

OPINION

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Yale Discriminates Against Students Like Me With Mental Health Disabilities. That's Why I'm Suing.

I was never treated like a 19-year-old in crisis. When I was desperate for support, I was made to feel like a burden and a liability.



BY ALICIA ABRAMSON PUBLISHED: DEC 21, 2022



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In September 2019, I showed up to my Yale University psychiatrist's office in tears. After getting As in most of my classes my first year, my depression and insomnia escalated at the start of my sophomore year, leaving me unable to fall asleep until only a couple hours before I needed to go to class. I was desperate for help.

I asked if some of my absences could be excused as long as I kept up with my coursework. I was told that the university's office of mental health and counseling had a policy of not writing notes in support of disability accommodations because students could be lying about their symptoms—the same symptoms my psychiatrist had prescribed me an antidepressant and antipsychotic to treat.

I'm now a Yale junior. Last month, I was one of two named plaintiffs, as well as a Yale mental health advocacy group called Elis for Rachael, who filed a class-action lawsuit against the university for failing to accommodate and discriminating against students with mental health disabilities.

I did not want to spend my time at Yale suing them. It's terrifying to go up against an elite, powerful institution wielding an endowment larger than the GDP of 103 countries. But despite scores of students begging for change, Yale has made minimal attempts at reform. For years, students and alumni have organized to ask that Yale make it easier to access mental health treatment on campus, address distrust of mental health services, and make medical withdrawal and reinstatement policies less punitive. These focused efforts have resulted in little change. Every second we wait puts students' lives at risk.

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People with mental health disabilities have federally protected civil rights, just like those with physical disabilities. Under the Americans With Disabilities Act, universities must provide academic accommodations and other reasonable modifications for students with all forms of disabilities. Our lawsuit argues that Yale has failed to do so.

As plaintiffs, we are not seeking monetary relief. All we are asking is for Yale to change their policies. I chose to be named in the lawsuit because I didn't want other students to go through the agonizing experience I did.

After being denied support by the school psychiatrist that fall, my mental health rapidly worsened. I knew that part-time enrollment was not permitted by Yale's policies, but I also knew that I couldn't finish the semester with a full course load—especially without any accommodations. Everywhere I turned for help, I was met with dead ends. I felt trapped. With no other choice, I submitted a request to withdraw.

Once my medical withdrawal was formalized, Yale seemed mostly concerned with getting me off campus. I had 48 hours to move out of my dorm. I lost 75 percent of my tuition and housing fees for the semester, despite having withdrawn only a third of the way into the term. My access to student health insurance was revoked. I was officially banned from engaging in any campus activities, using any Yale facilities, or even stepping foot on campus without prior permission. I was left isolated and

abandoned when I was most in need of help. It felt as though even Yale's facade of caring about my well-being evaporated the second I was no longer their problem to deal with.

After six months and attending an intensive outpatient therapy program, I felt stable, optimistic, and ready to reenroll. But the reinstatement process proved to be another daunting series of obstacles. The application consisted of a personal statement, three letters of support, interviews with Yale administrators, and a coursework requirement (which has since been eliminated) to earn grades of B or higher in two classes at an accredited four-year institution, which I also had to pay for. There is a cruel irony in taking time off school to prioritize my mental health only to be told that I have to take classes regardless—I just wasn't allowed to do so at Yale.



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All of this was meant to prove that I had been “constructively occupied” during my withdrawal, so that Yale could assess not just whether I had been effectively treated but also that I had used my time off “productively,” per their policies. But I didn’t take time off to be productive; I needed to heal. Yale’s process made me feel as though my mental health challenges were a weakness, a moral failure, a character flaw that I had to fix to earn my spot back.

I returned to campus aware that I was on thin ice. As Yale stipulates for most students who withdraw for any reason, I knew that if I failed a single course in my first year back, the university could kick me out, this time involuntarily. This pressure was compounded by an exhausting and demoralizing fight to receive disability accommodations as I was passed around between administrators and staff for weeks.

My time at Yale has been poisoned by these hurdles and the battle to secure reasonable accommodations. I was never treated like a 19-year-old who needed help. Instead, I was seen as a burden and a liability.

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This problem is not unique to Yale. Pressure cooker universities demand perfection and punish anything less, treating mental health disabilities as evidence of defectiveness rather than approaching students with compassion and care. The end goal is to produce the leaders of tomorrow, even if that means sacrificing their well-being.

As traumatic as my experience has been, the horrifying reality is that I am more fortunate than many others struggling with their mental health. I was never involuntarily hospitalized, and I had access to financial support and health insurance outside of Yale. This is not the case for countless students—those who are forced or pressured to withdraw by the university, subject to psychiatric incarceration, escorted off campus by police officers, or left without any form of support once they are cut off from the university, as detailed in our lawsuit.

The impact of Yale's discriminatory policies is most severe on students who lack the privilege I had. Students of color face medical racism. Students from rural areas are cut off from Yale housing and forced to return to places that may lack substantial mental health treatment. International students lose their visas and are unable to remain in the U.S. Students who rely on Yale for health insurance suddenly lose it.

The resulting campus culture around mental health is one of fear. It is difficult to describe the hopelessness of desperately needing help but knowing that seeking it might lead to devastating consequences—it's like you're drowning, but you know the life jacket might suffocate you too.

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I like to envision an alternate reality where my story played out differently. One where my distress was met with a process of identifying suitable accommodations, such as part-time course loads or virtual attendance, so that withdrawal wasn't my only option. Or if I did have to withdraw, a world in which I was met with support, treatment options, resources, and guidance, rather than cut off from Yale entirely and left to fend for myself. A world where my struggles did not call into question my ability to succeed, where I wasn't forced to prioritize being a Yale student over being a human being.

I shouldn't have had to advocate so fiercely for myself. Students struggling with their mental health, especially those in crisis, are often in a position of being unable to fight this hard.

Ultimately, our lawsuit is striving to take a meaningful step in building a more just world, where students in crisis are met with compassion rather than punishment. But it is only one step; it will take far more effort and advocacy to change cultural norms that punish mental health disabilities and transform university policies into humane ones that work to genuinely foster students' well-being. Because at the end of the

day, the question colleges should be asking is not “How can we get rid of you?” but rather, “What can we do to help you?”

Editor’s note: *Yale and the plaintiffs in the lawsuit have asked the court to halt proceedings as they enter settlement discussions. When reached for comment, a Yale spokesperson said in a statement, “We recognize how distressing and difficult it is for the student and their loved ones when a student is facing mental health challenges. When we make decisions and set policies, our primary focus is on students’ safety and health, especially when they are most vulnerable. We believe in creating and sustaining strong and sensible support structures for our students, and in many cases, the safest plan includes the student’s parents and family. We have taken steps in recent years to simplify the return to Yale for students on medical withdrawals and to provide additional support for students. We are also working to increase resources to help students. The university is confident that our policies comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Nonetheless, we have been working on policy changes that are responsive to students’ emotional and financial well-being.”*



Alicia Abramson

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