# Wellness Warriors

In response to a rash of suicides in recent years, Penn students have fought to take charge of their own mental health, creating new peer-to-peer counseling groups and collaborating more closely with the administration on wellness initiatives. Is it enough to combat the pandemic stresses, burnout, and social isolation that afflict "the loneliest generation"?

By Dave Zeitlin

Gianni Ghione C'21 stood on the corner of 39th and Chestnut Streets, watching the cars whizz by. He was on his way to pick up Chinese food on a drizzly February evening in 2018, a melancholy song from the musician Eden piping through his headphones.

*Would this be the day?*

In his head, he devised a plan. He kept his eyes trained on the road, the Division I athlete ready to spring into action. Suddenly, the music stopped. An old friend he hadn't talked to in years was calling. Feeling like such a random encounter must have been some sort of omen, he abandoned the fleeting thought of leaping into oncoming traffic, and instead safely crossed the street to retrieve his dinner.

On the way back to the Quad, he stopped at the fraternity house where many of his Penn wrestling teammates lived, locked himself in the basement bathroom, and cried.

**Ghione's suicidal thoughts** began during his freshman year at Penn in the fall of 2017. "The culture shock of being away from home for the first time and just feeling so distant from everything" were the driving forces, along with the stress of shedding pounds and competing at a high level for the wrestling team. Late at night in his dorm room, he remembers thinking: *Did I even care to be alive anymore*? *I love my friends and family, but did it really matter anymore*? What's more, he determined the easiest and most comfortable thing for him to do would be to conceal his feelings. "I could keep it hidden and no one would really know," he says, "because no one knew me well enough to think I was acting any differently."

Had Ghione looked, he might have found several of his classmates dealing with their own struggles and depression.

A month into his freshman year, Henry Platt C'21 had trouble getting out of bed, scrolling through smiling friends on his Instagram feed and wondering why he couldn't feel the same way. Phuong Vu EAS'21, an international student from Vietnam who was in the US for the first time, had difficulty participating in seminars and finding her place on campus socially. Jennifer Richards C'21 G'21 was told by two new classmates that they were contemplating suicide, the



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOMMY LEONARDI C'89

Gianni Ghione, a senior mental health leader and member of the Penn wrestling team, stands on the same corner from which he nearly took his own life three years ago.

first of those disclosures coming during her third day of college. Similarly, Allison Gelfarb Nu'21 saw several new friends struggling with anxiety and eating disorders and was shocked by a student suicide early in her first semester.

More than three years later, all of those students (as well as a handful of others interviewed for this piece) have emerged as campus leaders in Penn's growing mental health community, running student-led groups like Penn Wellness (Richards), CogWell (Gelfarb), and Reach-A-Peer Helpline (Phuong), as well as serving on the Student Wellness Advisory Group (Platt) and boosting the athletics department's mental health offerings (Ghione).

With the COVID-19 pandemic colliding with academic burnout, Zoom fatigue, seasonal depression, election anxiety, and existential dread over the state of the country and planet, it's doubtful there's ever been a time when these resources have been needed more.

When she was in high school, Allison Gelfarb was always the person that her friends would come to with their problems. She believes that was because of a personal tragedy in her own life: when she was in seventh grade, her mother passed away due to a congenital heart defect. "Going through that experience at a younger age has made me a very empathetic person," Gelfarb says, "and able to recognize that everyone is dealing with something, whether you can see it or not."

That came into sharp focus almost immediately upon arriving at Penn, when on August 31, 2017, she learned of the suicide of a senior named Nicholas Moya. A former president of Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity and data analyst for the men's basketball team, Moya was the fourteenth Penn student to die by suicide since February 2013—a staggering number that prompted a campus-wide conversation about the crisis, the launch of the University's "Campaign for Wellness" programming initiative, and the hiring of four new therapists and the extension of hours at Penn's Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS).

Meanwhile, student groups sprang into action—including CogWell, which Gelfarb joined her sophomore year and now serves as copresident. CogWell's mission is to "create a more supportive and caring network of students," says Gelfarb, by hosting training sessions in active listening across "every pocket of campus"—from religious groups to sports teams to sororities and fraternities, the latter of which was hit particularly hard by Moya's death. CogWell members try to make these sessions interactive (even now with everything on Zoom) with role playing activities that include what *not* to do when listening to a friend—things like looking at your phone, looking down, or cutting them off by saying something similar happened to you. "You don't even have to be struggling with mental health," Gelfarb says. "You just have to want to improve your relationships in life."

What separates CogWell from other mental health groups, Gelfarb notes, is that they actively seek out cultural centers and Greek houses, so "we may be reaching people that wouldn't reach out themselves." But each of the dozens of peer-to-peer mental health groups have their own niches, and several have either been established or expanded in recent years.

One of Gelfarb's friends and classmates, Eliana Doft C'21, joined Penn Benjamins, a student-run peer counseling organization that holds private, one-on-one meetings in rooms in Van Pelt Library or Harnwell College House. Like other group members, Doft took a semester-long training program (with an exam at the end) to learn listening skills. Then she would sit in a room during posted hours, waiting to see if anyone would stop by for a confidential ear and a cup of coffee (no appointments or sign-ups necessary). Most of the time no one did, but even still, she says, "the skills I've learned have been really helpful in my day-to-day conversations with friends and family."

Due to the pandemic, it's been harder for Penn Benjamins to promote the group on Locust Walk and to remain as accessible in a virtual format. (And for Doft, leaving campus in March to return home to New York City, then a COVID-19 epicenter, was a "really, really hard time" that led to her own anxiety and loneliness.) But the group has had staying power and remains well known on campus since its founding in 2015 by Emily Derecktor C'16, who while at Penn did a research project for CAPS that concluded that many students who would have benefited from mental health services didn't seek them. "I thought maybe peers could be the answer to that issue," she says.

At the time, Derecktor acknowledges that CAPS had a "terrible reputation" among the student body, in part due to longer wait times to see a counselor that have since been addressed. But she still felt it was important to work with CAPS, because "we wanted to make sure we were viewed as a legitimate organization." That meant the "Bens," as the group's peer counselors are called, were trained by CAPS psychologists and developed their own training manual.

"We really tried to build something with a really strong foundation, to last well beyond the time that we left," Derecktor adds. "At a very minimum, what Penn Benjamins does is it trains a group of people how to be excellent listeners. At its maximum, it can really make a difference in peers' lives."

The same year that Penn Benjamins was founded, another student-led group called Penn Wellness was launched to serve as an umbrella organization for the University's growing mental health offerings. Founded by Ben Bolnick C'16 L'21—who had previously created a wellness group at Penn Hillel and would go on to serve as a student wellness communications coordinator in the office of the vice provost for university life—Penn Wellness collaborates with various student groups,

Allison Gelfarb, who'd like to become a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner, runs the group CogWell, which trains students in active listening.

provides funding, and advertises events through its social media platforms and website (upennwellness.com), while serving as a liaison to the administration.

According to Jennifer Richards, current chair of the seven-member Penn Wellness board, more than a dozen groups fall under the Penn Wellness umbrella, including CogWell, Penn Benjamins, Penn Art and Wellness, Penn Franklins (peer support for graduate students), Penn Initiative for Minority Mental Health, Penn Reflect, Project HEAL (for students with eating disorders), Project LETS (for students with disabilities), SEAS Wellness, Wharton Wellness, Reach-A-Peer Helpline, Penn Undergraduate Health Coalition, the CAPS Student Advisory Board, and Penn's chapter of Active Minds—a national organization founded almost 20 years ago by Alison Malmon C'03 ["Staying Active," Sep|Oct 2020].

Using money provided by a fund from the Class of 1978 (about $15,000 every year), Penn Wellness helps these groups put on events, and it also runs point on Wellness Week, which this year was held virtually from November 8 to 14 and included workshops on listening skills, meditation, and nutrition, as well as a movie night, trivia games, a chess tournament, and "Wellness Jeopardy."

"It's been hard to get the same kind of exposure we've gotten in the past," says Richards, who, with campus closed, helped plan virtual Wellness Week from her home in San Diego. "But I will say that I think more students have been interested in the issues of wellness than we've seen in years past."

Richards calls it "admirable" that Penn's student mental health leaders have been hard at work to help other students when "they're also going through the same struggles." Those struggles, from what Richards and others have heard, include exhaustion due to the University's cancellation of Fall Break, social isolation and loneliness, and Zoom fatigue. But even before the global pandemic upended college life, she saw how difficult it was for several of her friends to keep up at a competitive Ivy League school—and not always knowing where to turn for help. What she now calls a "rough first semester" included "having to figure out by trial and error" how to talk to two new classmates who were contemplating suicide and also coping with the death of her friend and classmate William Steinberg, who lost his life in a plane crash while taking a trip to Costa Rica with his family. That's what caused her to get involved with Penn Wellness.

"When I was a freshman, it still felt pretty stigmatized," says Richards, echoing a thought conveyed by some of her classmates. "I feel like I've seen huge leaps in the last three years in not only how the administration but the student body is more accepting and open to talking about wellness and mental health. I think it's night and day." And having peer-to-peer options in addition to professional ones is important for a large and diverse university like Penn, she adds. "I think they definitely serve different but complementary purposes. You might not always need to go to CAPS; that's why these groups exist. There's clearly a service that they're able to provide."

**"Mental health does not discriminate and anyone can be dealing with something, no matter what it looks like on the outside."**

Early in the spring semester of her freshman year, Sophie Beren C'17 SPP'17 ran into a classmate she knew while waiting in line during sorority rush. The two friends said hello and shared a brief hug. Two days later, that friend posted a photo to Instagram of holiday lights at Rittenhouse Square, left gifts for family members at the top of a Center City parking garage, and then took a running leap off of it.

Madison Holleran's suicide on January 17, 2014, sent shockwaves through the University community and beyond, generating national attention and shining a spotlight on how onerous the transition from high school to college can be for even students who appear to have it all. "There really is so much going on with people behind the scenes, and you never know until you ask someone," says Beren, who stayed up all night crying when she heard the news. "The issue with Gen Z in particular is no one really knows how to start those conversations. Rather than actually having a breakthrough moment, or even just checking in with a friend, we let it go undealt with."

Fueled by the tragedy—and by the suicide of another friend in high school—Beren started a group called TableTalk with a very simple premise: encouraging dialogue between students, particularly those who might never otherwise meet. "It was born out of a lack of connection I felt on campus and feeling like every single person was really flocking together with people who are like themselves," she says. "I was still that energetic freshman introducing myself while on line at the dining hall, but I felt that no one wanted to keep meeting new people."

Beren didn't specifically brand TableTalk as a mental health group, "but the way we thrived," she says, "is that we're inherently addressing mental health and fostering space for human connection." That space used to be in the middle of Locust Walk, where group members would plop down inflatable couches, offer snacks, and invite candid discussion. It has continued to evolve since Beren graduated, with Derek Nhieu W'23, the 2023 Class Board president, starting a prepandemic podcast about student life.

Beren, too, has continued to push the conversation forward. In late 2019 she launched a company called The Conversationalist, billed as the "go-to destination to amplify Gen Z voices" through an app, a community forum, and weekly digital panels on topics ranging from the pandemic to new learning environments to politics and racism. "Clearly, there's no shortage of things to talk about," Beren says, touting a rising number of app subscribers and Instagram followers.

Beren has been thrilled to see openness and honesty during these panel discussions, but she's still worried about today's college students, including her sister, Esther, who's currently a sophomore at Penn. "Gen Z was already the loneliest generation, and also the generation most likely to struggle and be vocal about their mental health issues," Beren says. (Cigna conducted a nationwide survey of more than 20,000 people in 2018 revealing that Generation Z adults aged 18–22 are lonelier than older generations, and that students had higher loneliness scores than retirees.) "I think online school is only going to create a further divide in feeling lonelier and lonelier. … My overall feeling is that everyone feels depleted and disconnected."

In an earlier iteration, The Conversationalist was a platform that featured articles on mental health—one of which was written by Beren's first cousin, Henry Platt. Now a senior at Penn, Platt detailed the severe clinical depression he was diagnosed with a month into his freshman year. "I woke up each morning with the weight of the world on my shoulders," he wrote. "Getting out of bed and going to take a shower felt like I was being tasked with completing an Ironman. Responding to text messages or phone calls was completely out of the question. Tears and breakdowns and overwhelming sadness became my norm. My eyes saw as if through a permanent veil. I had suicidal thoughts."

Platt notes that it was "very cathartic" to write that all down and he was "blown away" by the positive feedback he received for the piece, which was republished in the *Jewish Journal*. "If I had any part in helping someone feel more comfortable confiding in someone else, or if I made someone feel less alone because they could relate to my experience, it was a job well done," he says. It also may have taken some people by surprise, considering that, by his own admission, he had "lived a charmed life" growing up with a loving and well-to-do artistic family in Los Angeles. (His father, Marc Platt C'79 is an award-winning film and theater producer ["Passion Plays," May|Jun 2006], and Henry sings in a group with his brothers Jonah Platt C'08 and Tony award-winning actor Ben Platt.) Yet those things seemed to amplify his unease. "If everything was going so well and I've been so fortunate to have what I have, then why am I still feeling like I can't get out of bed every day?" he says. "I think in a weird way it made me feel more guilty, or just confused."

In the piece, Henry expressed envy of his parents Marc and Julie Beren Platt C'79, who met their first week of college in the Quad ["Love Story," May|Jun 2006] and "didn't have to worry about what everyone else was doing at all times" in a world free of social media. When Henry arrived at Penn 42 years later, he was immediately sucked into "a barrage of Facebook events, Snapchat stories, and Instagram videos," trying to figure out where the best parties were and wondering why the start of college—which had been "heralded as such a superior experience"—actually felt more fraught than fun. "I opened my Instagram every single hour, just to see what I had missed and to check in on my likes," he wrote.

Open Platt's Instagram today and you'll find a page with videos of him singing to more than 10,000 followers. Even still, "I wish social media did not exist," he

Senior Henry Platt, a member of the Student Wellness Advisory Group, has written and spoken openly about his suicidal thoughts as a freshman.

says, because it's "not a true reflection of what people are experiencing." He's seen classmates project what's known as "Penn Face," a facade calculated to convey the impression that life is perfect and anything can be handled with ease—academically, socially, and otherwise. "It's so crazy," Platt says, "because 99 percent of people do not feel that and yet there's still this stereotype that is what the Penn student is like."

As Platt has learned, through therapy and self-reflection, to recognize the downsides of placing so much weight on Instagram likes and treating college as the pinnacle of life, his own mental health has dramatically improved. He's also been trying to help others break down the "barrier that 'Penn Face' presents," with his cousin Sophie calling him "instrumental in the new wave of mental health on campus" that didn't exist when she was an undergraduate.

When Platt had trouble getting out of bed as a freshman, he wasn't sure what to do or where to turn. After pointing out that the University's mental health resources should be more visible and accessible at a lunch with other students at Penn President Amy Gutmann's house, he was put on the search committee for a new chief wellness officer—a job that Benoit Dubé GM'01 landed in 2018 ["Taking Care," Jan|Feb 2019]. An associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the Perelman School of Medicine, Dubé has since been tasked with directing wellness initiatives across the University and overseeing an integrated division of student wellness services that includes CAPS, Penn Violence Prevention, and the Offices of Alcohol and Other Drug Program Initiatives. He also leads the Wellness at Penn initiative, which per its website (wellnessatpenn.com), "offers a wide range of opportunities to reflect and engage on issues of wellness, stress, mental health, resilience, happiness, personal and academic goals, and the meaning of success."

**"It's the first time I can remember since coming to Penn that everyone has had a common shared experience."**

Having someone at the forefront of the University's mental health efforts "has made a huge difference," Platt says, adding that Dubé is "such a soothing presence, always such a calming force." And Dubé has made it a top priority to incorporate student feedback, forming a group called the Student Wellness Advisory Group—or, as they like to call themselves, SWAG. Students who represent various schools and groups—including Platt, who reps performing artists—meet about once a month to discuss all sorts of issues across campus. "It's an exchange of ideas," Platt says, "and also just getting input that hopefully will inform higher-level decision making."

Dubé was particularly moved by Penn's students at the beginning of the last school year when they rose up in solidarity after a shocking tragedy that could have easily brought them down to new lows. On September 9, 2019, Gregory Eells, the recently hired executive director of CAPS, took his own life. It was a challenging and confusing time for the University community as Penn was thrust back into the national spotlight—but as Dubé told a group of parents during Family Weekend in 2019, "the death of a 52-year-old man should not be extrapo-

lated to this being a toxic place for 20-year-olds. It was wonderful what has come out of it. Students rose to the occasion and showed tremendous maturity."

Among them was CogWell's Allison Gelfarb, who was supposed to meet with Eells the day after his death. "It shows mental health does not discriminate and anyone can be dealing with something, no matter what it looks like on the outside," says Gelfarb, who'd like to become a psychiatric nurse practitioner and has done research on the mental health of nurses and those who care for others.

A week after Eells's death, Gelfarb came up with the idea for students to place sticky notes on the *Love* statue in the center of campus, because "love is transcendent. Even through hard times, love is what brings people together." About 100 notes were left, with messages that included "It's OK not to be OK," and "You are loved." The event was covered by local TV news stations and the *Wall Street Journal*. "It kind of unified students in a way," Gelfarb says. "I think it opened up the conversation."

Six months later, many of those same students went on Spring Break and were told not to return due to the COVID-19 campus shutdown in March. But Dubé has again been blown away by students seeking out solidarity during a crisis and trying to pluck some good from a rubble of dread. "The tragedy of Greg's death by suicide was, I think, a predictor of how resilient and resourceful students would be when COVID hit," he says.

Research out of Penn, USC, and Switzerland's University of Lausanne, published in November in the scientific journal *PLOS One*, showed that nearly one-third of US adults reported some level of depression and anxiety in the pandemic's early days. Yet Dubé notes that a survey of Penn undergraduates revealed that "students' level of distress after the pandemic was not nearly as high as we would have expected." More than 80 percent of the enrolled students surveyed reported that they hadn't needed mental health services. "Individuals who were already more vulnerable or brittle to begin with were definitely impacted by this added layer of the pandemic," Dubé says. "But otherwise students didn't seem to be crushed or paralyzed by the pandemic. If anything, they showed us how resourceful they were and how they were able to rise to the occasion."

As the pandemic extended through the summer, fall, and winter, Dubé has worried about the impact of isolation, stress, and the social connections that students have lost. For Platt, it's come down to "readjusting a lot of my expectations" about what his final year of college would be like. But he's "been really happy to see the greater Penn community—and particularly my senior class—come together and still try to salvage whatever elements of the experience are salvageable," he says.

He's been similarly pleased to see his classmates' "willingness to be vulnerable" because "struggling during this time is a very human reaction" to a global pandemic that's caused so much grief, death, and loss. "It's the first time I can remember since coming to Penn that everyone has had a common shared experience," Platt says. "When I was experiencing my own mental health struggles my freshman year, I felt kind of alone in it. Right now, everyone is experiencing the social stresses and the impacts of the pandemic—and everyone is united against it."

In a guest column for the *Daily Pennsylvanian* shortly after Eells's death, Dubé acknowledged the "shock waves" caused by a "man who spent his professional career promoting resilience" taking his own life—and acknowledged that the confusion might never subside. But after highlighting CogWell's event and other campus-wide conversations, he vowed to personally oversee the transition at CAPS, which he noted had already improved its services with 24/7 phone access to clinicians, free appointments with wait times that generally average just a few days, and the implementation of the "Let's Talk" program, which was rolled out in October of 2019. The brainchild of Eells, who had spearheaded a similar program at Cornell, "Let's Talk" brings drop-in clinical access to the Greenfield Intercultural Center, the LGBT Center, the Graduate Student Center, and other spaces where students study and socialize (when campus is, of course, open). "I cannot think of a better way to honor his memory," Dubé wrote at the time.

Among other advances, CAPS has also expanded its group therapy offerings—which, similar to the student-led peer counseling organizations, help students make real connections through shared struggles. The groups and workshops—which include a graduate women's support group, a support space for grieving students, an international student empowering group, and a support group for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students—are led by a counselor, but it's often the students who seize control of the conversation. "There are definitely powerful moments when people are sharing things they've never shared with anybody," says Michele Downie, the group coordinator at CAPS. "They're about getting support but also giving support." Students might come into these groups fearful about opening up in front of strangers but leave with the "opportunity to stay connected indefinitely," says Michal Saraf, the senior clinical director at CAPS. "Almost every aspect of life is group-based," she adds. "It's a wonderful way to work those issues out and also to mirror the kind of interactions we have on the outside."

When the pandemic struck, CAPS was able to "pivot very effectively," according to Dubé, and continue to offer group sessions, private appointments, and even "Let's Talk" in a virtual format. (They maintained a small in-person presence during the fall semester, and will likely provide a virtual/in-person hybrid model this spring.) "There's an artificial quality to using Zoom," Dubé admits, though he adds that what therapists "might

Stephanie Hasford, a junior psychology major, helps provide CAPS with student perspectives as a chair of the CAPS Advisory Board.

have lost with closeness" they've gained with students sometimes being more willing to share certain things because of their surroundings (a childhood bedroom, for instance, instead of an office on Market Street).

CAPS administrators have also continued to lean on the CAPS Student Advisory Board (CAPSAB), which advocates for student needs, solicits student input on CAPS policies and procedures, and helps market its services. CAPSAB cochair Stephanie Hasford C'22, who wants to be a psychologist, believes CAPS has done an excellent job promoting self-care to students during such unsettling times. Its website (caps.wellness.upenn.edu) provides guidance and tips on coping with COVID-19 (share your feelings; take breaks from social media; connect with others), election anxiety, and racial trauma—the latter of which was especially valuable to Hasford, who is Black, during this summer's protests for social justice. "Being at Penn, which is a predominantly white institution, sometimes you can feel your presence is ignored or not appreciated," she says. "And then seeing all the things going on in the world, you still have to suck it up and be a student. It's always good to have friends and a community you can stick with in these times."

One big issue in the fall was making sure students knew that they could still utilize CAPS while scattered around the world. Suhita Kodali C'21, another CAPSAB cochair, has been trying to understand why CAPS saw less use in the first few months after the pandemic. And she's concerned that colder weather and more time inside as the spring semester starts may exacerbate feelings of loneliness, even for students who live off campus with several housemates.

She's been trying to help. In addition to her role at CAPSAB, Kodali also cohosts a podcast called the Silent Lotus with classmate Suditi Rahematpura EAS'21, which is billed as "two young South Asian women, a little worn out from the world, ready to discuss all the topics that tend to get swept under the rug." For Kodali, whose parents are from India, talking openly about mental health is not something she ever thought she'd do. "At least in my family, it's not something we talk about," she says. "And I think a lot of children of immigrants especially have that same struggle."

Kodali dealt with that struggle early in the pandemic when she returned home to New Jersey in March. Her parents were mostly worried about her safety from COVID-19 and her physical health. "I don't think they considered the mental health impact of me having to come home in the middle of my semester and having to stay home when I was supposed to be in a different city for the summer," she says, adding that the suddenness of the 2020 spring semester being cancelled has had a lasting impact. "The lack of closure was very, very difficult."

**"It's always good to have friends and a community you can stick with in these times."**

Anthony Rostain GM'85 GM'87 is acutely aware of the new dynamic that Kodali and other college students faced after being whisked away from their dorms and into their childhood homes. Rostain, emeritus professor of psychiatry at Penn and the new chair of psychiatry at Cooper University Health, previously explored the student-parent dynamic in his 2019 book *The Stressed Years of Their Lives: Helping*

*Your Kid Survive and Thrive During Their College Years*, which Penn distributed to 1,200 families of incoming students in 2019. In a related workshop during Family Weekend that November, he discussed how parents have become more savvy to how the internet and social media affect their kids both positively and negatively. But then the pandemic came and "boom—immediately social interaction becomes totally digital and the only way you can do anything," says Rostain, who has encouraged his patients to take breaks from the screen and to try to create a normal sleep-wake cycle because "our brains are not designed to spend all of our waking hours looking at a screen." But when it comes to advice about the pandemic itself, he knows that parents "have to acknowledge that this is not something you can make go away for your kid," and that they have to toe a fine line between rigid rules preventing them from socializing out of the house and an overly cheery outlook trying to assure them that things will get better.

"A lot of COVID college kids are kind of feeling like they're going through something that's not only making life harder but that's screwing up their future," Rostain says. His mantra to his patients, some of whom are Penn students, is that "life is unpredictable, and this is going to be the best way to get used to unpredictability." And even though the nation's mental health situation has been troubling—one in four people aged 18 to 24 seriously contemplated suicide in June, according to research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Rostain has found reason for hope in a post-pandemic world. "The COVID college students will have a bonding experience through all of this that will, in the long run, make them more understanding of disadvantaged people and people who live in circumstances that they don't have as much control over."

Phuong Vu, the head of Reach-A-Peer-Helpline (RAP-Line), has had the opposite problem as the Penn students who were stuck at home and missing their college friends. As an international student from Vietnam, she hasn't been able to return home due to travel restrictions and misses her family as intensely as when she first arrived as a freshman in 2017, when she found it hard to fit in and her mental health suffered as a result. But then and now she's leaned on the community at RAP-Line, which was established in 1996 to provide peer support, information, and referrals to any Penn student who wants to connect to a human to get something off their chest.

Even though the pandemic stalled the group's phone service, Phuong says that a RAP-Line student is generally able to respond to each texter within one or two minutes. At first, most of the texts were about COVID-19 and adapting to virtual school, but students "don't talk about that as much now," Phuong says, adding that, no matter the subject matter, the most important thing is to respond with open-ended questions. "We're not allowed to give advice or be judgmental," she says. "The key is to remember to hear more about the person. Most of the time, people just want someone to talk to."

Just like CogWell, Penn Benjamins, and other student groups, RAP-Line will sometimes refer a student to CAPS (which also provides RAP-Line volunteers with training sessions). "There's a distinction between peer support and professional support but there's room for both," Saraf says. "For some people, the peer support is a wonderful resource and what they need."

Rostain agrees. "We're not expecting students to be professionals," he says. "What we are hoping that they can do is offer comfort and help people through the worst of their loneliness, and then, if necessary, getting them to some help."

Three years after nearly jumping into traffic, Gianni Ghione is doing much better—but it's been a winding and frightening road to get there. As a sophomore in 2018–19, he dealt with a shoulder injury and concussions, causing him to miss the season and wonder: *Who am I without wrestling? What am I if not an athlete?* One day at his friend's room in a fraternity house, he laid down on the floor and said, "Hey, I'm having a full-blown panic attack."

The panic attacks continued through that winter. He barely ate. He couldn't carry on a conversation. One day he went to a mall with his girlfriend and forgot where he was or how he got there. By February of 2019, he decided to take a leave of absence from Penn, returning to his home in New Jersey and checking himself into an Intensive Outpatient Program, where, through five-hour-a-day group therapy sessions, he "learned so much about coping mechanisms and mindfulness and being more in the present moment."

Back at Penn for his junior year, he managed to cope with another wrestling injury (a broken ankle) and a global crisis (COVID-19) with far more serenity than he would have a year earlier. And he's been trying to help his fellow athletes get by, too. Along with administrators in the athletic department, he attended an Ivy League/Patriot League mental health summit before his junior year and came up with the hashtag #KeepYourHeadUP for a video campaign featuring Penn athletes pledging to break the stigma of talking about mental health. And he believes Penn Athletics is "moving in the right direction" with the advent of health and wellness captains for each team. "I think it's awesome we have a more approachable route, when if you're dealing with something that's super heavy and stressful you can reach out to someone you're in the thick of it training with every day," he says.

One of Penn's health and wellness captains is Abby Abramson C'21, a softball player studying neuroscience who has been trying to make sure teams have been sticking together this past year—through virtual game nights, journaling, meditation, and more. She and other health and wellness captains want to ensure that athletes can talk through the pain of feel-

Phuong Vu, an international student from Vietnam, has battled her own struggles and helped others at Reach-A-Peer Helpline throughout her time at Penn.

ing like part of their identities have been stripped away with the cancellation of their seasons. "Athletes are taught from a young age that you need to push through and you need to be strong—and sometimes struggling with mental health doesn't fit that image," Abramson says. "That's been one of our main concerns. There is no image of a perfect student athlete; there's only humans."

It's easy to see why college athletics presents a particular mental health concern. Over the past 15 years, four Penn varsity athletes have died by suicide—including Holleran, a member of the track team. Andrea Wieland, a psychologist hired in 2018 as an associate athletic director for athletic performance, recognizes the unique demands and pressure on Ivy League athletes, citing research that shows that at Penn and other colleges, athletes are less likely to seek out treatment than the rest of the student body because of the fear of being recognized or seen as weak. But she's helped to spearhead efforts to shed the stigma with increased programming on emotional wellness and resilience, and with a potential partnership with CAPS next fall so that a mental health screening from a mental health specialist is "part of the process of medically clearing our student-athletes."

For Ghione, many factors helped turn the tide—including the outpatient group therapy, support from his family, and calling the CAPS 24/7 hotline on his hardest nights. And just like Henry Platt and several more of his classmates from across campus, he's tried to be a mental health leader simply by being transparent and willing to talk to others. Shortly after he took his leave from Penn, he posted a long screenshot on Twitter that detailed his mental health journey with a far shorter Tweet to go with it: "It's okay to not be okay! Don't hesitate to reach out!!"

In many ways, Ghione is paying it forward because he knows his story might have turned out differently if not for his own circle at Penn—his coaches; his teammates who'd take cathartic walks with him across the South Street Bridge just to watch dogs frolic at the dog park; Matt Valenti C'07, a Penn associate athletic director and former star wrestler, who talked him down in the wake of his worst panic attack.

**"The key is to remember to hear more about the person. Most of the time, people just want someone to talk to."**

"I would say the biggest thing I've learned is that things will only get better if you start to work on them," says Ghione, who got a tattoo on his left wrist that reads *Only If You Let It*. "I didn't reach out to anyone when I was dealing with my depression and my suicidality. And it wouldn't have gotten better if I didn't start talking to people about it." He understands that not everyone has a supportive family that they can turn to, and he's especially sympathetic to students who might be holed up in a room during the pandemic dealing with their depression on their own. But whether it's a professional therapist or a peer group or simply a friend or acquaintance, "there's *always* someone you can talk to," he says. "If you don't think there is someone, a lot of people will surprise you if you just take that first step."