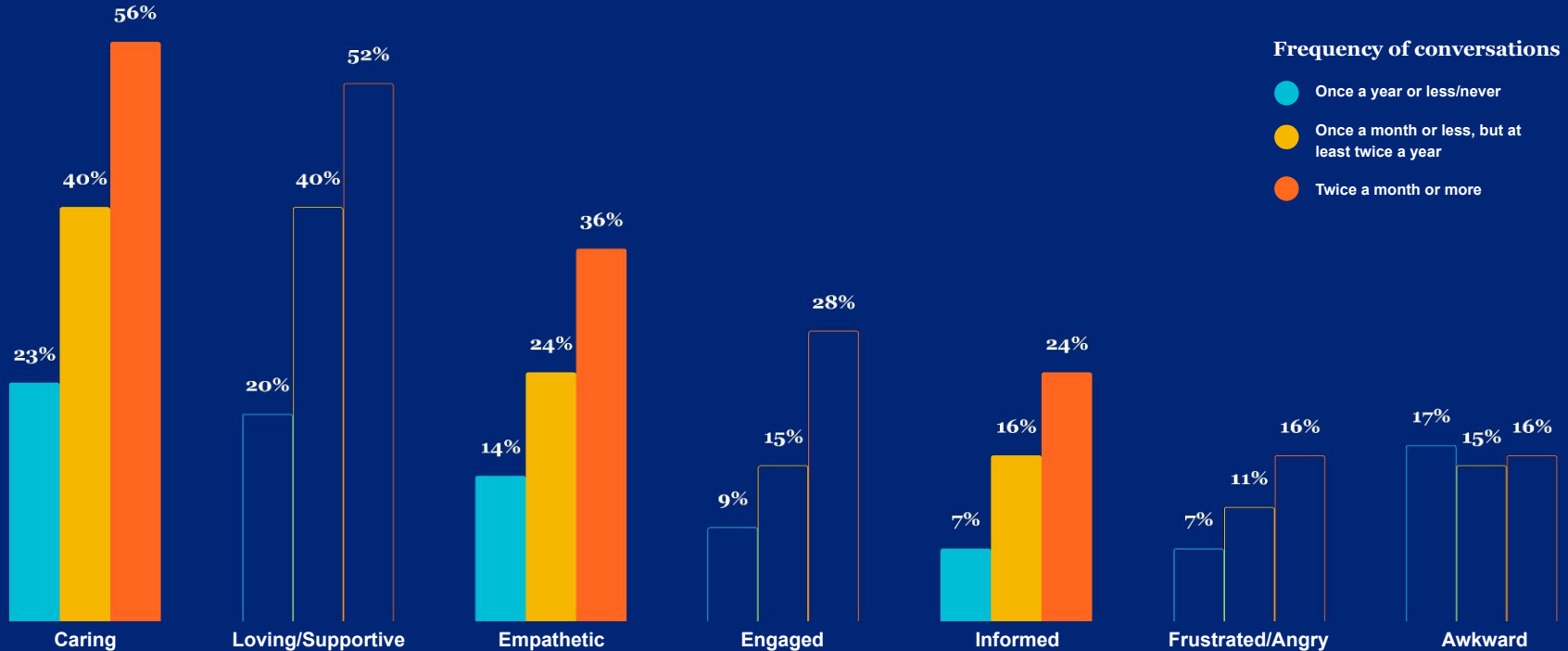
Among those who have discussed mental health, parents of college students seem to perceive a more positive result than college students say they experience. In contrast, parents of high school students seem to expect a more negative experience for their students than what students self-report.



# 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

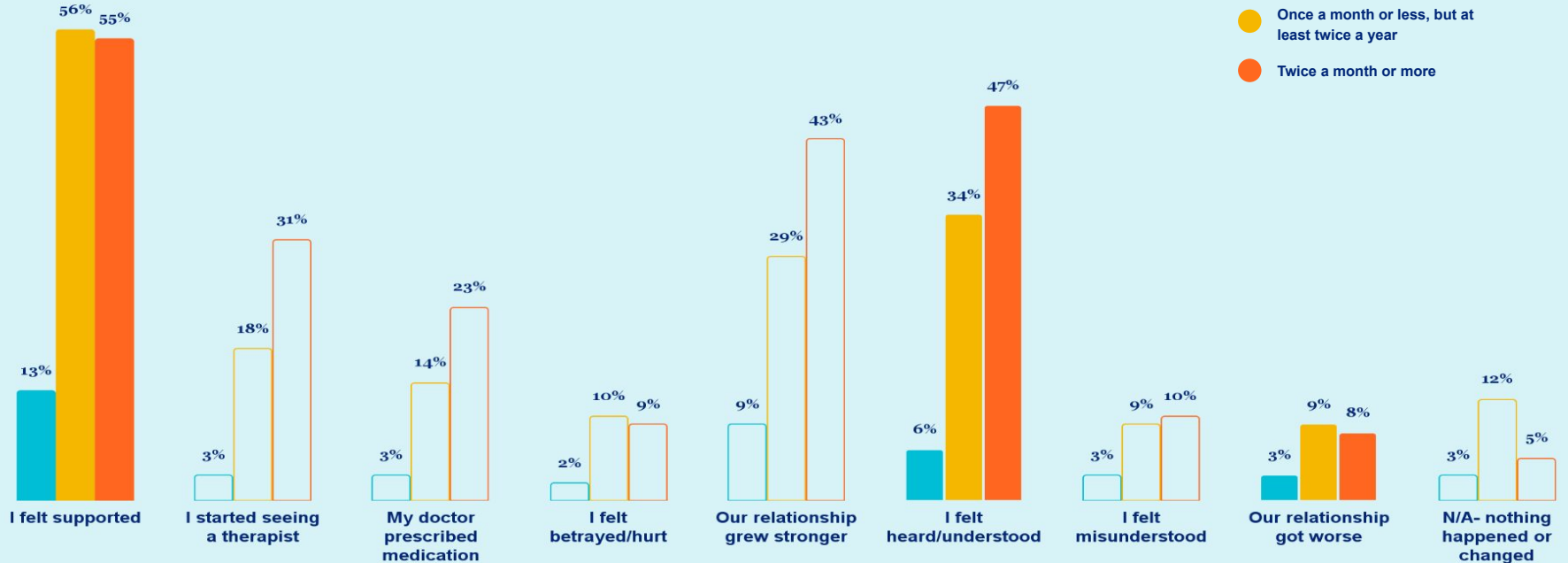


# High school students report feeling “understood” with more frequent conversations about mental health

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

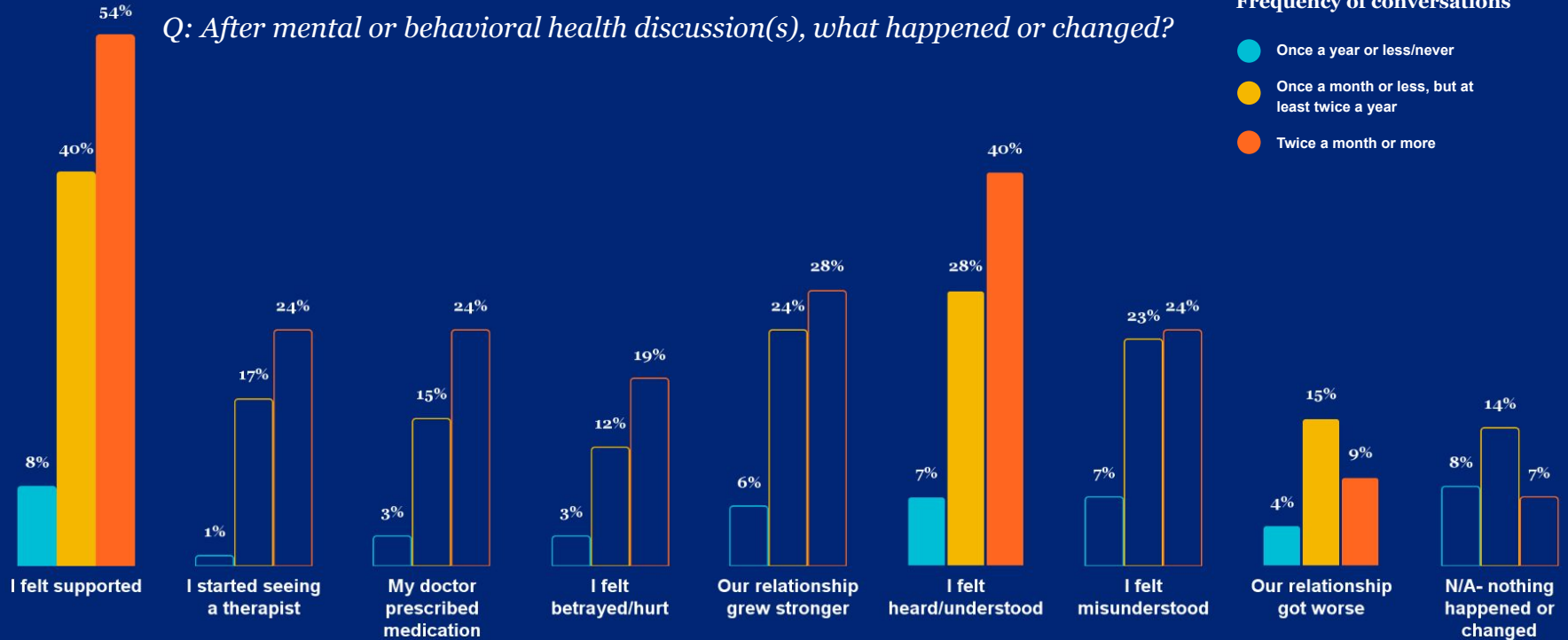
## Frequency of conversations

- Once a year or less/never
- Once a month or less, but at least twice a year
- Twice a month or more



# 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?



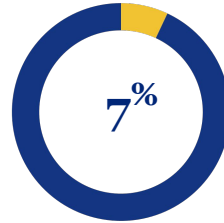
# Spotlight on: Embracing the awkward

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.



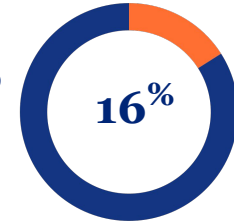
Despite stereotypes, **fewer than 1 in 5 college students** and **fewer than 1 in 10 high school students** report their parents' behavior or tone was "awkward" during conversations about their mental or behavioral health—and for college students, that rate holds steady, regardless of how often those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

## High School Students

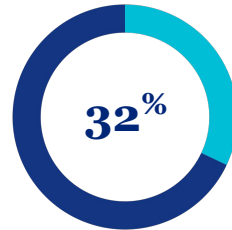


Percent of students who report that their parents' tone was "awkward"

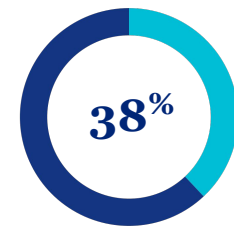
## College Students



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**





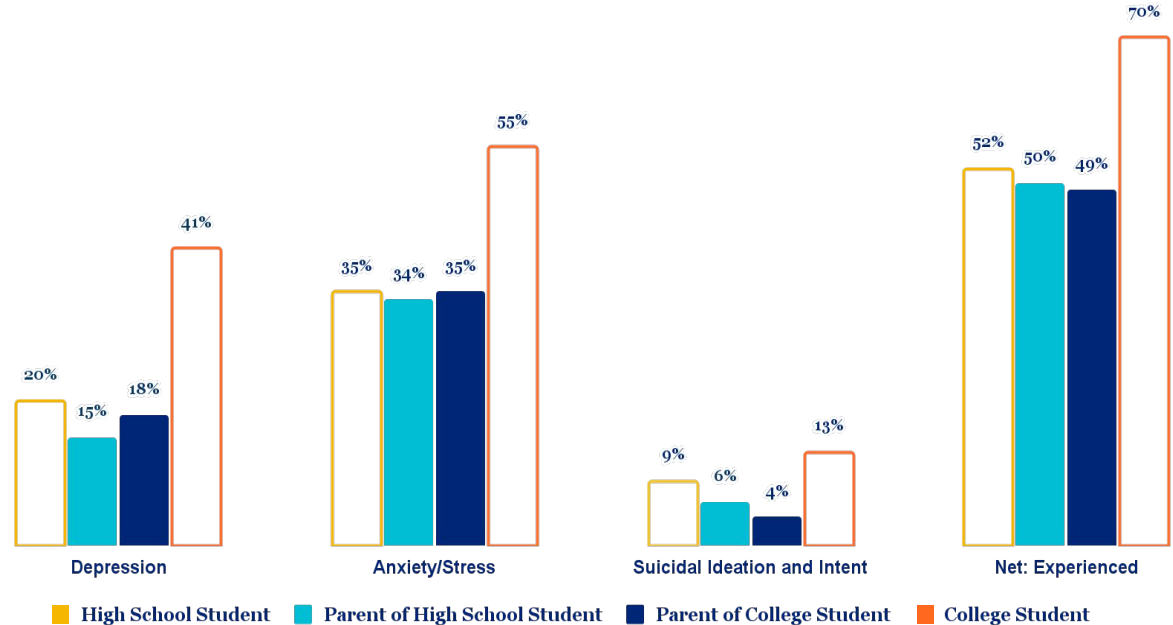
While student experiences may change dramatically from high school to college, **parent perceptions stay largely the same** →



# 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 the 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.



## 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 US college students, 529 parents of college students, 501 high school students, and 502 parents of high school students. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1st September - 12th October 2023. The survey was carried out online.



# About UnitedHealthcare

UnitedHealthcare is dedicated to helping people live healthier lives and making the health system work better for everyone by simplifying the health care experience, meeting consumer health and wellness needs, and sustaining trusted relationships with care providers. In the United States, UnitedHealthcare offers the full spectrum of health benefit programs for individuals, employers, and Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, and contracts directly with more than 1.5 million physicians and care professionals, and 7,000 hospitals and other care facilities nationwide. The company also provides health benefits and delivers care to people through owned and operated health care facilities in South America. UnitedHealthcare is one of the businesses of UnitedHealth Group (NYSE: UNH), a diversified health care company. For more information, visit UnitedHealthcare at [www.uhc.com](http://www.uhc.com) or follow UnitedHealthcare on [LinkedIn](#).

